

A photograph of three shirtless men in a theatrical performance. One man in the foreground is sitting on a wooden chair, leaning forward with his hands clasped near his face. Another man stands behind him, and a third man is partially visible on the left wearing a straw hat. The scene is lit with dramatic, low-key lighting, creating strong shadows and highlights on their muscular bodies. The background is dark and textured, possibly a stage set.

(DIS)ABILITY,
DIVERSITY,
AND
PERFORMANCE

Michael ACHTMAN | Kelsie ACTON | Christina BRASSARD | Sabina ENGLAND
| Ruicai KONG | Brooke LEIFSO | Ashley McASKILL | Menka NAGRANI

SUBSCRIBE NOW
www.alttheatre.ca
or by phone 514-848-0238

A SUBSCRIPTION MAKES A WONDERFUL GIFT!



Its easy to do:

+ Go to alt.theatre.ca and follow to the subscribe page, then fill in the purchase order using the mailing address of the gift recipient.

+ Send an email to admin@alttheatre.ca and let us know it is a gift and we will include a gift card with the first issue of the subscription.

Subscribe to *alt.theatre* and receive 4 issues a year of Canada's only magazine tackling politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage. For over 15 years, *alt.theatre* has provided a forum for artists, activists, academics, and others interested in issues of cultural diversity.

15 YEARS
OF CULTURAL
DIVERSITY AND
THE STAGE

CONTENTS

11.3

EDITORIAL

- 8 **The Art of Accessibility**
By Nikki Shaffeeullah

ARTICLES

- 10 **Stigmas of Capitalism: The Wounded and Disabled Body in Li Ning's Physical Theatre**
Ruicai Kong's examination of Li Ning's theatrical work explores how violence, pain, and pleasure are inscribed by modern China's political and economic apparatus on the body.

IMAGES BY CHUN YU AND YANG WANRU

- 16 **Reconfiguring the "Disabled" Artist: Tender Reverberations in *Portraits*, a Theatre Terrific Fringe Production**

Ashley McAskill explores the tender reverberations of theatrical experience through her collaborative work with Vancouver's mixed ability company Theatre Terrific.

IMAGES BY THEATRE TERRIFIC

- 23 **Deaf Performance Art, Sound, and *Allah Earth***
Sabina England writes about how she works with sound in making art as a Deaf filmmaker and performance artist, specifically on her solo show, *Allah Earth*.

IMAGES BY BRENDON BEAVERS

- 26 **"We are the chair...and many things besides": Multiplicity of Identity and Brechtian Staging Techniques in *Inter-relationCRIPS***

Kelsie Acton describes how *Inter-relationshCRIPS*, a work by Lindsay Eales and Danielle Peers, explodes the Brechtian "not...but" to explore and counter dominant narratives of disability.

IMAGES BY KAYLEE BORGSTROM

INTERVIEW

- 30 **The Performativity of (Dis)ability: *Les Productions des pieds des main***
Christina Brassard interviews Montreal director Menka Nagrani about her work with actors with intellectual disabilities.

IMAGES BY ÉLISA CÔTÉ AND DAVID RICARD

DISPATCHES

- 34 **Unraveling Embodiment**
Brooke Leifso reflects on her original show, *Unraveling the Dis/abled*

IMAGES BY JORDAN RULE

- 36 **How Creative Is the Creative Enabler?**
Michael Achtman reflects on a template for supporting artists with disabilities.

IMAGES BY CAGLAR KIMYONCU

BOOK REVIEWS

- 37 Ashley McAskill reviews Kirsty Johnston's *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*.

UPCOMING 11.4 SUMMER 2014

ARTICLE Lauren Spring proposes improvised theatre as a tool to help foster resilience after trauma with refugees at the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture. **INTERVIEW** Jane Heather talks with Trinidadian political theatre artist Tony Hall. **DISPATCH** Mieko Ouchi shares stories of participatory theatre work that invites youth to be co-investigators with adult artists in exploring social issues. **BOOK REVIEW** Anne Nothof reviews *Two-Spirited Acts: Queer Indigenous Performances*, edited by Jean O'Hara.



© Epic Photography. Kristi Hansen in Concrete Theatre's production of *Are We There Yet.*, a participatory sexuality education play for young audiences.

alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage is Canada's only professional journal examining intersections between politics, cultural plurality, social activism, and the stage.

alt.theatre welcomes suggestions or proposals for interviews, news, pieces of self-reflection, analytical articles, and reviews of books, plays, and performances. Submissions to *alt.theatre* are vetted by at least two members of the editorial board as well as external reviewers where appropriate. Contributors retain copyright of their articles with the understanding that any subsequent publication will cite *alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage* as the original source. *alt.theatre* retains the right to distribute copies of published articles for educational and promotional purposes. Please query the editors before submitting any work for consideration: info@alttheatre.ca

Founded in 1998, *alt.theatre* is published quarterly by Teesri Duniya Theatre—an intercultural theatre company with a mandate to produce socially engaged theatre that reflects Canada's social and cultural diversity. *alt.theatre* is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography.

Bibliothèque et Archives Nationales Du Québec/Library and Archives Canada ISSN 1481-0506

For more information,
contact *alt.theatre* magazine at
Teesri Duniya Theatre
460 St-Catherine W., Suite 916
Montreal QC H3B 1A7
Tel. 514 848-0238
email: info@alttheatre.ca
www.alttheatre.ca

 [facebook.com/alt.theatre](https://www.facebook.com/alt.theatre)
[facebook.com/teesriduniyatheatre](https://www.facebook.com/teesriduniyatheatre)

 twitter.com/alt_theatre
twitter.com/Teesri_Duniya

alt.theatre: cultural diversity and the stage
is published quarterly by



Teesri Duniya
THEATRE

“Change the World, One Play at a Time”

COVER PHOTO

© Chun Yu, Li Ning, An Bin and Zhang Zanmin in
Li Ning's *Exuviate-Implant*

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Nikki Shaffeeullah

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Dalbir Singh

ASSOCIATE EDITOR AND BOOK REVIEWS

Dirk Gindt

EDITORIAL BOARD

Nikki Shaffeeullah

Dalbir Singh

Dirk Gindt

Denis Salter

Edward Little

Rahul Varma

Lina de Guevara

Jill Carter

MANAGER

Linda Levesque

CIRCULATION ASSISTANT

Leilani Fraser-Buchanan

GRAPHIK DESIGN

DFI GRAPHIK.CA

COPY EDITOR

Colette Stoeber

FOUNDERS

Rahul Varma and Kapil Bawa

PAST EDITORS IN CHIEF

Rahul Varma, 1.1-1.2

Russell Krackovitch, 1.3-1.4

Tal Ashkenazi, 2.1

Edward Little, 2.2-9.4

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$157 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country.

Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 157 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.

CONTRIBUTORS

11.3

EDITORIAL



NIKKI SHAFFEEULLAH

is an artist, activist, researcher, and the editor-in-chief of *alt.theatre*. She recently completed an MFA in Community-based Theatre at the University of Alberta, where her research explored de-colonial practices of theatre creation. Nikki is originally from Toronto, but her life, work, and studies have taken her across Canada and the world. She currently works in Edmonton as director, actor, improviser, facilitator, and teacher.

The Art of Accessibility: **PAGE 8-9**

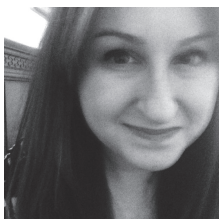
ARTICLES



RUICAI KONG

is a PhD candidate in the School of Cultures, Languages and Linguistics at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. He is working on a PhD project titled "Performing the Revolution: Model Theatre in the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)." He obtained his MA from Renmin University of China in Beijing. He is a theatre critic at sohu.com (Beijing).

Stigmas of Capitalism: **PAGE 10-15**



ASHLEY MCASKILL

is currently in the fourth year of her PhD in Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. She is researching the current state of "disability theatre" (a name that she questions) in Canada. Her main research question is: How is the creative work of artists who identify as having disabilities and/or mental illness being recognized, developed, and encouraged in Canada?

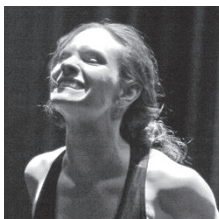
Reconfiguring the "Disabled" Artist: **PAGE 16-22**



SABINA ENGLAND

is a filmmaker, playwright, and stage performance artist. She studied at London Film Academy and holds a BA in Theatre from University of Missouri. Her plays have been produced in London at Tristan Bates Theatre, Soho Theatre, and Theatre Royal Stratford East. She wrote and directed her first film, *Wedding Night*, which premiered at Tribeca Cinemas in New York City. She recently published her first work, *Urdustan*, a book of short stories.

Deaf Performance Art, Sound, and *Allah Earth*: **PAGE 23-25**



KELSIE ACTON

is a dancer, choreographer, and a PhD student in the Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation at the University of Alberta. Her research examines understandings, negotiations, and enactments of crip time in integrated dance.

"We are the chair": **PAGE 26-29**

INTERVIEW



MENKA NAGRANI

founded *Les productions des pieds des mains* in 2004 and has created numerous socially engaged and acclaimed productions both in Montreal and internationally. Menka has won several awards for her creations, including a Quebec Arts Council award for her artistic career. A leader in integrating disabled artists, Menka is often invited to present at conferences and lead workshops around the world.

The Performativity of (Dis)ability: **PAGE 30-33**



CHRISTINA BRASSARD

is a PhD candidate in québécoise literature at the French Department at the University of Toronto, focusing on the representation of the construction of identity in literature, arts, and culture in Québec. Last year, she worked for the Centre de Recherches Théâtrales at the Université du Québec à Montréal and participated in seminars on drama at École Supérieure de théâtre in Montréal. She recently published two articles in the Québécois magazine *Jeu*, and collaborates with the editing board of the literary critic journal *Postures*.

The Performativity of (Dis)ability: **PAGE 30-33**

DISPATCHES



BROOKE LEIFSO

is an Edmonton-based multidisciplinary artist who focuses on devised performance facilitation and direction. She has worked with Theatre Yes, Azimuth Theatre, and Northern Light Theatre, and is a founder of Mindhive Collective. She identifies as an activist with values in anti-oppression and a woman with mild cerebral palsy. In 2015 Brooke will start her MA in Expressive Art Therapy at the European Graduate School.

Unraveling Embodiment: **PAGE 34-35**

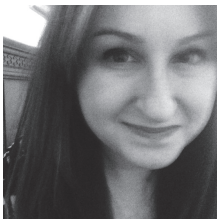


MICHAEL AHTMAN

is a writer, director, dramaturg, and access consultant based in London, UK, whose work spans theatre, film, video, and live art. He is currently working with Pete Edwards on an Unlimited commission examining disabled people's experience of rape and sexual abuse.

How Creative Is the Creative Enabler? : **PAGE 36**

BOOK REVIEW



ASHLEY MCASKILL

is currently in the fourth year of her PhD in Communication Studies at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. She is researching the current state of "disability theatre" (a name that she questions) in Canada. Her main research question is: How is the creative work of artists who identify as having disabilities and/or mental illness being recognized, developed, and encouraged in Canada?

Stage Turns: **PAGE 37-39**

The Art of Accessibility

BY NIKKI SHAFFEULLAH

“Many Canadian theatre and performance scholars have not yet fully confronted ableist assumptions at play in their fields, whether they deal with mainstream or marginalized communities,” asserts Kirsty Johnston in her 2009 article, “Building a Canadian Disability Arts Network: An Intercultural Approach.” The *alt.theatre* editorial team was eager to take up this task, and so, when choosing a theme for this special issue, we sought to create a dedicated space to address ableism in performing arts and explore (dis)ability performance as it intersects with politics, social activism, and cultural diversity. (*Dis)ability, Diversity, and Performance* is *alt.theatre*’s third special issue, after 2013’s *Gender and Theatre at the Margins* and 2012’s two-part *Oral History and Performance*. The field of disability performance is growing and deserves to become an integrated part of all theatre practice, discourse, and scholarship. This issue is an effort to contribute to that process.

What can theatre makers and scholars from all backgrounds and abilities learn from disability justice activists and artists? There is tremendous wealth in the analyses and ways of knowing that were born in these movements, and I suggest we begin by foregrounding *accessibility* in our work and research. I borrow the name of this editorial from “The Art of Access/ability,” a collaborative event hosted in February 2014 by the Edmonton queer collective Qmunity League and local indie theatre group mindhive collective. As an attendee, I was inspired by how this thoughtfully crafted evening of performance and party not only provided a comprehensively accessible space for guests, but in its design and programming unpacked the *aesthetic* possibilities of *accessibility*. What does accessibility look like when it is held as an artistic value?

The active and intentional employment of accessibility frameworks in theatre-making should absolutely not be understood as simply a provision of services. And while working against (dis)ability-based oppression is of course a matter of human rights, the practice of doing so in the performing arts is not even *just* that. Accessibility is *central* to the craft of theatre-making; it is an artistic asset, for theatre and (dis)ability justice share the core value of *interdependence*. Disability justice activist Mia Mingus affirms: “With disability justice, we want to move away from the ‘myth of independence,’ that everyone can and should be able to do everything on their own. I am not fighting for independence ... I am fighting for an interdependence that embraces needs and tells the truth: no one does it on their own and the myth of independence is just that, a myth.” Theatre is, by its very nature, collaboration: at its simplest, it is the relationship between artist and audience; in its most common iterations it is the sum of the creative exchanges between performers, designers, playwright, director, and others. Theatre is interdependence, and that interdependence is a strength.

This issue brings together artists, activists, and scholars working across different areas of (dis)ability performance. Ruica Kong and Sabina England each offer insight into how (dis)ability performance can work in intersectional ways to challenge other planes of oppression. In “Stigmas of Capitalism: The Wounded and Disabled Body in Li Ning’s Physical Theatre” (pp. 10-15), Kong’s analysis of new capitalism in China considers how the state values productivity of physical bodies and how this manifests in mainstream theatre. He illustrates that “state capitalism and mainstream theatre share the same values: both enshrine

productivity and exclude people with disabilities The problem thus is how theatrical practices can serve to redefine ability and disability in contemporary China.” Kong asks, “Could the theatre employ the disabled without being caught up in the economics of efficiency and profitability, and in this way provide an alternative?” and in his ensuing discussion demonstrates how Chinese artist Li Ning’s work is a creative challenge to ableism and capitalism. In “Deaf Performance Art, Sound, and *Allah Earth*” (pp. 23-25), England thoughtfully offers her perspective as a Deaf filmmaker and performance artist who values using sound in her work despite not being able to hear. She identifies culturally specific reasons why she believes sound to be a key tool for bridging cultural divides, and explains how this is a priority for her as an Indian Muslim woman artist working to counter Islamophobia and racism.

