Disability Inclusion in Professional Theatre and the Ethics of Casting Disabled Roles

by

Maye Hansen

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Thesis Committee:

Professor Lauren Shouse, Thesis Director

Dr. Dianna Rust, Thesis Committee Chair

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APPROVED:

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Lauren Shouse, Thesis Director
Professor, Theatre

_____

Dr. Dianna Rust, Thesis Committee Chair
Professor, University Honors College

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Abstract

The inclusion of disability in theatre stands many steps behind other inclusive movements, and ethical representation remains scarce. Disabled characters are deeply intertwined in history with offensive stereotypes, ridicule, and ableist use of their disabilities to further the plot or character. In the modern age of theatre, steps have been made to remedy this—some successful, some not so—yet they are few and far in between. Further still, casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles is an exceedingly customary practice, revoking deserved opportunities from the largest yet least represented minority group in America. This thesis examines this phenomenon and addresses historical and modern factors that influence it, dissects disabled roles and the casting of disabled actors, examines the responsibilities of all parties involved, and suggests practices directors may put in place to begin to combat exclusion in professional theatre.

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List of Terms

Able-bodied

An individual who is not disabled.

Drama Therapy

The use of theatre techniques to facilitate personal growth and promote mental health.

Invisible Disability

An impairment or health condition that is not immediately obvious to others.

Mixed Cast

A cast of actors in a theatrical production that consists of both disabled and non-disabled actors.

Mobility aid

A device that helps individuals with mobility impairments to walk or improve their overall mobility.

Neurodivergent

An individual differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal; not neurotypical.

Introduction

The inclusion and representation of disabled actors in professional theatre, or lack thereof, is not widely discussed as a substantial occurrence in the field. While strides have been made within recent years with the creation of theatre companies with all-disabled casts (Sandahl 622), a lack of diversity remains prevalent in professional productions that are not shaped to include disabled actors (Fryer, Cavallo 10), as well as a general mindset that inhibits participation (Collins 313). Additionally, a staggering percentage of non-disabled actors who play specifically disabled roles is dominant in theatrical productions, such as in film (Woodburn, Kopić 1; Garner 83; Johnston 39-40), which is not often commented upon due to deeply ingrained practices in theatre (Garner 83). This casting phenomenon opens many discussions surrounding the ethics of such, including arguments that all disabled roles must be portrayed by similarly disabled actors and counterarguments that acting should be flexible. Companies and directors who operate their productions have yet to advertise and adopt universal, integrated accommodations for any given disabled actor (Fryer, Cavallo 5-6), the lack of which can prove difficult or even triggering for them (Buckley et al. 52). Many have yet to shift away from the concept of drama therapy when discussing disabled performers (Sandahl 623; Fernández, Conejo 345). This exclusion does not only lie in inaccessible architecture for those with mobility aids (Reynolds 14), but it also includes a company's mindset and objection to fluctuations in their creative vision—such as altering lighting choices for actors with sensory aversions—most of which pose no significant issue (Buckley et al. 52). This lack of innovation, and conflicting pressure for diversity in theatre, is what

contributes to the very issue of casting disabled roles with non-disabled actors in the name of representation.

In this thesis, I researched and analyzed the inclusion of disabled actors in theatre and the ethics of casting disabled roles in plays and musicals. In doing so, I analyzed scripts with disabled characters, examined disabled theatre companies and their impacts on inclusion, dissected the history of inclusion and representation, and established practical solutions to the very issue. Additionally, I conducted interviews with two disabled actors of varying experiences to help shed light on the opinions of disabled persons. My objective is to draw from this research and offer a deeper look into the technicalities of disability representation, offering clear steps that companies and actors can take to make theatre a more accessible art form for disabled actors. Above all, this thesis will dissect the very root of the issue—casting non-disabled folk in disabled roles and the exceptions and variations that may arise. My argument is that in the casting process, directors must not view the disability of a role as cosmetic, separable from the person, or a feature that non-disabled actors can mimic. All actions must be made to ensure that disabled or neurodivergent roles in theatrical productions, as with ethnic roles, be reserved for the actors who have experienced the same trials and tribulations as the character, and theatre companies must adopt practices that encourage inclusivity and accessibility in their spaces.