Through specific case studies, Ashley McAskill, Kelsie Acton, and Christina Brassard provide insight into contemporary theatrical works across Canada that engage with (dis)ability. McAskill’s “Reconfiguring the ‘Disabled’ Artist: Tender Reverberations in *Portraits*, a Theatre Terrific Fringe Production” (pp. 17-22) interrogates several phenomena in the field of (dis)ability and performance, and specifically the problems and possibility in how the word “tender” is used. McAskill argues that “tender” has the “potential to perpetuate the disabling culture of people with disabilities being inferior to the non-disabled,” but also “has the potential to loosen such fixed frames of difference, whether in the field of disability or in other intercultural performance works.” Using Vancouver-based Theatre Terrific as a case study, she carefully explores the nuances of tenderness in mixed-ability theatre workshops. Kelsie Acton’s “We are the chair . . . and many things besides”: Multiplicity of Identity and Brechtian Staging Techniques in *Inter-RelationCRIPS*” (pp. 26-29) looks at a performance work by artists Lindsay Eales and Danielle Peers that was presented as part of Stage Left’s *Woman’s Work* in Calgary. Acton illustrates *Inter-RelationCRIPS*’ disruption of mainstream understandings of disability, and she unpacks how the show’s Brechtian sensibility engages with capitalism, gender, and sexuality to “transcend the potential limits of identity-based politics and to explore intersecting multiple oppressions.” In

“The Performativity of (Dis)ability,” Christina Brassard interviews Menka Nagrani, founder of Montreal dance theatre company *Les Productions des pieds des mains*, and they discuss Nagrani’s character-driven choreography in the work she creates with artists with intellectual disabilities.

This issue’s Dispatch section sees two practitioners offer perspective on disability theatre creation. Brooke Leifso self-identifies as an artist with mild cerebral palsy, and her reflections in “Unraveling Embodiment” speak to how theatre and its focus on embodiment can facilitate a space for people with disabilities to resist (dis)ability-based oppression. Of her process, Leifso shares: “I reached a place of personal development where I knew I had to face the shame and my internalized ableism. I wanted to come to terms with what my body was and, ultimately, to finally be okay living in these bones.” Michael Achtman is a support worker based in England who collaborates with Pete Edwards, an actor and writer with cerebral palsy who uses a wheelchair and has limited control of his movement and speech. In “How Creative Is the Creative Enabler?” Achtman describes the model of “creative enabler,” a specialized support worker with “skills and experience in the area practiced by the disabled artist” who supports the artist through creation and performance. He shares his experience with this evolving model and invites questions on if and how creative enablers can artistically contribute to the projects they work on.

This issue’s small sampling of rich work demonstrates how this field called (dis)ability performance comprises an extremely diverse range of practices. As Kirsty Johnston describes in her book *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre* (which Ashley McAskill reviews on pp. 37-39), “disability theatre in Canada may best be understood as an intercultural project, one in which artists from a range of disability cultures contribute to a polyvalent disability culture . . . disability culture is not a monolith that essentializes one world-view or disability experience” (6). The field is dynamic, and it is still evolving. We are working through the language—Brassard highlights Nagrani’s concern with the limitations of the term “integrated dance”; England explains how the choice to capitalize or not “Deaf” relates to community-based identity; McAskill problematizes

“tender” and the use of the word “disability” itself. We are working through our tactics—England shares how she sometimes uses her “creative work as a celebration of life, and other times to vent [her] frustration and lament [her] struggles in the world”; Leifso charts her personal creative journey that moved away from the body, to the mind, and back to the body. We are working through the still-necessary need to compartmentalize marginalized practices into distinct fields like “(dis)ability arts” or “culturally diverse performance” and toward practices that go beyond creating avenues for inclusion and instead actively dismantle the systems that create barriers in the first place. The foregrounding of accessibility in our creative processes is essential in this project of equity and an indispensable lens for artistic creation.

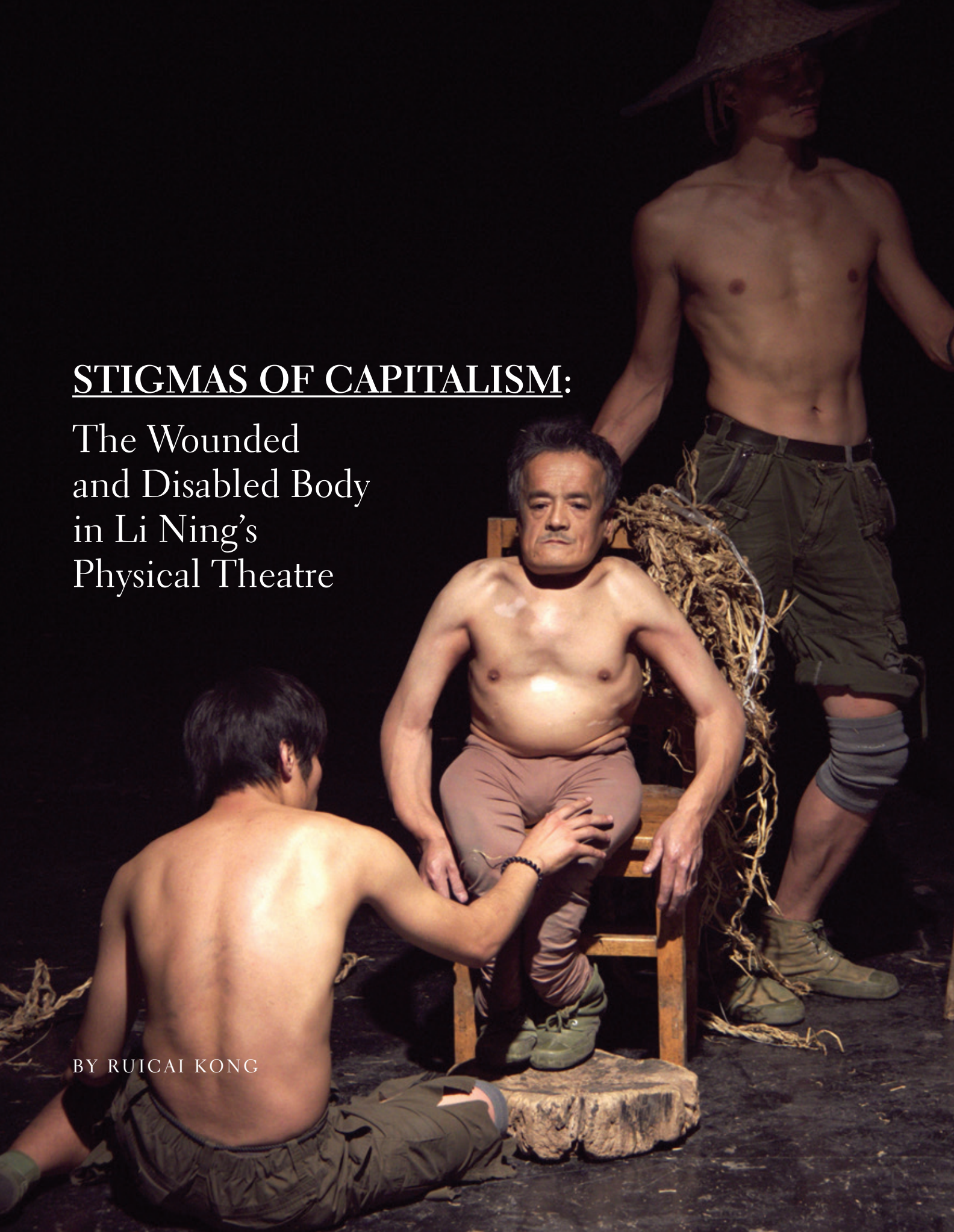
WORKS CITED


- Johnston, Kirsty. “Building a Canadian Disability Arts Network: An Intercultural Approach.” *Theatre Research in Canada* 30.1-2 (2009): 152-174.
- Mingus, Mia. “Changing the Framework: Disability Justice.” *RESIST Newsletter*. November 2010.

STIGMAS OF CAPITALISM:

The Wounded
and Disabled Body
in Li Ning's
Physical Theatre

BY RUICAI KONG





Li Ning's theatrical work *Exuviate-Implant* (2012) opens with Zhang Zanmin sitting on a tiny wooden stool. Zhang's crooked legs are pressed against the chest of his small body. Positioned in a corner right beside the audience, he is too close to be noticed as a performer. To move himself, he begins to lift up his hips, pulls the stool sideways, and sits back on it. The stool turns into the simplest prosthesis for his paralyzed legs. The little theatre then grows dimmer, with only a shaft of light hitting the stage. Inch by inch, Zhang haltingly edges towards the spotlight...

To polish its modern, capitalist image, China has exorcized any trace of disability — physical or metaphorical. In the largest cities like Beijing or Shanghai, public facilities for the disabled are partial and incomplete, and they are worse still in second-tier cities or the vast hinterland (Palmer). When the Communist Party prioritizes economics and productivity, disability is unconsciously ignored, under-represented, and even kept out of sight.

No doubt, an authoritarian capitalism has emerged in China since the 1978 open-door policy. In the name of “Capitalism with Chinese characteristics,” the Communist Party has reformed its economic policies into a capitalist version, but it maintains a socialist politics and ideology (Huang; Hasmath and Hsu). As the Party controls both the realms of economics and culture, it prioritizes the significance of GDP growth and reinforces productivity as the paramount morality (Pei).

Since the beginning of the 1990s, mainstream theatre has participated in this economic game. Maximizing the performability and efficiency of theatre has become the primary concern. Every effort is designed with a single goal: profitability in the service of the burgeoning art market (Jin). In this context, ability is synonymous with physical fitness and smoothness in delivering the performance. The image of healthy and active bodies, therefore, acquires its symbolic meaning. In a sense, state capitalism and mainstream theatre share the same values: both enshrine productivity and exclude people with disabilities or those who seem to be “deformed” or “malfunctioning.” The problem thus is how theatrical practices can serve to redefine ability and disability in contemporary China. Could the theatre employ the disabled without being caught up in the economics of efficiency and profitability, and in this way provide an alternative?

Li Ning's physical theatre presents a nuanced picture of physical exploitation in modern China. In his works, the labouring body is constantly inflicted with wounds and stigmas left by the state and capitalist apparatus, while the physically disabled body reserves certain potential and possibility to challenge the established system. Li Ning's artistic practices range from sculpture, poetry, modern dance, independent film to physical theatre. His works are mostly concerned

IN HIS WORKS, THE
LABOURING BODY IS
CONSTANTLY INFLICTED
WITH WOUNDS AND
STIGMAS LEFT BY THE
STATE AND CAPITALIST
APPARATUS, WHILE THE
PHYSICALLY DISABLED
BODY RESERVES
CERTAIN POTENTIAL
AND POSSIBILITY TO
CHALLENGE THE
ESTABLISHED SYSTEM.

with the relationship between bodies and environments, where impacts of the state and capitalism on the body have become a recurring subject matter. His experimental film *1966/1986/2006* (2006) investigates influences of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) on modern China's psyche. Two semi-autobiographical films, *Tape* (2010) and *The Freeze* (2012), document his struggles as an artist in a socialist state, where rigid censorship, institutional and political violence, and uneven urbanization under capitalism constitute his creations' surroundings. The urbanizing landscapes, a customary hallmark of modern China, are an indispensable backdrop in his works that can be found in his films *Unfinished 2* (2007), *Land Forms 2* (2008), and *Tape* (2010), as well as in his theatrical works *Preparation* (2010) and *The Freeze* (2011).

This essay focuses on two of Li's theatrical works, *Preparation* and *Exuviate-Implant*, and considers how violence, pain, and pleasure are inscribed by the political and economic apparatus on the body. I attempt to interpret the two works within a context of Chinese capitalism. This context not only offers an existential environment for the body in question, but also, and more importantly, it makes Li's artistic activities critically challenging.

Preparation scrutinizes the exploitability of the body in China's rapid economic development. By using non-professional performers, Li Ning can disclose the "wounds" on the body left by the socio-economic apparatus. He recruits performers from all walks: cashiers, cleaners, waiters, street idlers, factory workers, college students, officer workers, and businessmen. Their backgrounds offer a starting point for Li's creation, as their singularity, I argue, is largely defined by their daily profession and social status.

The working class, and the "peasant-worker" in particular, are the protagonists of this physical performance. Every year, millions of peasants leave their poverty-stricken villages and

rush into the affluent coastal cities. They are the tremendous forces driving the world's factory, yet they are socially marginalized. As perpetual outsiders in the mega-cities, they live in the outskirts of the privileged complexes, in slums of villages-in-the-city, under bridges, and even in manholes (Liu; Wu, Zhang, and Webster). The term "peasant-worker" embodies the complicity of the Party/state and the capitalism that shapes this class. On the one hand, they are politically defined as "peasants" through household registration, an administrative device enforced by the Party. This means that they are denied all the benefits and welfare the citizen enjoys. On the other hand, they are workers defined by the capitalist apparatus, living in the cities they built, cities that politically and culturally exclude them (Wu).

Beyond this double exploitation, peasant-workers are largely under-represented in mainstream media and propaganda (Lin). The TV screen is flush with images of the privileged nouveau riche and self-proclaimed middle-class. Even on the experimental stage it is rare to see the faces of peasant-workers. Most avant-garde performances uncritically indulge in introducing and imitating chic Western trends or glossing over cliché-ridden metropolitan sentiments without touching the reality. A simple glance at the list of dramas by Meng Jinghui, a leading figure in China's little theatre, makes this point plain.

Li Ning's subject matter and creation process make his works outstanding. Just as the peasant-workers are marginalized, Li Ning marginalizes himself. He bases his creation and practices in a second-tier city, Jinan, capital of his home province, and performs in the first-tier cities across the country. He believes that while Beijing may be undergoing a bonanza in the art market, it is also a bubble. He is inspired much more by the people living below the glorious veneer (Kong, and Li Ning).

Preparation examines the socio-economic "wounds" on the non-professional performer's labouring body. The wide-ranging tasks of the labourer discipline how a given body speaks, moves, reacts, and behaves. Nothing is more revealing than the repetitive working movements each profession requires: writers typing; cashiers scanning, typing and cashing; sex workers flirting; flyer distributors peddling. These somewhat repetitive, habitual, and abstract movements are a secret form of institutional violence, wounds stigmatized by capitalism. *Preparation* captures these abstract movements and serves to stabilize these internalized rhythms that live in the performers' bodies. As their exploited bodies are freed from workplaces and put on stage, the abstract of capitalism is seen, the violence uncovered, and the wounds opened up and made visible. They are no longer outside the public view, or normalized in daily life, but are strident, sensational spectacles.

The act of stabilizing the labouring movements is a provocative one, for these movements would otherwise sink into unconsciousness. The paradox is that the wounds of capitalism are conspicuously there, but are designed to constantly evade perception.

This cognitive numbness introduces a kind of paradox to the body in question. Although the regulative power is assigned and imposed on the body, the way it accommodates and controls bodily energy and potential can produce certain pleasure to which the body can become addicted. As Lyotard



© Yang Wanru. The J-town Physical Guerrillas in a poster of Li Ning's independent film, *Sticky Tape*.

writes in one of his controversial texts, “[T]here is *jouissance* in it, the English unemployed did not become workers to survive, they—hang on tight and spit on me—*enjoyed* [*ils ont joui de*] the hysterical, masochistic, whatever exhaustion it was of hanging on in the mines, in the foundries, in the factories, in hell, they enjoyed it” (Lyotard 111).

Similar to the English workers in the nineteenth century to whom Lyotard refers, labouring bodies in modern China are subject to the same paradox. The repetitive working movements prescribed by their jobs to regulate the bodily energy, in a sense, provide certain form for the formless energy and potential the body possesses. These movements normalize, customize, and thus tame the potential of the body. They construct a false identity for the body, where the induced pleasure makes the disciplinary power evade our intuition. In presenting the laboring movements on stage, *Preparation* exposes the contradictions and tensions surrounding the working bodies: the wounds of capitalism are nuanced and ambiguous, not simply clear-cut moral issues.

Preparation not only exposes these laboring movements, but magnifies, hypes, and overplays them. It is a crude theatre that crosses the boundary between reality and fantasy. The work shows no story or plot, but only physical scenes and spectacles. The performances are thrown into diverse settings, and their repetitive movements provide the basic ingredients for the choreography design. These settings include chaotic construction sites with roaring rumbles, piles of rubble and rusty heavy machinery, or hodgepodge cityscapes flush with thousands of advertising flyers, rubbish, and the cacophony of a low-quality, governmental propaganda soundtrack. Placed in this milieu of heightened mimicry, the bodies, once disciplined by capitalism, immediately lose their professional rhythms.

In one scene, the performers speak in their dialects, one by one, about their backgrounds. The use of marginalized dialect

is provocative in Beijing, the capital of China, where standard Mandarin is privileged. Accents are sources of discrimination for the peasant workers in big cities, exposing their peasant origins, an identity created and marginalized by socio-political hierarchies (Lei). In China's job markets, accents are regarded as a failure to communicate efficiently and both a physical obstacle to and a stutter in the free flow of capital (Lei; Chan, King, and Phillips 109). In *Preparation*, the abject origin of the body is exposed by the utterance of accented speech, an origin that every commodity tries to hide. Like scratches on a CD, accents betray the bodily origins that smear the capitalist façade. This façade of standardization is similar to Baudrillard's “hyperreal,” in which the origin of a commodity is a threat: “Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” (Baudrillard 169). Thus, Baudrillard notes, “Only the extinction of original reference permits the generalized law of equivalence, which is to say, the very possibility of production” (140).

Pointing out the wounds of capitalism, *Preparation* involves two ambiguous identities of the working body. One is the identity imposed by capitalism: programmed physical movements that dominate one's own physical potential. The body becomes a standardized commodity, a nameless object without any trace of origins. The other identity is marked by the accent, a birthmark left by the humble origins of a body. They both belong to a form of self-intimacy, a form of auto-affectation: the subject can find pleasure both in repetitive working movements and the voice of their accent (Derrida 79-80). They both exploit the potential of the body, defining it by profession or origin.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the discursive accents in *Preparation* attest to the fact that there are uncontrollable forces that capitalism fails to exploit completely in a body. This becomes a weak resistance. Interestingly, Li Ning named his



© Liu Nian and Yuan Wei. The cast of *Preparation*.

LI NING'S BODY LIES UNDER OR BEHIND ZHANG'S BODY, WITH THEIR LIMBS STACKED AND OVERLAPPED. LI THUS BECOMES ZHANG'S PROSTHESIS, A VEHICLE TO FACILITATE ZHANG'S MOVEMENTS. THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THEIR BODIES COLLAPSE, AND THIS INTIMACY IS AN ANTI-CAPITALIST ACT.

troupe the “J-town Physical Guerrillas.” The term “guerillas,” or “partisans,” denotes a form of rhizome-like forces, or a virus-like contamination that discursively infects the apparatus.

The critical intervention presented by *Preparation* enlightens my interpretation of how Li Ning engages with physical disabilities in *Exuviate-Implant*. The latter should be understood in the context of China’s capitalism. This provides a coherent picture of his trajectory to represent bodies in modern China.

Exuviate-Implant presents a new approach to the exploitability of the body by turning inward. First and foremost, in a capitalist context where ability and productivity are valued, *disability* becomes understood as *useless and worthless*. Non-normative physical abilities are malfunctions in delivering

the physical disciplinary power of capitalism. People with disabilities are assumed to be underperformers, or non-performers, both for the performance of capitalism and in the theatre. Such “useless” bodies are thus inherently incapable of being exploited. This serves as a pause, a standstill that is independent, if possible, from the rule of efficiency. In the supposed deformity and malfunction of the disabled body, no rhythm or accent can be found.

In *Exuviate-Implant*, where physical disability is central, the backdrops, props, sounds, and bodies seldom have reference to reality. Different from the bacchanal atmosphere in *Preparation*, this work is lucid, simple, and tranquil; a sentimental, lyrical drift. Throughout the performance not a single line of dialogue is presented. No repetitive rhythm associated with capitalist disciplinary can be identified. The stage is incredibly simple. There are only three performers: Zhang Zanmin, Li Ning, and An Bin.

Traces of reality are only found in the beginning, when we see Zhang Zanmin, an actor with physical disabilities, confined to his dingy room. There he falls into a dreamy world. Despite the scattered references to reality, the work’s engagement in social reality is still poignant. The creation process provides an important subtext to this work: Li Ning met Zhang Zanmin in 2011 when Zhang was suffering from loneliness and social alienation because of his physical immobility and on the verge of suicide. Li persuaded Zhang to join his troupe. They then embarked on the journey of creation (Cai and Li Ning).

How to turn the “useless” body into something “useful” is an interesting issue in this work, where the potential of the disabled body becomes an alternative. The performance frequently invokes an authentic world created by ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi (369 BC – 286 BC), who wrote about usefulness and uselessness:

Master Chuang [Zhuangzi] was walking in the mountains when he saw a great tree with thick branches and luxuriant foliage. A lumberjack had stopped by its side but did not attempt to fell it. When Master Chuang asked him the reason, he said,

“There’s nothing that it can be used for.”

“This tree has been able to live out the years allotted to it by heaven because it is worthless,” said Master Chuang. (Chuangtzu 185)

In this performance, the body of “worthlessness” bears a new potential of “worthiness,” which can open up to diverse, visceral possibilities that are otherwise homogenized by capitalism. In certain scenes, Li Ning’s body realizes, aesthetically and technically, the invisible ability and potential that lies inside Zhang’s immobile body. Li Ning’s body lies under or behind Zhang’s body, with their limbs stacked and overlapped. Li thus becomes Zhang’s prosthesis, a vehicle to facilitate Zhang’s movements. The boundaries between their bodies collapse, and this intimacy is an anti-capitalist act: If physical alienation is a product of capitalism, which keeps everyone inside an atomic individual, returning to a degree of physical intimacy becomes a kind of defiance. *Exuviate-Implant* also breaks the boundaries between body and nature, flesh and material. Instead of being reduced to a commodity, Li Ning’s work allows the body to be close to natural materials. Branches of wood become a key prop: In the poster for the performance, Zhang’s crooked feet are placed beside some twisted wood, which alludes to the worthless/worthy tree in Zhuangzi’s text quoted above.

It is important to note that Zhang’s performance, as employed by Li Ning, is a strange form of exploitation. The audience does not know if Zhang Zanmin is exploited as an actor performing a disabled character, or simply acting himself. Audiences trained to respond to able-bodied performers are not able to read anything in Zhang’s ineffective physical movements, deadpan face, and slow mobility. Yet the staging of Zhang’s physical disability, something usually and deliberately concealed by capitalism, fiercely challenges the visual norm prescribed by the system, where only able-bodied, healthy, and normatively beautiful are favoured.

In one crucial scene, Zhang Zanmin is placed in a tall chair, half naked, with Li Ning howling beside him as a warrior and An Bin kneeling down before him. It looks as if Zhang is seated on his throne, housed in a shanty barn with cut wood and stalks. Something is to be born there. This scene summarizes the performance by charting a kingdom for the disabled, an unexploited place that is well preserved and protected. In this land, capitalism and politics fails to exert their power, while a transcending is possible.

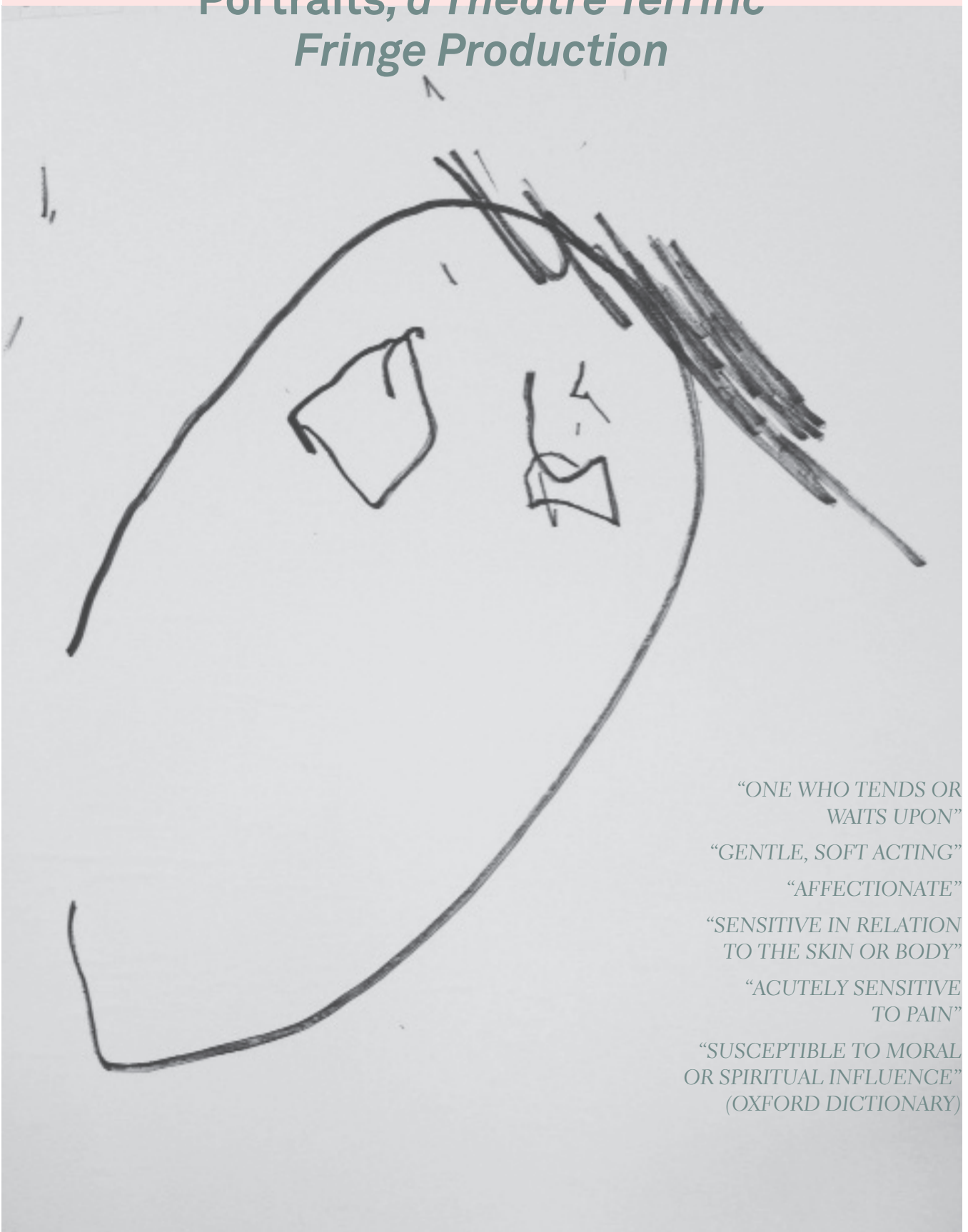
Preparation and Exuviate-Implant present exploited bodies—both able-bodied and ones with disability—amid China’s modern transformation. They reveal the paradoxes and tensions of how bodies exist under capitalism, and invite alternatives. In a sense, Li’s exploration of physical disability in *Exuviate-Implant* completes his critique of capitalism. The alternative the performance provides might be tentative. Nevertheless, it challenges the established concept of ability and disability, and reveals the deconstructive possibility inside the body

WORKS CITED

- Baudrillard, Jean. *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.
- Cai, Yiyun, and Li Ning. “(Interview) J-town Physical Guerrillas and Li Ning: The Body Is a Theatre.” *Literary Life Weekly* 80 (2012): 51-57.
- Chan, Chak Kwan, King Lun Ngok, and David Phillips. *Social Policy in China: Development and Well-being*. Bristol: Policy Press, 2008.
- Chuangtzu. *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Trans. Victor H. Mair. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison. Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1973.
- Hasmath, Reza, and Jennifer Hsu, eds. *China in an Era of Transition: Understanding Contemporary State and Society Actors*. New York: Palgrave, 2009.
- Huang, Yasheng. *Capitalism with Chinese Characteristics: Entrepreneurship and the State*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008.
- Jin, Fu. “The Reform of Cultural Institutions and the Future of Theatre.” *Dramatic Literature* 322/1 (2011): 7-14.
- Kong, Ruicai, and Li Ning. “(Interview) Body, Environment and Theatre.” *Sohu.com* 24 September 2010. Web.
- Lei, Guang. “Rural Taste, Urban Fashions: The Cultural Politics of Rural/Urban Difference in Contemporary China.” *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 11/3 (2003): 613-618.
- Lin, Xiaodong. *Gender, Modernity and Migrant Workers in China: Becoming a ‘Modern’ Man*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Liu, Jue. “China On the Move.” *The World Of Chinese* 4 (2014): 28-35.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Libidinal Economy*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993.
- Palmer, James. “Crippling Injustice: Disabled people in modern China are still stigmatised, marginalised and abused. What hope is there for reform?” *Aeon*, 17 February 2014. Web.
- Pei, Minxin. *China’s Trapped Transition: The Limits of Developmental Autocracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Wu, Fulong, Fangzhu Zhang, and Chris Webster. *Rural Migrants in Urban China: Enclaves and Transient Urbanism*. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Wu, Xiaogang. “Household Registration, Social Exclusion and Rural Migrants in Cities.” *Socialist China, Capitalist China: Social Tension and Political Adaptation*. Ed. Guoguang Wu and Helen Lansdowne. London: Routledge, 2009. 29-54.

Reconfiguring the “Disabled” Artist:

**Tender Reverberations in
Portraits, a Theatre Terrific
Fringe Production**



“ONE WHO TENDS OR
WAITS UPON”
“GENTLE, SOFT ACTING”
“AFFECTIONATE”
“SENSITIVE IN RELATION
TO THE SKIN OR BODY”
“ACUTELY SENSITIVE
TO PAIN”
“SUSCEPTIBLE TO MORAL
OR SPIRITUAL INFLUENCE”
(OXFORD DICTIONARY)

© Theatre Terrific. Self-portraits drawn by ensemble members during the creation of *Portraits*.