1: An Introduction to Disability and Theatre

An Overview

Disability inclusion is a nuanced topic that can begin to be understood through the concept of disability theatre. Disability theatre, as described by Kirsty Johnston in *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism,* "is one branch of a wider international disability arts and culture movement which seeks to address and redress the very idea of disability in the modern arts and, by extension, society" (Johnston 15). Similar to other theatre genres, like outdoor theatre or musicals, it is a performance model that distinguishes it from standard productions. The distinctions in question are acceptance and integrated accommodations for those who need them. Many disabled individuals require accommodations to make processes and certain feats viable for them and their unique abilities. The answer to accommodations in theatre is not a one-size-fits-all; disability exists on a spectrum, and even individuals with the same disability may have differing needs. Thus, making theatre into a more accessible space relies not only on the acceptance of the general public, as with the inclusion of ethnic or queer folk, but a possible reinvention of how many companies operate. These considerations may include architectural changes for those with mobility aids, routine and schedule changes for those who may need more breaks, technical changes for those with unique sensory needs, and above all, changes in casting disabled roles.

Positive disability representation in theatrical productions has yet to come to its well-needed fruition. To date, it still stands that few shows feature disabled roles, and even fewer disabled actors are cast in said roles. Little research has been done on this phenomenon in theatre specifically, but studies have been conducted for film that mirror

theatre. According to *The Ruderman White Paper: On Employment of Actors with Disabilities in Television*, "over 95% of characters with disabilities are played by actors without disabilities" (Woodburn, Kopić 20). Discussions have arisen regarding whether it is due to a small audition pool or the efforts of casting directors, theatre companies, and all-around publicized acceptance in the realm of theatre. Disability, however, has been featured in theatre since some of its earliest forms, even if not explicitly stated, only under a derogatory lens that uses their attributes as leverage for ridicule rather than to honor them as capable individuals, with extreme cases delving into exploitation, such as with freak shows of the 19th century (Půtová 92). These characters often are not explicitly stated to be disabled but rather are caricatures of disabled traits or deviances from what is deemed normal, which further perpetuates the stigma surrounding what is diverse that is prominent in theatre.

As of the mid-2020s, there has yet to be a lasting breakthrough for disabilities in the same way that those of other minorities have been represented. As a result, some companies—Detour Company Theatre, Identity Theatre, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers, and the like—have formed solely to represent disabled persons, give them a voice in theatre, and share their stories. Many of these companies have been praised for their impact on disability representation. Unfortunately, this act of honoring disabled voices has been skewed to the point of alienation; these all-disabled companies often become platforms for "drama therapy" (Sandahl 623; Fernández, Conejo 345) and social research rather than a way to include disabled actors in theatrical productions casually. Drama therapy is a form of therapy for disabled individuals that uses performance to build social skills, self-confidence, and empathy (Fernández, Conejo 345; Lenakakis,

Koltsida 258). More often than not, it is expressed by disabled actors that they wish to be included, not placed on a pedestal that unwittingly excludes them even further from their non-disabled peers. Furthermore, Collins states that "despite empowerment, segregation exists, which can be disempowering, creating barriers to inclusion … hence, there is a need to review how the lives of disabled people are positioned vis-a-vis others in society" (Collins 313). This statement reestablishes the fact that separating disabled individuals from those who are not in a non-disabled-dominated society may cause more exclusion rather than the opposite. Above all, the effort should be to unite actors of all abilities and identities as one—which also means that equity must be achieved by offering resources to those who need them to be included.

A prominent hindrance to casting a disabled actor in a non-disabled role is the argument for accuracy. Many object to the idea of "cross-abled" casting because, with some roles, it may not be normal or make sense for that character to be disabled. For some, viewing a Mufasa from *The Lion King* in a wheelchair or a deaf Hamlet from Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is strange or uncomfortable unless one makes strides to suspend their disbelief and address their internalized ableism. To address these arguments effectively, it is important to clarify when accuracy must be upheld in theatre and when artistic liberties can be exercised. This includes considering when an actor's abilities are essential to a character and when they can be adapted, as well as examining the blending of cultures from different time periods or the harmonious integration of typically separate elements for the sake of storytelling. As modern theatre shifts to more abstract creations, this idea of accuracy and when it is needed is especially crucial to consider, as well as the willingness to let go of realism and, simultaneously, one's own inherent bias.

Disability in Early Theatre

Greek and Shakespearean theatre undoubtedly featured impactful disabled stereotypes. While William Shakespeare is a renowned playwright who has contributed to the foundation of theatre history, he is a prime example of how ableism manifested in the 16th and 17th centuries and beyond. Shakespeare serves as a prominent contributor since, most often in his works, disabled characters were viewed as a comic tragedy because of their disability and were the target of ridicule within their respective plays (Anderson 144-145; Conroy 1; Hilton 159-160). Shakespeare often used the term "fool" for characters with inherently neurodivergent traits or those with a physical or neurodevelopmental disability (Anderson 147–148). His emphasis on language and how it signifies a character's class roles meant that many disabled characters were written to speak through prose, a style of speech that does not have the grace of iambic pentameter poetry (Anderson 148). Shakespeare was also an enthusiast of the "mad woman" archetype and painted women in emotional distress as insane, crazy, or simply ridiculous due to their femininity (Charney 451). I am not insinuating that Shakespeare purposefully intended to be ableist or widen the divide between those who are non-disabled and those who are disabled. Rather, I am drawing a connection between his possibly accidental stereotypes and how they became rooted in storytelling tropes for decades to come, still affecting the theatre scene to date.