BY ASHLEY MCASKILL

“Tender” is a controversial word in the field of disability and performance. Due to its association with fragility and caregiving, *tender* has potential to perpetuate the disabling culture of people with disabilities being inferior to the non-disabled. Characters with disabilities in the media are projected as a site of charity or overachievement in their ability to overcome their assumed impediments. However, *tender* also has the potential to loosen such fixed frames of difference, whether in the field of disability or in other intercultural performance works. This can be described as a “moment of immense tenderness that can manifest as uneasy but also confusion” that replaces “foreclosed certainties with fresh openness to exploration and interpretation” (Abbas et al. 40). Being a researcher of theatre and disability in Canada, I am interested in how the word “tender” emerges during the workshop process of mixed ability theatre groups. I use the term “mixed ability” to emphasize the diversity of artists in these theatre groups who may or may not identify as having disabilities or being a disabled individual. This paper will explore the complexities of tenderness in such groups’ artistic practices and question whether tenderness is productive in the field of disability and performance.

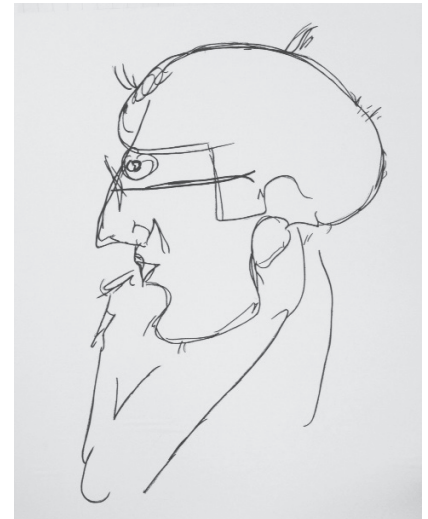
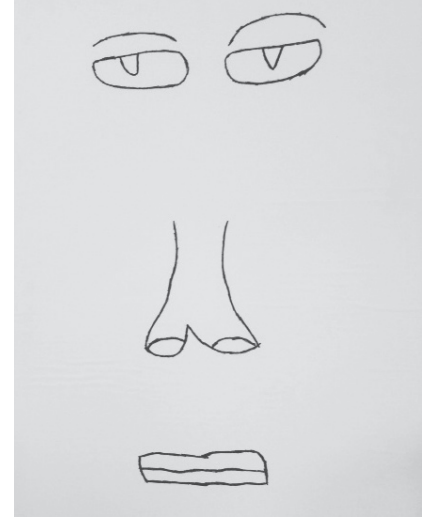
“Disability arts” is often perceived as a new, liberating discourse on disability and art. Originating in the 1970s and 1980s, disability arts is the result of a new political activism about the marginalized position of individuals with disabilities. According to the Edward Lear Foundation website, emphasis is placed on giving artists with disabilities a space “to tell their own stories, present their own perceptions of disability and issues around it.” Although progressive, the term disability arts also reinforces practices of exclusion and confinement between the non-disabled and individuals with disabilities. This is evident in the current state of affairs for artists with disabilities working in Canadian theatre. Their artistic work is often subjected to a medical gaze, being perceived as more therapeutic/rehabilitative than artistic. One of the main reasons for this is that, as Petra Koppers has pointed out, performances by individuals with disabilities have historically been confined to the freak show and medical theatre, spaces where humans are dissected with a

“diagnostic gaze” (31, 38). As a result of being discredited as artists, individuals with disabilities are “robbed in their legitimacy and power of critiquing culture” (Abbas et al. 9).

At present, there are very few theatre groups in Canada working with artists with disabilities for purely artistic purposes. Theatre Terrific, in Vancouver, brings together diverse individuals with and without intellectual and/or physical disabilities and mental health issues. Founded in 1985, it is also Canada’s oldest mixed-ability theatre company. Toronto’s Workman Arts is an arts and mental health organization whose focus is not on drama therapy but on “the artistic development of the members” (Johnston, *Staging Madness* 2). In addition, the MoMo Dance Theatre Company based in Calgary works, according to its website, with “artists of all abilities, skills, and levels” to “remove barriers and facilitate artistic expression through performance and the enjoyment of movement.” Kirsty Johnston, in *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*, points out that very little research has been done on these groups’ artistic work and, more importantly, on the vulnerabilities performers with disabilities endure and engage with during workshop processes. My interest with these groups is in how each artist (non-disabled or disabled) is artistically valued, and how tenderness, or what I am deeming “tender reverberations,” gives space for such artistic validation to emerge.

Tender reverberations are *affective processes* of deformalization and vulnerability, whereby the borders of our knowledge of ourselves and our bodies shift or soften. I use the word *reverberations* to assert how such processes are constantly in motion, providing a site of self-reflection (something I discuss later in the paper). This may mean an image or a moment may stay with you beyond its initial emergence, continually making its echo felt as you move in this world. You may ask yourself, “Why has this moment stayed with me? What is its effect?” This rich yet ethical confusion gives potential for complicating understandings and relations of the human body, moving beyond medical and/or physical differences, or divisions of abled and disabled.

I argue that these reverberations occur in an aesthetic dimension



whereby knowledge is attained through the senses rather than some sort of formal rational dialogue. Working on grounds similar to Emmanuel Levinas’ notion of the “face-to-face” encounter that is “uncontainable, leading you beyond thought and knowledge” (87), tender reverberations loosen fixed mandates of artistic practices and understandings of others. As Julie Salverson says, “This encounter with and call by the other is a surprise, a deformalization . . . a compelling invitation” (34-35). Performance-engaged works, as Anna Catherine Hickey-Moody suggests, “allow us to dissolve inflexible ideas of the way things ‘are’” (*Becoming-Dinosaur*, 170). This is not to say that during performative work, divides between the abled and disabled dissolve, but rather to offer new ways of “moving beyond category” (ibid). One of the ways to move beyond categorization is to re-conceive the makeup of a human body by situating it as a part of a larger worldly relation. In the case of mixed ability theatre companies, members are seen first and foremost as artists and relate to their colleagues as artists rather than through

© Theatre Terrific. Self-portraits drawn by ensemble members during the creation of Portraits.



labels of specific medical diagnoses or mobility challenges. Such diminishment of medical identity gives space for tender reverberations to energize.

Yet, there is a risk with including the word tender when working with people with disabilities. As a researcher I ask myself, “How do I articulate tenderness in my field that does not carry an abelist tone? There are the dangers of projecting cultural perceptions of individuals with disabilities as being emotionally fragile and child-like.¹ Sarah Ahmed argues that different bodies are “stuck” with painful histories that come to culturally embody certain emotional values. The stickiness of such histories shape the “surfaces and boundaries” of certain bodies, such as those of disability (10). Often associated with “tending to” and feelings of affection, tender has the potential to perpetuate perceptions of disabled bodies as being objects of weakness and vulnerability. For this reason, I ask my readers to challenge themselves to define tender not just as an emotional state, but as an aesthetic process. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed tells her readers to ask not, “What are emotions,” but rather, “What do emotions do?” (4), or perhaps in my research, “What does *tender* do?”

This latter question emerged over the summer of 2013 for me with

members of Theatre Terrific. Over an eight-week period, I participated as an ensemble member among eighteen other cast members in their 2013 Fringe Festival production, *Portraits*, engaging in theatre exercises led by their artistic director, Susanna Uchatius. However, unlike other companies, where the script is written prior to the rehearsal process, Theatre Terrific has a tradition of creating original works through an intensely personal collaborative process for their Fringe Festival productions. This includes a lot of question and response exercises, such as, in the case in *Portraits*, asking cast members to discuss some of their own questions about life.² Although I was unable to be in the final production, my participation with Terrific was very personal and raw, coinciding with the honest rigour of my Terrific colleagues. Focusing on the cast responses from these exercises, this paper asserts the complexities and significance of tender reverberations within diverse groups like Theatre Terrific.

TENDER REVERBERATIONS ARE AFFECTIVE PROCESSES OF DEFORMALIZATION AND VULNERABILITY, WHEREBY THE BORDERS OF OUR KNOWLEDGE OF OURSELVES AND OUR BODIES SHIFT OR SOFTEN.

In certain parts of this paper I contextualize how certain exercises were adapted to ensure the inclusive working environment but I will not outline each cast members’ diagnoses. It should also be noted that all quotes used in this paper were compiled by *Portraits* stage manager Darlene, who attempted to write down word-for-word each of the ensemble members’ responses.³ Some of these responses were non-verbal and at times did not necessarily occur through dialogue. I also will not isolate definitions of disability theatre or compare those definitions against competing art therapy discourses. As a researcher and theatre practitioner, I acknowledge that there were therapeutic elements to the *Portraits* workshop process, but the individuals I refer to in this paper are first and foremost professional theatre artists.

Negotiating *disabling* ethics

Since the beginning of her tenure as artistic director of Theatre Terrific, Uchatius has endeavoured, as she describes on the Terrific website, to move the company away from “the narrow special interest label associated with ‘disability theatre.’” This is not to say that the company avoids its origins; Theatre Terrific was founded by Connie Hargrave in 1984/85 with the intention of creating a theatre training ground for individuals with disabilities in Vancouver (These are the founding principles for many theatre companies in Canada that are working with artists with disabilities: e.g., MoMo Mixed Ability Theatre; Les Muses; Workman Arts). This is most evident in Terrific’s mandate, which outlines the group’s diversity: “Our diverse ensembles include professional and emerging artists with or without developmental, physical, or mental health issues, gender or language challenges.”

Candice, a longstanding Theatre Terrific member and cast member of *Portraits*, has gone on record to describe the theatre as a site where individuals with disabilities “share their rawness but in an artistic way” (Johnston, *Stage Turns* 81). In the case of *Portraits*, emphasis was placed on the cast members sharing their personal questions about life. The synopsis for the show on the audition notice read:

Personal. Blunt. Honest. In a virtual space of white, all kinds of folks

step into the 'truth booth' to tackle great big questions. What is your place in life? Why does it matter? Sparks fly! Real life portraits are sketched. Camouflage is removed. The answers will touch your heart, blow your mind and leave you to ponder ... who am I?

Portraits cast members described some of their own obstacles as individuals with disabilities in a world built for the abled. One of the strongest instances of this was cast member Alex's monologue in which she revealed, "I don't like it when people make fun of the way I talk. I have brain damage and this is how I talk."⁴ Another example occurred at the end of the show when cast members revealed to the audience their big question about life: Tyson asked, "Why do Philippine people work with disabled people?" Tyson was one of four cast members who used wheelchairs; he also required a caregiver with him. He used a communication device through which he would type most of his responses. During more dialogue-based exercises, Tyson would either prepare his answers in advance or as a group we would wait for him to devise his answer and either Uchatius or another ensemble member would read his response. In the final performance when Tyson posed his question, Filipino cast member Edna held a microphone for him. Outside of the production, Edna was also the caregiver and life-long friend of Katrina, another cast member of *Portraits*. Stephanie also exposed her own pain-related disability: "I had a near death experience in Taipei, Taiwan, but I don't want to talk about it. I deal with a lot of pain on a daily basis." Issues around disability were also discussed and experienced during the rehearsal process: cast members admitted the ways in which individuals with disabilities are often judgmental of others in their community and their own anxieties about being laughed at by nondisabled audience members. Although Terrific, like many other similar companies, is trying to move beyond the category of disability theatre, the company remains extremely transparent about its members' lived experiences, which include issues of disability and ableism.

Uchatius is accredited as an artistic director; her workshop exercises have allowed Theatre Terrific members to feel comfortable being emotionally raw.⁵ Adapting methods from her own

theatre training, Uchatius has created performance exercises that support and unify the diverse members of Terrific but simultaneously honour each individual and their differences.⁶ Members of *Portraits* participated in an entrance ritual in which the group would stand in a circle and pass a stone from one person to another. During this exercise, each cast member would slowly breathe and make eye contact with everyone in the circle. One aspect that we as an ensemble adapted uniquely to *Portraits* was to sigh while breathing out.

Unlike many theatre companies in Canada, Terrific not only supports artists with disabilities, but also provides a space in which they can feel artistically valued. Such instances are not possible in mainstream theatres, which emphasize verbal communication and theatre training from performance institutions whose programming is often inaccessible to individuals with developmental and physical disabilities. Despite working as a professional theatre company, members of Theatre Terrific, similar to artists with disabilities at large, struggle to be taken seriously in the broader professional performing arts industry. This was well-expressed when Uchatius asked the ensemble what we wanted more of in life. One cast member stated, "To be noticed and appreciated for what I do when it comes to my theatre work." Theatre Terrific has proven to be one of the rare companies to consider their members as equal contributors.

Workshopping *Portraits*

At the beginning of the *Portraits* workshop process, Uchatius asked the ensemble, "What are your big questions about life?" Like our ensemble, the responses were diverse, with some questions about the broader meaning of life and some relating more to lived realities. Ian, a tall middle-aged cast member, stated, "Important questions is flying airplanes to connect us to the outside world." This desire to travel was brought up a lot by Ian throughout the workshop process, and he later told me this was because he had never actually flown in an airplane or been outside of British Columbia. Tyson's big question about life was "[t]o move out on my own place ... Independence is important because I am able to be whole on my own." Cast member Jonah also posed a personal question: "How do I feel confident in myself and know my place

in the world?" Other broader questions included:

Why, if the world has so much, do some have so little and some have so much?

Why is there not enough love?

Why do people belong to different groups? Why do different groups not blend together?

Why are we destroying our world and what should we do about it?

Why is vulnerability seen as a weakness? (*my question*)

Why won't people be courteous?

What does it mean to be alive in this world today?

Poetry also was an integral part of our process, both reading and creating our own short poems. Poems like William Blake's "Eternity" and Raymond Carver's "Late Fragment" that contemplate themes of life and death came to extend these bigger questions about life. Some of the *Portraits* ensemble members faced speech challenges. Susanna would ask us to recite poems out loud and emphasize listening and working together. Going through each poem, some words became more significant than others. Kieran, who is selective in his verbal communication, has difficulty expressing more complex sentences; however, during the poetry exercises, he created beautiful harmonizing tones while sounding out each word.

These poems inspired cast members to ask even more questions, such as in the case of Carver's "Late Fragment":

And did you get what
you wanted from this life, even so?
I did.
And what did you want?
To call myself beloved, to feel
myself
beloved on the earth.

This piece prompted us to think about competing discourses of happiness/sadness, good/evil, and life/death. While looking more at the line, "Did you get what you wanted from this life," Uchatius asked the

ensemble what we wanted more of in life? Sitting outside under a tree in a park, we shared our extremely personal responses with each other. Our stage manager, Darlene, a long time member of Theatre Terrific expressed her desire for “inner peace.” Ian echoed his desire for travel with “an airplane ride.” Michelle, who was emotionally open about her lack of self-confidence, wanted “happiness that gets rid of the blues.” Selena stated her desire to be with her daughters more. Daryl, another long-time member of Terrific, signed his desire to have a key for “the pizza place” (his place of employment) and to go swimming. I expressed my own desire for more time and balance, something I struggle with on a daily basis. Edna, who is the only one in her family currently residing in Canada, stated her wish to go home and take time to be with her relatives. This session for me was extremely compelling, as I witnessed each cast member, without hesitation, sharing his or her experiences and feelings.

Although some desires and questions that arose during these exercises did revolve around issues of disability and accessibility, disability was not at the core of the exercise. What was apparent was how and in what ways we all had felt disabled. Yet this is not to say that such personal admissions wipe away the differences of the group. Rather, they create new ways of relating to one another. Too often in community field work, divisions of “victims, villains and heroes” emerge (Salverson 7-8). Roles become fixed and individuals have difficulty moving beyond or even in between being the fixer and the one that needs fixing. Julie Salverson explains that with such problematic binaries, the act of testimonials becomes limited to a mere monologue “where one person speaks and the other listens” (21-22). In the case of mixed ability groups, such process frameworks are essentially dangerous and isolating. This is when group members with disabilities can feel less like artists and more like case studies.

What became apparent during *Portraits* was that roles were essentially complicated due to the ensemble’s mutually vulnerable admissions. This is not to say that this was easily done or always successful. However, we became witnesses to one another’s admissions, exposing something about ourselves.

Uchatius was also actively vulnerable in the work process, revealing her own fears and her stake in the project as artistic director. My own role became emotionally challenging throughout the process of *Portraits*. I became honest with my fellow ensemble members about my own social anxieties and allowed my own stories to be witnessed instead of merely being a listener and watcher of Theatre Terrific’s members. It is only with this openness and willingness to be vulnerable that tender reverberations are actualized. As Salverson says, “Although performance as a pedagogical medium carries potential to *transform both images and understandings*, such a progression cannot be taken for granted. Change is a *slow, tender, and tenuous* process. It is not particularly linear” (emphasis mine, 85). Such transformations affect how artists with disabilities shift from being perceived merely as medical objects to being taken seriously as theatre collaborators. Collaboration deformalizes prior treatments of such artists as emotionally fragile and in need of tending and support. Perhaps this is when such understandings of “disability theatre” can be restructured or even broken down.

Tender reverberations also materialized through the creation of our own self-portraits. During this exercise, Uchatius directed us to feel our faces with our hands and draw what we felt, without fear of making a mistake or perfect portrait. Recalling my own experiences, I felt the softness of my eyelashes, the roughness and bumpiness of my forehead, and smoothness of my hands as they embraced my cheeks. Edna revealed her own thoughts of her drawing: “This picture is me. I have long hair. And a flat nose. I always smile.” Alex, who is a very talented visual artist, shared, “I feel proud and then my relationship by talking to people and any kind of ladies. I wear a dragon necklace ‘cause I like dragons. My face is soft like Frankie’s [his cat’s] fur.” Duran drew in sections, illustrating close-ups of different parts of his face: “Different sections are based on the physical qualities of my face. I felt my hairline. The little bumps that I felt on my forehead. My eyelashes felt very long and my stubbly.” Katrina exclaimed, “This is me. Hair! Black hair! I don’t have any glasses on.” Jonah related his drawing to his late father: “Confident and energetic. My mouth is

coming towards my dad’s nose. My nose is sort of like my uncle’s nose. I have long eyelashes for one thing.” Candice echoed this act of memorial, “Well, my picture is oval shaped. I’m a pot head. I drew my face oval shape in memory of my mom.” Erica, in contrast, used nature metaphors to explain her self-portrait: “It’s very faint. I can’t see it. I don’t know. Well, I guess I thought of my face like clouds in the water ... like a stream ... that’s what I thought of my face.” Ian explained, “It’s a self portrait. It’s smoking, but I don’t. I drew it and I filmed it when I drew it frame by frame.” His smoking reference later became a true comedic moment in the final *Portraits* script. One revelation that came through this exercise was cast member Larry’s declaration of his sexuality: “I drew my hair up because I was looking behind you ... I saw one [photo] had its hair sticking up. I have glasses on. I think I’d like to say I’m ‘G’ – ‘A’ – ‘Y.’” The “G-A-Y” line was included in his final monologue for the show. Yet over the course the last week before the show, Larry began to say the word “gay” instead of spelling it; however, he was also selective, delivering this line only to some audiences during the final run of productions.

These portraits came to enhance the aesthetic space of the workshop process and the actualization of tender reverberations. What became apparent was how complex our identities are: for example, in Larry’s admission of his sexuality, and Candice’s and Jonah’s memorials to their loved ones. Although labels of “disabled” and “abled” existed outside the theatre, within these exercises led by Uchatius, intersections of power relations were grayed. Tender reverberations emerged in the ways we began to relate to one another beyond an ablelist power dynamic.

Reverberating beyond the event

Moments such as Larry’s would emerge and re-situate our understandings of bodies, the work process, and ourselves. These events of surprise were both confusing and enlightening, superseding prior knowledge and perceptions of how to move through life. Tender reverberations thus affect how we come to witness events of our lives and others’ that are both painful and loving. It’s a process that will place us in uncomfortable positions, loosening



prior mandates of how we were living our lives. Although my tone at this point in my paper may sound extremely sentimental, it is important for me to acknowledge the affective consequences of such reverberations, which still echo in me. These reverberations are the vibrations of ethical encounters during *Portraits* that are both pleasurable and unsettling. They are echoes that affect the way I move through this world, how I teach, how I engage in theatre, and how I approach my research.

Cast member Tyson and his work during *Portraits* was one of these encounters. During one exercise, Susanna asked each cast member to fall to the ground on a count of eight. For members working from a wheelchair, she asked them to merely fall as low as they could. While doing this exercise, Tyson unbuckled himself from his chair and began to roll on the ground. When this first happened, many of us became concerned whether this was a safe position for Tyson. After being reassured by Tyson and his caregiver, we continued the exercise. Tyson also surprised us during a group dialogue; one time he spontaneously left the circle to position himself by Kieran to help him answer some of the questions he was being asked. He typed to Kieran, “I can read your mind.” I was unsettled by my own reactions to these moments due to my reasons

IN THE CASE OF MIXED ABILITY GROUPS, SUCH PROCESS FRAMEWORKS ARE ESSENTIALLY DANGEROUS AND ISOLATING. THIS IS WHEN GROUP MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES CAN FEEL LESS LIKE ARTISTS AND MORE LIKE CASE STUDIES.

for being so surprised. I asked myself after these incidents, “Why was I so surprised watching Tyson move out of his chair? Why did I underestimate his body and performance? What am I not acknowledging about myself right now, or more importantly, about Tyson?” For Tyson, it was a moment of knowing he was in a place where he could explore the limitations of his body and challenge the working environment of his physical space and his fellow colleagues expectations of his physicality. This personal encounter also raises the larger questions of practice: How are companies working with artists with disabilities challenging their own practices with their actors?

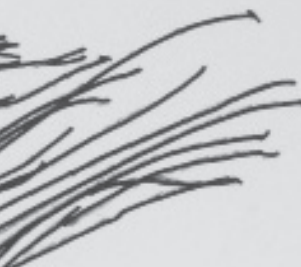
Conclusion

Following my time with Theatre Terrific, the company had the misfortune to have to go on a five-month hiatus due, the website stated, to “unforeseen financial and organizational distress.” It was during that time that I wrote most of this paper. This proved to be difficult knowing what my colleagues in Vancouver were enduring. The hiatus revealed the fragile grounds on which such companies work while competing in the larger Canadian theatre scene. However, on April 2014 the company recommenced its regular theatre classes and will be competing in the Vancouver 2014 Fringe Festival.

I leave this paper feeling raw and unsure. Throughout this piece I have used the term “artists with disabilities” while arguing that such individuals should be perceived as artists first rather than as medical objects who are performing. As I write this conclusion, I have a strong desire to go through the paper and eliminate such labels. Perhaps my own writing practices are merely perpetuating the disabling culture I discussed at the beginning of this essay. “Tender” is also a word I am working

through. Since writing this article, I don’t believe it’s a word I would apply to the other companies I am working with, since few of them sustain the same level of personal conversation that Terrific’s Fringe shows do. I also believe that some members of Terrific would not use the word tender either. I would like to suggest that fellow researchers doing fieldwork around interculturalism or identity politics have dialogues with the groups they talk to about their language around difference. This is something I didn’t do with my Terrific colleagues.

Conclusions are meant to be a space for final thoughts and recommendations for future work. Here is my recommendation: perhaps it is time to be less conclusive and more open to unsettlement and vulnerability. I am in the process of trying to understand my own conception of tender reverberations, as well as approaches to theatre groups that engage and support artists with disabilities. Since members of Terrific were so forthright in sharing their personal feelings, I feel it is important that I do so in my own written work. I leave my paper on this note, admitting my own vulnerability and *tending* to the vibrations pricking yet soothing me while I work.



1 Cool
2 not nice
3 not friendly.

NOTES

- 1 The word tender has received mixed reviews among many of colleagues—including Susanna Uchatius, artistic director of Theatre Terrific who, associated it with “child-like.” However, after reading an earlier draft of this article she became more open to my perspective on the word. I think it is important in any fieldwork you are doing to be always be open to critique and dialogue.
- 2 During Portraits, stage manager Darlene would often ask cast members to repeat their responses for clarification. These notes were piled together and given to Uchatius to devise a script. Each cast member received his or her own monologue, which included their own words from the workshoping process. The final script for Portraits was produced two weeks before opening night. This is the case for all of Terrific’s original Fringe Festival pieces.
- 3 Prior to travelling to Vancouver from Montreal, I compiled three different consent forms for the group upon the guidance of the Concordia ethics committees: one for participants without medically defined disabilities, one for participants with medically defined disabilities (more-so for developmental and mental illness), and one for legal guardians. However, upon arriving in Vancouver and upon Susanna’s request, one inclusive form was created that contained a space for legal guardians to sign.
- 4 All quotes from the cast are from “Cast Collected Material.”
- 5 It is important to note here that theatre companies in Canada that work with artists with disabilities work according to different models, and so many do not work in the same collaborative process as Theatre Terrific.
- 6 Some of these methods include Anne Bogart’s viewpoints: “an improvisation-based technique that provides actors with a tool box and vocabulary for exploring a play through movement and gesture”; Tadasha Suzuki Movement, “comprised of a variety of exercises that challenge the body’s centre of gravity by presenting a series of physical obstacles”; Kirsten Linklater’s Voice Process, which “attempts to free the natural voice of actors and non-actors”; and Susanna’s emphasis on ensemble development. (see <http://www.theatreterrific.ca/history-and-mandate>).

WORKS CITED

- Abbas, Jihan, Kathryn Church, Catherine Frazee, and Melanie Panitch. *Lights ... Camera ... Attitude!: Introducing Disability Arts and Culture*. Toronto: Ryerson University, 2004.
- Ahmed, Sarah. *Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Carver, Raymond. *A New Path to the Waterfall*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989.
- “Cast Collected Material.” Transcribed by Darlene Brookes. *Portraits* workshop/rehearsal notes. August-September 2013.
- Hickey-Moody, Anna Catherine. “Becoming-Dinosaur: Collective Process and Movement Aesthetics.” *Deleuze and Performance*. Ed. Laura Cull. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. 161-82.
- . *Unimaginable Bodies: Intellectual Disability, Performance and Becomings*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2009. (N.R.).
- Johnston, Kirsty. *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*. Montreal: McGill-Queens Press, 2012.
- . *Staging Madness: Dramatic Modes of Representing Menial Illness at the Workman Theatre Project, 1989-2001*. PhD Dissertation. University of Toronto: Toronto, 2002.
- Kuppers, Petra. *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on the Edge*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Levinas, Emmanuel. *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*. Trans. A. Lingis. Boston: M. Nijhoff, 1981.
- Salverson, Julie. *Performing Testimony: Ethics, Pedagogy, and a Theatre Beyond Injury*. PhD Dissertation. Toronto: University of Toronto, 2001.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Michigan: Ann Arbor, 2006.



Deaf Performance Art, Sound,
and ALLAH EARTH

BY SABINA ENGLAND



© Brendon Beavers. Sabine England in *A Different Story*, an ASL and musical concert performed with Lux Ascension.

I am a Deaf¹ filmmaker and performance artist. I enjoy what I do because I like to share my stories with people and make them smile, laugh, cry and think, and because art is a great tool to teach about different cultures, ideas, religions, and disabilities. I consider art to be an expression of the soul, a bridge that helps people meet across what society otherwise separates into differences, and I use it to share my worldview as a Deaf Indian Muslim woman. Sometimes I use my creative work as a celebration of life, and other times to vent my frustration and lament my struggles in the world. While it is not easy, I try to work with my deafness as I create, instead of letting it work against me.

I cannot hear sound—one of the basic elements of both filmmaking and performance. However, even though I cannot hear sound, I understand the importance of music. Music has a profound effect on hearing people everywhere, and has the power to bring together people from different cultures. I respect that, and for that reason, I want to work with musicians and incorporate music into my projects.

I admire what musicians do, and I like to learn about the long process and hard work that goes into composing music, writing lyrics, and putting songs together. When I work on film projects, I have to decide which songs to use and how to edit the audio quality. Instead of struggling with my deafness, I ask for hearing people to help me with audio and give me feedback during the editing process. I collaborate with others to pick the right song that fits the mood and theme of the given video or film. Even then, it's still hard and sometimes the process leaves me feeling hopeless and angry. There have been days when I've thought *what is the point?* and have contemplated giving up. But in the end, I know giving up would make me feel even worse. I am not a quitter. I like to keep pushing myself. If I fail at first, I just keep going. I try again. I remind myself to not view my deafness as an obstacle to achieving great results in my projects, even those that use sound.

As a Deaf filmmaker who is also a performance artist, I can say that performing live on the stage is totally different and can be even harder. Sometimes my performances consist of me alone on stage, sharing my poetry or stories, accompanied by music or voice to elevate the experience for hearing audience

members. When sound is involved, I rely on my instincts to try to perform in sync. Sometimes, I count the beats in my head: 1... 2... 3... Sometimes I ask other people to give me a visual cue, and look out the corner of my eyes for a hand sign. Ultimately, however, it is *not* my goal to perform perfectly in sync with music, but rather to let it naturally flow with my performance.

I am currently writing my first solo stage show called *Allah Earth*. It is adapted from my short film of the same name, which I shot and performed in Costa Rica in 2013. It is inspired by Sufi poetry, combined with sign language and Islamic spiritualism, and is a celebration of the beauty and biodiversity of Mother Earth (and what better setting for that than Costa Rica?). The stage version of *Allah Earth* blends mime, sign language, poetry, prayers, and video projection. It is also one-of-a-kind cultural experience, fusing Indian, Islamic, Indian Muslim, and deaf experiences, traditions, and ways of knowing.

Allah Earth will be broken into two portions of American Sign Language (ASL) poetry. While I perform my poetry in ASL, there will be a voice actress who will speak so that hearing audiences fully understand what I say. The point is not really to know what I'm saying, but to feel what I am *feeling and experiencing*. Translation itself is an art and is an important part of how I share my stories with both Deaf and Hearing audiences: American Sign Language has a completely different grammatical structure from English. For example, one poem says in English, *I've gone into the woods to absorb in the sights of nature*, and in ASL I say *I wander through trees trees trees all around nature everywhere beautiful*.

To score the show, I am using North Indian classical music, a part of not only my culture and heritage, but also my faith: There is a strong history of Muslim influences in Indian music, and likewise, a history of Indian cultural influences on Muslim societies in South Asian cultures. Some South Asian musical styles are influenced by Islamic styles, such as Qawwali (Sufi music popular in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh) and Ghazal (Urdu poetry often combined with music). Countless respected Indian Muslim poets and writers have contributed to writing well-known songs for Hindi cinema, from long ago through to this day. Again, when using music, I'm not worried



about performing exactly in sync with the music; my aim is for the music to flow with my sign language poetry, like a running brook.

Allah Earth features the Adhaan, which is the Islamic call to prayer. Muslims are obligated to pray five times a day in the direction of Makkah—the holiest city of Islam, located in Saudi Arabia. The first person in the world to recite the Adhaan almost fifteen hundred years ago was a Black African slave called Bilal. Bilal struggled against the anti-black racism that was rampant in the day and suffered much physical abuse and violence from Arab slave owners. He was eventually freed by the Prophet Muhammad, who loved him as a brother and treated him as an equal. Bilal firmly held onto and vocalized the beauty of Allah, and he had such a beautiful voice that people would stop and listen. Today, there are different ways to recite the Adhaan—some are slow and singsong, while others are fast and booming. *Allah Earth* features a slow, melodic version, and while the recording plays, I pray and perform on stage. I've heard from both Muslims and non-Muslims about how listening to the Adhaan have affected them; it is considered by many to be one of the most powerful, emotionally moving sounds they have encountered. I use it in *Allah Earth* to share that experience, to thank Allah for giving me the opportunity to perform, and to share my faith with the audience.

I am creating a performance with religious tones in order to show other people that religion isn't necessarily a bad thing, and Islam is most certainly *not* a religion of terrorism. I grew up as a Muslim and was always taught values by my family and other Muslims. I want to show that there are many Muslims and many different Muslim cultures around the world that rejoice in positivity, love, respect, kindness, and charity, and profess to take care of Mother Earth and animals. I grew up around all kinds of Muslims, from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, the Balkans, and other parts of the world, and most were kind-hearted, humble people. I want to share the character of my Muslim upbringing with the audiences, both Muslim and non-Muslim, and in particular with deaf audience members. I grew up isolated as a Deaf South Asian Muslim girl around mainly deaf white people. There is a lot of ignorance and racism in my local deaf community, as my non-white deaf friends and I have

experienced. I'm not angry about it, because I know that there's not much exposure to other cultures in the predominantly white deaf community. However, I would like to present a new experience to my local Deaf community and invite them to explore my world, my culture, my religion, and my perspective on life.

I also want to encourage people to embrace the beauty of Mother Earth, to look around and say, "Hey, it's a beautiful world we live in, so let's take more action to protect our plants and animals." There is a lot of debate about climatic change, and I don't want to lecture: I simply wish to remind people that we only have one planet, and we should protect it before it's too late. I want *Allah Earth* to highlight the diversity and beauty of the different cultures, ethnicities, religions, races, and nationalities on Earth.

Allah Earth is my way of sharing my soul, my culture, my deafness, my religion, and my dreams with the world. The piece is growing, and I have plans to bring the show onstage in St. Louis and London, and to perform it in other spoken languages. I invite you to accompany me on my journey through *Allah Earth*.

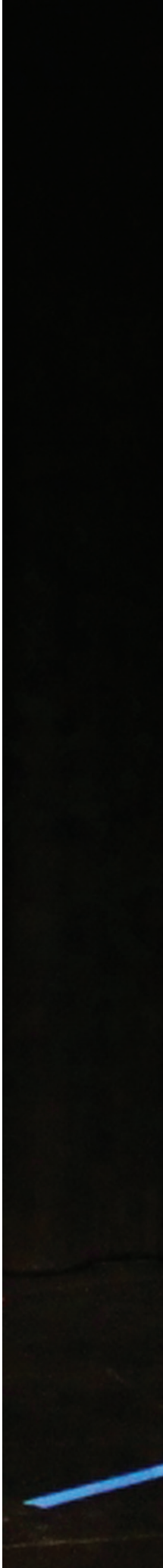
NOTE

- 1 "Deaf," capitalized, is used by deaf individuals, including myself, who want to openly identify and ally themselves with the community, whereas "deaf" in lower case is used in general, i.e. for people who are deaf who may or may not identify with the deaf community.

“We are the chair....
and many things besides”

MULTIPLICITY OF IDENTITY AND BRECHTIAN STAGING
TECHNIQUES IN *INTER-RELATIONCRIPS*

BY KELSIE ACTON





© Kaylee Borgstrom, Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales in *Disintegration*.

Dominant understandings of disability are located in the medical, charitable and individual models of disability. In these models, disability is a tragic lack that must be repaired by medical intervention or overcome by outstanding, super-human effort on the part of the individual experiencing disability. Disability is always an individual problem, never a societal one, and a problem that ultimately defines the person experiencing disability to the exclusion of all else. A. J. Withers, an Ontario activist, lists the devastating effects of dominant understandings of disability, including “the minimization of our own knowledge about our experiences, the inability to access appropriate medical care, abuse, confinement and even death” (54). In *Inter-relationCRIPS*, a work performed as part of *Women’s Work*, artists Lindsay Eales and Danielle Peers use alienation through expanded movement and the “not...but” to counter dominant understandings of disability.

Women’s Work was produced by Stage Left in October of 2013 at the Motel Theatre in Calgary. Directed and curated by artistic director Michele Decottignes, the overall structure and staging of *Women’s Work* had a Brechtian sensibility in its total rejection of naturalistic and realistic representation. Made up of a series of pieces of staged writing, the only connection between the pieces was movement sequences choreographed by Eales to the incessant repetition of Sak Noel’s popular song that asks “What the fuck?” *Women’s Work* also used a backdrop of continuous video, and performers often remained on stage to witness their fellow performers’ work. Although a Brechtian sensibility would ask that the actor distance themselves by demonstrating “the character as a function of particular socio-historical relations” (Diamond 87), the projection of headlines both historic and recent and the specificity of the performers’ writing served to historicize the present, asking the audience to consider the socio-historical forces at work in the here and now.

Eales and Peers performed four vignettes throughout *Women’s Work*, collectively entitled *Inter-relationCRIPS*. The common elements between vignettes were Eales and Peers themselves and the quality of the movement they used. Neither Eales

The movements vaguely recall the weaving patterns and dips of ballroom, but the eroticism of the movement is evident on both of their faces. Here, Eales and Peers disrupt the dominant tendency to desexualize women experiencing disability.

nor Peers are trained as actors and they made no effort to suggest they were playing different characters in any of the vignettes shown. They are, however, trained movers, Eales as a dancer and choreographer and Peers as a former Para-Olympian in wheelchair basketball. Throughout the four vignettes, the quality of the movement they use shifts constantly, rippling between the realistic and slightly larger than realistic. A foot pointing, a limb outstretched just a little more than necessary, a counter-balance held a moment too long—all remind the audience that this is not quite real. This breaking and re-breaking of the realist movement destabilizes the illusion of reality, creating an alienating effect.

Through the content of the four vignettes, Eales and Peers resist stable identity by staging an “exploded” version of Brecht’s “not...but.” Brecht’s “not...but” has constituted a practical challenge for directors and actors looking to Brecht for techniques of a politically engaged theatre. Elin Diamond in “Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory” describes the “not...but”: “Each action must contain the trace of the action it represses, thus the meaning of each action contains difference. The audience is invited to look beyond representation—beyond what is authoritatively put in view—to the possibilities of as yet unarticulated actions or judgments” (89). *Inter-relationCRIPS* offers an alternative possibility of staging Brecht’s “not...but” and uses this staging to transcend the potential limits of identity-based politics and to explore intersecting multiple oppressions. The structure of *Inter-relationCRIPS* explores, or rather explodes, the “not...but,” primarily to explore and counter dominant narratives of disability.

The first vignette offers a familiar representation of disability. The piece begins with Peers lying upstage on a long table. Eales enters and mechanically moves Peers’ legs, then

her torso, to transfer Peers into her wheelchair. Eales hooks Peers’ oxygen over her ears and slides the tube under her nose. The harsh sound of a phone splits the silence. Eales answers. She deflates, presumably in response to the voice on the other end and then inhales, her eyes opening wide. She repeats the deflation and the expansion, larger this time.

As she does so, the lights change, darkening on Eales and coming up on Peers. Peers releases the breaks on her wheelchair and playfully spins in circles, pulling wheelies and rocking from side to side until she falls over. Once on the ground, Peers swings her wheelchair around herself in circles by her oxygen tubing. As the lights shift again, Eales, frustrated, exclaims, “Mommy’s at work!” and snaps her phone closed to rush over to Peers to reset her chair and haul Peers back into it.

Peers’ and Eales’ roles here are easily understood. Peers is marked through her wheelchair as visibly disabled, and is restrained, rendered passive both by the care given to her and by the expectations of what is appropriate behavior for a woman experiencing disability. Eales too is constrained. The word “Mommy” suggests that she is care-giving reluctantly to support herself while she might find more fulfillment giving care to her own children.

Although this vignette takes aim at the intersections of capitalism and disability, this would not be a revolutionary application of the “not...but” except for the way the subsequent vignettes shift Eales and Peers’ relationship: In the second vignette the caregiver relationship is reversed. Eales has collapsed, her head resting on Peers’ leg. Peers offers her a pill bottle and Eales at first accepts, but then shakes out the multi-colored pills, scattering them onto the stage floor. Eales slowly takes one and

places it in her mouth. The lights shift, brightening and becoming pinker and harsher. Eales opens her hands in front of her eyes, her fingers becoming enormous eyelashes, her palms, odd, blank eyeballs. A voice intones, “There’s so many people watching me.” This will become a refrain throughout this particular vignette, repeated again and again by Eales, sometimes in horror and sometimes in delight. Eales moods shift quickly throughout this vignette. She moves from exhaustion, or perhaps depression, to ecstatic delight, to fear, to rage. Throughout the piece, Peers unobtrusively cares for Eales. Eales takes focus through her expansive movement and constant mood shifts, but Peers is always close by. Peers follows her, gathering spilled pills, calming Eales as she rages, helping Eales dress, and acknowledging Eales whenever Eales decides to direct an utterance at her.

This section explicitly breaks down the caregiving relationship set up in the first vignette. Here, Eales is cared for by Peers, but in a very different manner than in the first vignette. In the first vignette, Eales’ frustration with her *job* is palatable in her careless manipulation of Peers’ body. Here, Peers’ care, concern, and emotional investment in Eales is evident in the way she uses her hand to softly connect with Eales and the attention Peers pays to cleaning up the spilled pills and folding Eales’ dress. Caregiving is revealed as a relationship—not a transaction. It is a deeply caring relationship built through small gestures and mundane activities.

Peers and Eales’ relationship shifts twice more. In the final vignette, Eales and Peers are downstage staring straight ahead, Peers seated in her wheelchair and Eales standing. Their hands slowly inch towards each other. Their eyes connect and then their hands. They slide into a swirling pattern across the stage. They stop facing each other. Eales lifts a leg and slides onto Peers’ lap and then drops back. The movements vaguely recall the weaving patterns and dips of ballroom, but the eroticism of the movement is evident on both of their faces. Here, Eales and Peers disrupt the dominant tendency to desexualize women experiencing disability.

The third vignette is a short film and relies heavily on language to make explicit *Inter-relationCRIPS*’s rejections of fixed identities. On the back wall

an image of Peers appears, suspended on her crutches. Over the sounds of a wheelchair wheel being spun, Peers and Eales’ voices are heard repeating advice and compliments: “Cheer up,” “Get well soon,” “You’re an inspiration.” The film cross-fades to Peers riding an escalator in her chair, and in voice-over she declares, “I disappear on the horizon of other people’s hope. I am the chair.” “I am the chair” is a challenge to the advice and compliments. Eales will not “cheer up”; Peers will not “get well soon.” Peers will not stop using the chair, and although the world may want her to conform to the popular story of people who use wheelchairs being “inspiration” to others, she will resist. This positioning is political: by challenging the “inspiration” narrative, the piece criticizes dominant understandings of disability that believe charitable monies should be devoted to “finding a cure” rather than making the world more accessible, i.e. altering architecture, policies, and beliefs that present barriers to people experiencing disability. Withers calls these aims “wasteful and offensive,” and Peers and Eales likewise reject the goal of “being cured.”

The piece continues with a video of Eales and Peers moving and falling to what they call ‘the epithets of otherness’ – “good girl,” “queer,” “bitch,” “slut,” “crazy,” “gimp.” Onstage, the performers on stage repeat, “hush-a, hush-a, we all fall down.” The video shifts to images of Peers and Eales dancing and moving together in many different settings. The voice-over then states, “she connects,” and goes on as Peers and Eales reclaim the epithets they have been called: “lover,” “partner,” “crazy,” “gimp,” “queer.” They voices are full of tenderness, humor, and play. As Peers and Eales fade away, still dancing, the screen shifts to a shot of sidewalk and grass moving underneath wheels. The voice states, “We are the chair, and many things besides. We don’t cheer up, but we fuck shit up. We don’t overcome, but we are becoming ... other ... wise.”

This becoming “other ... wise” destabilizes Peers and Eales’ identities. They are not their disabilities and they disavow the dominant narratives of disability. They are not fixed, but becoming something else, something not yet articulated. This becoming otherwise is not individual, but relational and ever changing. Here,



© Kaylee Borgstrom. Danielle Peers and Lindsay Eales in *Disintegration*.

the subversive power of the exploded “not ... but” is revealed. Rather than hint or suggest at the repressed, Peers and Eales demonstrate all the repressed possibilities and give them equal weight. Diamond sees “keeping difference in view instead of conforming to stable representation of identity” as key to understanding the “not... but.” Throughout *Inter-relationCRIPS* Eales and Peers celebrate and play with difference and instability.

Just as the voice-over says, “we are becoming ... other ... wise.” *Inter-relationCRIPS* offers the techniques of Brechtian theatre an “other ... wise,” a way of playfully expanding the possibilities offered by Brecht, and appropriating them as tools to suggest other ways of being. In “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory,” Diamond suggests that a feminist criticism of Brechtian theory and an appropriation of Brecht’s techniques for feminist aims have the possibility to radicalize Brecht’s theatre/theory. *Inter-relationCRIPS* takes Diamond’s suggestion even further by using expanded movement to alienate the audience and an exploded “not ... but” to counter dominant understandings of disability.

WORKS CITED

- Diamond, Elin. “Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory.” *A Sourcebook of Feminist Theatre and Performance: On and Beyond the Stage*. Ed. Carol Martin. London: Routledge, 1996. 120-135.
- Eales, Lindsay, and Danielle Peers. *Inter-relationCRIPS*. Part of *Women’s Work*. Produced by Stage Left, 16-19 October 2013.
- Withers, A. J. *Disability Politics and Theory*. Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing, 2012.

© Les Productions des pieds des mains. Claude-Michel Bogina, Edon Descollines, Richard Gaulin, Carl Hennebert-Faultkner, Eric Vincent Carrière, Geneviève Morin-Dupont, and Marie-Soleil Pilette in *Leçons*.



A man with short dark hair and a light beard is shown from the chest up, wearing a white button-down shirt. He is looking upwards and to the right with a thoughtful expression. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting his face and shirt.

The Performativity of
(Dis)ability:

Les Productions des pieds des mains

CHRISTINA BRASSARD INTERVIEWS MENKA NAGRANI

The notion of marginality has gained popularity in several fields of research over the last decades. Everything in our society considered “normal” is now challenged by people who do not adhere to the dominant norms. Indeed, many theorists, philosophers, and artists have thought about this issue of construction of the margin and the norms. Menka Nagrani is one of these. One of the first people to integrate artists with intellectual disabilities on stage in Québec, she founded the dance theatre company *Les Productions des pieds des mains* in 2004 to provoke insight on artistic and social issues. Her work is often presented in the Montreal professional art scene and at international festivals in France, Belgium, and Japan. She has also won several awards for her artistic achievements. This report examines the representation of disabilities in Nagrani’s shows to illustrate her motivations in casting these types of actors.

Nagrani’s interdisciplinary approach appeals to spectators both of contemporary dance and of experimental theatre. Her major pieces, *Leçons* (2004), *Le Temps des Marguerites... à la folie ou pas du tout!* (2005), *L’Ombre* (2006), and *Pharmakon* (2011), are at the intersection of dance and theatre. Her shows are stories that focus on characters, and she creates the choreography based on these. The characters each have their own world, their own approach, and their own way of moving and dancing. On stage, we do not perceive a dancer or an actor with an intellectual disability, but a character whom Nagrani builds from the personal qualities of her artists, including their strengths and weaknesses. This is how the show becomes credible: we do not discern artists with intellectual disabilities; instead, we see the characters. Old people, young people, shaking or limping people—that is part of the universe of the character being brought to life. She highlights the beauty and fantasy in difference and creates stories from the relationship between those characters.

In September 2012, I had the opportunity to take part in seminars at the École Supérieure de Théâtre de l’Université du Québec à Montréal, where Nagrani is pursuing graduate studies in order to create a dialogue between theory and her practice. It is through these seminars that I discovered Nagrani’s work. In December 2013, I did an interview with Nagrani on her creation. We recently discussed the idea of writing a theoretical essay about her artistic creations in the coming years.

Unique and natural interpretation

According to Nagrani, artists with intellectual disabilities promote the natural:

On stage, their presence is different from other artists. They interpret their roles with no self-censorship, which makes their acting more profound. They are not afraid to dare to follow an idea. They have no self-criticism and they will immediately go deeply into emotion.

They do not intellectualize their interpretation, and this is what Nagrani admires the most about these artists: “The actors without intellectual disabilities tend sometimes to be excessively intellectualizing and their interpretations may seem forced. They will try to interpret all the layers of meaning of a sentence. In comparison, the actors with an intellectual disability will generally take the sense of the text literally, which allows them a more accurate interpretation.”

Furthermore, as Nagrani points out, working with artists who have no sense of self-critique or self-censorship can lead to further challenges, especially in the learning and rehearsing process. Over the years, she has developed her own elaborate methods, rich in content and practical skills, to help train people with intellectual disabilities become professional artists on stage. A leader in integrating disabled artists, she is often invited to present at conferences and give workshops around the world.

For Nagrani, having disabled artists on stage is no excuse for presenting a show of lesser quality: “As a director, I have a responsibility to make sure all my artists shine on stage.” For this reason, she has put several strategies in place to help integrate the disabled artists into the show, including extended rehearsal times, individual coaching, and personalized journals. She also creates her shows in such a way that the artists who are most at ease on stage can support those whose performances may be more fragile.

Despite using these strategies, Nagrani admits that working with disabled artists remains somewhat risky. Not having self-criticism can sometimes lead to loss of control. Because of this, she pays particular attention to their way of being: “It’s a wonderful challenge for me because the artist’s restrictions are also a source of inspiration and creativity—and creativity doesn’t happen unless we take risks.”

Nagrani uses dance to bring the interpretation of all artists closer to the materiality of their body and to research what is unique to each of them. While dancing, the artists’ bodies become performative tools that keep them from over-intellectualizing the dramatic text. Whether they are disabled or not, having the artists dance makes the show more credible by bringing artists closer to their bodies than to their minds. According to Nagrani, we cannot pretend when we are dancing. For example, she says, dance increases the realistic aspect: “If the actor pretends to fall by expressing it with the look on his face, it will appear as though he is pretending. The dancer will get it for real, surrender to gravity, playing with his body. Here, there is no faking it.” She also talks about the importance of interdisciplinary methods, as dance brings a great deal to the acting: “This obviously makes the play more natural.” In addition, the integration of artists with intellectual disabilities increases the search for truth and concreteness. Actors without intellectual disabilities have much to learn from the interpretation of actors with intellectual disabilities.

Integrated dance

The tradition of integrated dance goes back to the 1980s, when its main purpose was to provide an opportunity for disabled people to integrate into the artistic sphere. Most companies aimed to show the difference between this type of dance and others; there was a separation between these shows and more conventional ones. The approach of most of these companies seemed to be to inspire hope. Their goal regarding social integration of people with disabilities seemed to have an educational and therapeutic aim.

But Nagrani is uncomfortable with references to integrated dance in describing her company, and she does not want to use that label for her shows. She notes: “By integrating atypical bodies on stage, I aim to break the boundaries of contemporary dance. Categorizing my work as integrated dance leads to

confinement. This goes against the main idea of integration of people with disabilities within our society.” Several Canadian integrated dance companies have expressed their wish to raise awareness of the limitations artists with disabilities face in redefining the scales and criteria of excellence for performances that integrate them.

Nagrani wants her shows to be judged and reviewed according to the same criteria as any other professional show. She presents in major theatres and always invites the public to be critical about her shows regardless of the artists who are performing. Critics most often put aside the whole idea of integrated dance and compare her shows to any other. Paula Citron, for example, a dance critic for the *Globe and Mail*, ranked *Le Temps des Marguerites* the fourth best dance-theater play performed in Canada in her review of the 2007 dance scene.

The reconstruction of the norms

Nagrani suggests that the interpretive style of these artists with intellectual disability may redefine how actors with no disability interpret their roles. She mentions that she is inspired by a quote of French director Claude Chagualier: “La marge nourrit la norme et la transforme” (The margin feeds and transforms the norm). For Nagrani, margins act upon the norms in order to reconstruct them and to expose that the truth is constantly evolving and can often be close to falsehood. She illustrates this by focusing on and highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of her artists within her shows. For example, one of the artists suffers from trembling and she sometimes emphasizes this unique physical attribute by asking all of her artists to emulate that movement. Thus, this gesture is normalized and becomes, from an aesthetic point of view, an asset.

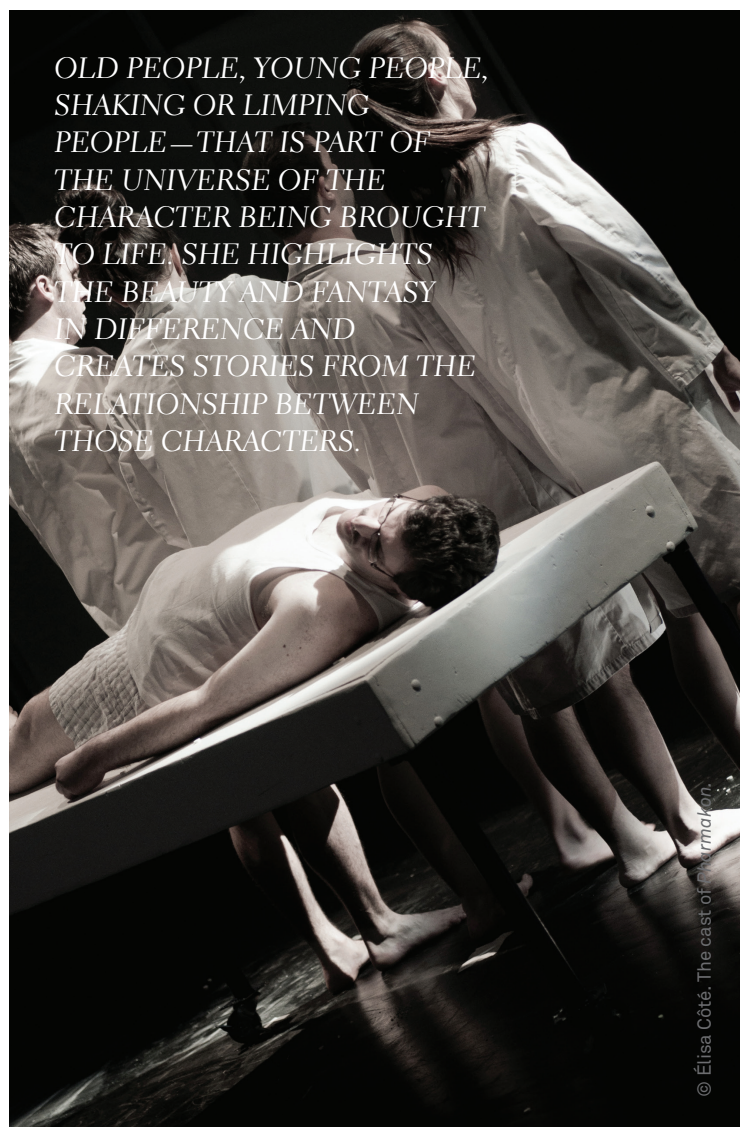
Nevertheless, Nagrani does not want to create shows simply to put atypical artists on stage. Instead, she starts by selecting an idea or theme and she then casts her actors, atypical or not, based on the needs of the future show. “The artists’ disabilities serve the artistic purpose of the play,” she says. “This allows the spectator to reflect on notions that I hold dear, such as beauty standards and conformity in today’s pop culture-driven world.”

Toward a new show for Nagrani

Although she continues to be interested in atypical artists, Nagrani’s next creation does not include atypical artists. She is working on the staging of the play *Le chemin des passes-dangereuses* by Québécois playwright Michel Marc Bouchard. The performers in the show will both act and dance. Nagrani wants to reinvent the traditional Quebec folk dancing known as *gigue* in an acrobatic, percussive, and contemporary dance mixed with Bouchard’s dialogue. The dramatic force of the *gigue* is revealed through the aggression and conflicts of the characters in this work, rooted in a new body language. The dance will also take us to the crossroads between tradition and modernity. She aspires to incorporate the lessons she has learned from her work with atypical artists and bring the same candid and frank interpretation to her new show. This play will be performed at the Théâtre Prospero in Montreal in February 2015.



© David Ricard. Mireille Camier performing with Les productions des pieds des mains.



OLD PEOPLE, YOUNG PEOPLE,
SHAKING OR LIMPING
PEOPLE — THAT IS PART OF
THE UNIVERSE OF THE
CHARACTER BEING BROUGHT
TO LIFE. SHE HIGHLIGHTS
THE BEAUTY AND FANTASY
IN DIFFERENCE AND
CREATES STORIES FROM THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
THOSE CHARACTERS.

© Éliisa Côté. The cast of *Urmakon*.

UNRAVELING EMBODIMENT

Processing my diagnosis of mild cerebral palsy has been a lifelong project of shame, burying, and coping. Until I began devising *Unraveling the Dis/abled* the diagnosis was like an open wound in my identity, something that was always there but that I hated talking about: being different in a way I couldn't control. I shoved my diagnosis to the back of my mind and began the arduous process of constant overcoming and compensating. I became book smart, instead of athletic. I took self-value from being clever because I could rely on nothing else. I got into art, music, and politics: an angsty teenager who rebelled against her suburban family.

When I was twelve, I was in my first musical, and I fell in love with theatre. As I got older, however, I became aware that my body was not meant for acting. It shook, tightened up, and misbehaved. I lacked confidence. But by deciding I was not fit to perform, I internalized the idea of performance being only for able-bodied people. I chose to focus on my mind instead, hoping to be a playwright, and then discovered a passion for directing and facilitating the birth of new work.

Unraveling the Dis/abled is based on my personal experience with cerebral palsy, using movement scores, spoken word, and film to loosely express a narrative about how growing up with a medical diagnosis influences childhood, sexuality, and identity. The text is unscripted spoken word—poetic reflections accompanying movement inspired by physical therapy exercises, natural movement, and externalized gestures of internal thought patterns. The movement score is composed of simple acts—walking, falling, tumbling—that enable me to be fully in my affected body. This allows spectators to witness how cerebral palsy lives in my muscles, twists my bones, and how I see myself. I delicately present the disabled body—my disabled body—as performance, and this is a subtle political act. *Unraveling the Dis/abled* deconstructs the disabled body and the striving for “normal,” comfortable, and whole.

Creating *Unraveling the Dis/abled* was more of a personal journey than an activist or professional project. While preparing for an artist residency at the Haven on Gabriola Island, I knew it was time to begin to unpack how I related to being in this body and how this body shapes my identity. For my whole life, I had a degree of cognitive dissonance. In my mind, I was normal. My medical diagnosis, however, would creep on me—being stared at in public spaces, forgetting how my body presented until I saw a picture of myself or caught a glance in a full mirror. I would feel a degree of shame, and then walk on. That's all you can do ... until you no longer can. I reached a place of personal development where I knew I had to face the shame and my internalized ableism. I wanted to come to terms with what my body was and, ultimately, to finally be okay living in these bones.



The residency was hard. I spent time just watching myself in the mirror, absorbing the mechanics of my body, and then reflecting. When a child receives a diagnosis, the medicalization of life is just there: doctors' appointments, school assessments, class presentations on what makes you "different." It's described to you in age-appropriate terms and then, at a certain age, you're dropped from medical support systems. So, I became a researcher of my own body. I requested childhood medical records, YouTubed personal accounts of living with disability, and listened to the five-minute descriptions designed for parents seeking to understand what their child has. Those with disability are infantilized and desexualized; I sought to dissect my personality as it related to my diagnosis.

At first, this proved impossible. When you have no knowledge of life *without* something, how can you really know how it affects you? It lurks under the surface, along with a series of what-ifs and uncertain longings for what your parallel universes might contain. All I could and can do is research, reflect, and embody. *Disability* is something mapped onto the body to describe non-normative ways of relating to the world. I have discovered that *disability* is something I embody because I have to. It's a label to reject and embrace.

The debut of *Unraveling the Dis/abled* was a powerful experience. After three weeks of processing my body, I felt I had integrated the most insecure and vulnerable part of myself. For the first time, my cerebral palsy wasn't something I was hiding but something I was relishing in. I still don't wish to act or have my body on stage, but I no longer feel broken or shamed by the body I live in.

Brooke Leifso

Unraveling the Dis/abled debuted at Latitude 53, in Edmonton, Alberta, in November 2013.

HOW CREATIVE IS THE CREATIVE ENABLER?

In 2004, I was hired to be a “creative enabler” for Pete Edwards on Graeae Theatre’s *Missing Piece*, a training programme for disabled actors. Pete is an actor and writer who uses a wheelchair and has a differing speech pattern and limited control over his movement as a result of his cerebral palsy. I was hired to assist him with mobility tasks as well as to interpret his speech on stage and off.

A working definition of a creative enabler is: a support worker with skills and experience in the area practised by the disabled artist. The artist can call on the creative enabler to assist in ways they could not ask of a general access support worker or personal assistant. The role was invented for Pete on the course by Graeae’s access manager at the time, Claire Saddleton, and Artistic Director Jenny Sealey, but has since been adopted by disabled artists practising in a variety of media.

Graeae was particularly keen to offer Pete a chance to experiment with a variety of methodologies for communicating his speech on stage. For a monologue from Sarah Kane’s *Crave*, I created and operated PowerPoint captions that accompanied his live speech; for an original solo performance piece, *Fat*, I recorded a version of Pete’s monologue in my own voice and mixed our two versions together as an audio track that played during his movement solo; and for a production of Molière’s *Georges Dandin* in which Pete played the aristocratic M. De Twitville, I performed the newly added role of M. De Twitville’s servant who assisted him with mobility and obligingly finished all his sentences. According to Pete, “Having a creative enabler was vital to me and my work. It gave me the chance to create that would have been impossible without support from the right kind of person who had the appropriate artistic background.”

One of the most challenging aspects of the creative enabler role is maintaining the boundary between access support and artistic input. As an artist yourself working closely on a project, it is easy to become invested in the outcome and sometimes difficult to suppress your own creative ideas. But the access support aspect of the role asks that you hold back—as an interpreter you would not add your own thoughts when repeating someone’s speech; as a playwright’s scribe you would not suggest ideas for scenes or characters.

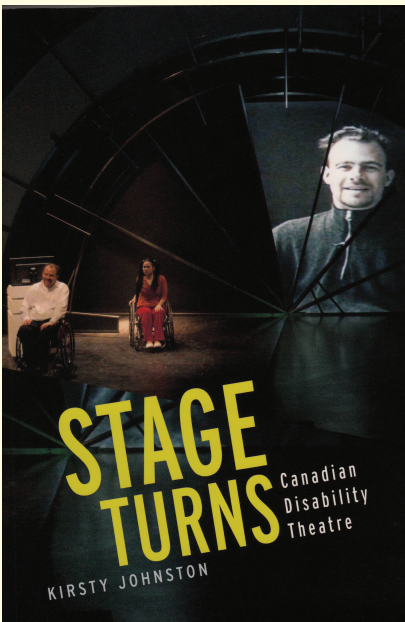
In truth, however, the creative process is organic, and, while maintaining sensitivity to the boundaries of their role, creative enablers may find themselves contributing creatively. Performing the role in *Georges Dandin*, I was directed by both director Philip Osment and Pete, but naturally I had some artistic input into my own performance. When recording dialogue to interpret his speech, we discussed how Pete would like me to deliver the lines, and I tried to mirror his own interpretation, but an element of my own expressivity inevitably came into play in recording and mixing the audio track.

Once *Missing Piece* was over, Pete and I continued working together, and in further developing *Fat*, Pete’s solo performance about a gay man looking for love along London’s South Bank, my role as creative enabler began to morph into dramaturg and then director. This transition from support worker to artistic collaborator was not always easy, and the lines were further blurred by the friendship Pete and I developed wherein we maintained an ongoing artistic dialogue. We spent a lot of time honestly discussing the parameters of my role in order to make this transition work.

We ended up bringing in another creative enabler for the full production and UK tour of *Fat*—Karen Spicer, who was able to support Pete’s creative work and function as his onstage assistant. As dramaturg and director, it was interesting for me to note how the principles of creative enabling continued to apply, as I endeavoured to facilitate the input of Pete and the collaborating team while checking my own impulses to impose an artistic vision.

Fat was funded by Arts Council England, and as part of that process we provided a report that described and disseminated our experience to other UK artists. Graeae has continued to use this model in its work, and in 2012, filmpro, a digital arts organization, led a training programme sponsored by the *Evening Standard* that brought together eight disabled artists to train eight new creative enablers. During this training, the term itself came up for discussion as being too ambiguous: as Alex Bulmer, a blind writer and director, has said, “My creativity is the one thing I don’t need enabled!” But perhaps ambiguity is its strength. Hopefully, the creative enabler model can provide a flexible template for other disabled artists to support their working practices.

Michael Achtman



STAGE TURNS: CANADIAN DISABILITY THEATRE. BY KIRSTY JOHNSTON. MONTREAL: MCGILL-QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2012. 221 PP.

Book review

BY

ASHLEY MCASKILL

Representations of disability remain limited to one-dimensional characters framed as innocent, comical, freakish, and at times miraculous through overcoming or being cured of disability. Such illustrations position disability as a stigmatized condition and something to be feared. However, when a nondisabled actor plays the role of a character with developmental disabilities, the performance is perceived as complex and receives critical praise. As a young scholar working in the field of disability and performance, I have invested my own research efforts in the Canadian theatre scene. Upon searching for literature on “disability theatre” in Canada, I was surprised to see how little research exists. However, Kirsty Johnston of the University of British

Columbia has recently added *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre* to this body of literature. Johnston gives new insights into the complex field of disability theatre in Canada, ranging from aesthetics and artistic work to specific companies and activist practices.

Johnston begins by outlining the difficulty of defining the field: “Disability theatre is neither easy to define nor homogenous in its expression” (xi). She surveys different tensions and boundaries of disability theatre within Canada and how the term has come to validate different terms for artists who are a part of this field and movement. Described as a “branch of disability art,” Johnston asserts that her own intention is not to define disability theatre as one kind of aesthetic or practice, but rather to expand on the different debates that have produced “meaning in the field” (4). In my own writing practices, I have often used the phrase “artists with disabilities,” about which I have also expressed my own discomfort during conference presentations. Johnston echoes this concern about problematic labels used in the field. Categories such as *disability artists* have come to identify artists with a more activist perspective, working to undo stigmatizing stereotypes of the disabled, making this a term that greatly distinguishes them from *artists with disabilities* (5). Beyond the debate on how to identify such artists, other complexities emerge from the term “disability.” Although many artists outside of the disability art movement do have hearing-related impairments, many artists who are a part of the deaf and hearing community do not identify themselves as having a disability or impairment (ibid). Throughout her book, Johnston describes ways in which different companies and artists engage and identify with disability theatre, expanding on the political implications of associating with such a category. Focusing mostly on western and central Canada, Johnston divides her book into two parts: the first concentrates on theatre histories and the second focuses on aesthetics and specific performances within Canadian disability theatre.

In chapter two of her analysis, Johnston gives her readers a range of theatrical works within the disability theatre scene in Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, while chapters three, four, seven, and eight focus on specific

work/companies. Johnston ensures that these choices are not premised on “quality or importance” but explains that they emerged from her doctoral research as specific cases that proved to be illuminating. Extending her doctoral research on the Toronto-based company Workman Arts, chapter three outlines Workman’s role in creating space for artists with mental illnesses and how the company has diversified strategies of community theatre engagement by challenging stigmas around mental illness. Although Workman is criticized for containing “medical protocols,” Johnston assures her readers that the company’s work is “artistic and social” rather than “medical and therapeutic” (53). Such an emphasis on work being more *artistic* than *medical* is prevalent in disability arts. In chapter four, Johnston explores Vancouver-based Theatre Terrific, the oldest known mixed-ability group in Canada. Similar to many groups, Terrific has “wrestled over time with several competing agendas” due to limited funding and competing ideas of “what a theatre involving disabled people ought to do” (66). Johnston’s extensive historical research on the company reveals Terrific’s ever-changing mandates: from a space for individuals with disabilities to work creatively, to a site of artistic vocation. Terrific’s history “sheds light on the conditions attending disability theatre in Canada in its earliest phase, as well as the new possibilities emerging from a more active, diverse disability theatre community” (83). Although they have different mandates, Johnston’s chapters on Workman and Terrific collectively reveal how such companies are diversifying the current Canada theatre scene through integrating artists who are all too often left out.

Arguably, disability theatre has received more attention only recently. In her concluding chapter, Johnston praises Canadian playwright David Freeman and his play *Creeps* (1971). Celebrated as one of Canada’s first disability theatre exports, *Creeps* is a piece that often flies under the radar in Canadian theatre courses. The action of *Creeps* is set in a factory washroom where male workers with disabilities (most with cerebral palsy) vent their frustrations about their female supervisor, who often yells profanities at them offstage. Many of the dialogues resonate with Freeman’s own experiences of living with cerebral palsy and poor working environments he

has endured in the past. What this play offered (and continues to offer) is a more complex representation of the disability experience. Johnston asserts “written and produced well before most of the disability theatre described in the book ... artists and playwrights from Canada and beyond have been seeking to follow Freeman’s example” (172). This does not necessarily mean Canadian theatre makers have been promoting disability education in their work, but rather “galvanizing and developing a disability identity” (ibid).

Tensions around different aesthetic strategies have proven extremely diverse in terms of collaborative methods, dramaturgies, and overall performance styles (3). In her discussion on aesthetics, Johnston does not offer up which aesthetic protocols are most beneficial to disability theatre, but rather gives a variety of different approaches meant for different contexts. In chapter six, “Re-Staging Disability Theatre,” Johnston compares Stage Left’s *Mercy Killings* (2003), based on the 1993 premeditated murder of 13-year-old Tracy Latimer, a girl with cerebral palsy killed by her father, and the 2003 Realwheels production *Skydive*, an “action-adventure-comedy” in which two male actors (one quadriplegic) soar above the stage during the entire production through the use of special stage technology. Cast members of *Mercy Killings* wanted to address the perspectives of Tracy and people with disabilities at large, a part of the case they found had received little attention from the media. Developed by six performers with physical and developmental disabilities together with a collection of professional artists and community collaborators (with and without disabilities), Stage Left wanted to build an “inclusive artistic practice” for all its members. This involved ensuring the full collaboration of the disabled actors, making all research accessible in “plain language,” artistic training that instilled confidence, and stress management for all collaborators (such as taxi services to and from rehearsals). Other strategies included a coding system for actors with limited literacy to help with transitions, a jury box where actors could sit down when tired, specially timed lighting cues to prevent seizure triggers, voice-overs for scene transitions, and two films directly related to Tracy Latimer that “allowed both performers to have a critical role

in the production even when health concerns prevented involvement in the life aspects” (110-11). Throughout the production, the cast gave their perspective on the case as a whole, including a critique of problematic media representations of the disabled experience. *Skydive* differed greatly from *Mercy Killings* in terms of political intentions. Considered one of Canada’s most commercially successful pieces of disability theatre, Johnston’s choice to include this piece highlights Canada’s contribution to stage technology in disability theatre at large. An ES Dance Instrument, a large extended lever able to move in all directions, created by choreographer Sven Johansson, allowed the two male performers to be soar in the air together and demonstrated “new spectrums of physicalities on stage” (115-17). Through these examples, Johnston gives her readers insights not only into exciting pieces of disability theatre, but into how these pieces are reinvigorating theatre practices at large and changing standards in collaborative processes.

Johnston’s work does not deal with theatre practices alone, however, but also with the representation and treatment of people with disabilities at large. This is evident in chapter eight, “Disruptive Spaces: The Clinic,” in which Johnston examines Theatre Terrific’s productions of *The Glass Box* (2009) and *The Secret Son* (2009)—two productions that critiqued “clinical encounters” for people with disabilities and disability stereotypes. *The Glass Box* consisted of three performers playing sex icons in the format of a game show with participants answering questions about their sex lives. Many of these questions were based on the performers’ actual experiences—such as cast member Kyla Harris, who became paraplegic at the age of 15 after a diving accident and since then has had problematic experiences with insurance companies asking personal questions about her sex life. Johnston contextualizes the discomfort around representing disability and sexuality onstage, but also the all-too-common assumptions about the “sexual worth” of people with disabilities (which is wrongfully perceived, to say the least). In contrast, *The Secret Son* was based on playwright Arthur Miller’s disownment and institutionalization of his son, Daniel, who was born with Down syndrome. The play critiqued Miller’s parenting (or lack of it) in his

son’s life due to Daniel’s disability. What both productions bring forward is how disability theatre serves as a means for people with disabilities to take up the articulation and treatment of their own identities both clinically and sexually, or, as Johnston asserts, a site for artists to “speak back” (147).

Although she concentrates her dialogue on Canadian companies, Johnston also describes how these disability theatre events and practices have received international attention. Since there is no national agenda for disability theatre, Canadian practitioners have linked themselves with other companies around the world. Johnston makes reference to the shift of disability theatre at the international level from the early 1990s to 2000, when relationships became more “coherent and permanent” (87). In chapter five, “Scale Jumping,” she outlines the histories and progression of some of these relationships. This history begins in 1991 with Elaine Avila, then a Theatre Terrific instructor, urging colleagues to connect with other companies outside the country after her own pleasant experiences working with San Francisco Theatre Unlimited. Johnston also highlights festivals as playing an important role in international networking. In 2001, the Vancouver Kickstart Celebration of Disability Arts and Culture was founded. The Calgary SCOPE Society, Transition to Independence, and Stage Left also worked together in 2002, creating two smaller-scale festivals; and in 2003, Workman Theatre Project (now Workman Arts) and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health co-produced the Madness and Arts World Festival in Toronto. Since 2000, Toronto has also hosted Art with Attitude, led by disability scholars and activists Catherine Frazee and Judith Sandys, both from Ryerson’s Institute for Disability Studies and Education. Prior to these groundbreaking festivals, Johnston asserts that many of the companies mentioned in her book worked autonomously, never having dialogues with outside companies. However, with the growth of disability arts festivals in Canada, Johnston notes that such events have given “opportunities for professional exchanges ... along with providing prospects for artistic collaboration ... artists have the opportunity to share ideas and be inspired by each other” (93).

Stage Turns ultimately highlights the tensions in current disability theatre in Canada, and the ways in which different artistic activities are working to complicate prior conceptions of disability. Johnston's historical research and interviews with different artists and companies invite her readers to ask who is being valued onstage and how the companies are creating new spaces where an array of artists can find artistic value. Her writing brings to light the problem of access in current Canadian theatre practices and provides some provocative case studies of different productions that have responded to these issues. As Johnston states in her concluding chapter, "[M]any disability theatre artists have found different ways of balancing competing impulses to provoke or entertain, empower or educate, contribute to the mainstream or fight institutionalized discrimination, build community or contest its borders" (173). Essentially, Johnston's work acknowledges the progress disability theatre has made, but also recognizes the ongoing need for a more informed national agenda in terms of funding, rehearsal space, theatre technology, and assumptions about people with disabilities. As a young scholar, I have found my own work enriched by this book, which has become one of my main references and a foundation to work from. This book is definitely a first of its kind in Canadian theatre literature and will hopefully be used in Canadian university classrooms, as it gives us the opportunity to reveal the diversity of current artists attempting to thrive in Canadian theatre.



VOYAGES NORKO TRAVEL

Serving Travelers since 1970

- *Air Tickets at Discounted Prices*
- *Holiday Packages*
- *Tours to India and Pakistan*
- *Hotel Reservations, Car Hire*
- *Travel Insurance*



www.norkotravel.com
manager@norkotravel.com
1234 Stanley Street,
Montreal, Quebec, H3B 2S7
514-871-8888 1-888-871-8888