Though a product of his time, Shakespeare's works planted a deep ableist belief within society that viewed disability as either comic or tragic and not simply a characteristic one may have. Likewise, while many of his characters were not directly intended to be disabled, they still were meant to be a punching bag due to their traits,

which are now correlated with disability (Sandahl 14). While not the very beginning of ableism in media by any means, his depictions correlate with the common belief that differences in traits, appearances, or behaviors are a bad thing in society. This correlation trickles into theatre when people believe that disabled actors should not portray typically non-disabled roles; disability is seen as a hindrance, not an attribute. By depicting a character through a disabled actor, many may see their disability as a downgrade to the character rather than a differing trait. Often, one does not realize they are laughing at a disabled person through Shakespeare's works; the depictions of these characters are designed to ridicule the abnormal rather than normalize it.

One prominent character from Shakespeare's works that Susan L. Anderson dissects in her article, *Disability in Early Modern Theatre*, is Richard III from the similarly titled drama. Throughout the play, Richard laments over the inhibitions of his disability and the "unfairness" of it all; in his eyes, he is monstrous, needing his traits to be cured. He is a villain of his own story, fueled by his resentment toward his differences (*Richard III* 1.1.18-21). While he is written with inherently villainous ideals—jealousy over the throne—it is his motivations that paint disability in a bad light, in turn making it seem as though he is only a villain because he is disabled. Richard III's motivation, stemming from resentment over his disability, reflects a familiar narrative pattern that disabled characters feel ashamed of their disabilities, or these disabilities serve as negative motivations within their stories. This fuels the belief that a disability is a bad trait and a source of shame, strife, or anger. The truth is that many disabled persons are either indifferent to their disability or find contentment with their abilities (Bury et al. 678). Thus, the push for proper disability representation means a push for disabled

characters who are simply disabled, whose disability is not an active force in their character arc but a trait they have and nothing more, i.e., the normalization of disability. Shakespeare's *Richard III* stands as an influential early example of the "woefully disabled" phenomenon in theatre and fiction as a whole.

While the writing of this disabled character is an inherently harmful stereotype that further perpetuates stigma, it should be noted that Shakespeare's works were simply a product of his time. Thus, while one cannot change the past by condoning outdated writing practices, one can take corrective liberties when producing the play in the modern age. According to Lionel Warner in his article titled *'Disabled' Characters in Plays*, "in the case of a play, the matter is additionally complicated by the fact that the play partially exists on the page and fully comes into being only when realized by director and actors" (Warner 371). This observation establishes that the effort to be more inclusive, in the case of older works specifically, should be placed less on the source material and more on the directors and actors bringing the works to life. It is left in the hands of those adapting a source to present it respectfully. One can adopt practices to make the performance more liberating and less of a condemnation of abnormality, i.e., Richard III's motivations being fueled by a hatred toward himself. Arguments may be made, however, against producing plays like *Richard III* now to begin with. With advancements in disability acceptance since Shakespeare's time, it makes sense that companies should focus on modern, more inclusive plays rather than outdated, problematic productions. Contrarily, as put by Susan L. Anderson in *Disability in Early Modern Theatre*:

> Contemporary stagings of early modern plays can learn from the techniques and casting practices of modern disability theatre … early modern scholars can

> contribute more detail and more nuance to this understanding of the ways disability signified in the past and challenge the assumption that past views of disability conformed to a singular tradition. (Anderson 149-150)

In other words, one does not have to adhere to outdated practices if working with an older play and can instead offer their own interpretations of disability in that play's context. Furthermore, the depictions of these disabled characters may be reconceptualized if cast with a similarly disabled actor by reclaiming the meaning of that character's disability artistically. Thus, responsibility then falls onto the very casting of the show to begin with.

In response to these problematic depictions of disabled persons in early theatre, a common pushback for proper representation began to rise, and companies formed with the sole motivation of demonstrating the capabilities of disabled performers. In stark contrast to using disabilities for ridicule, this shift in performance history went the complete opposite route by solely focusing on disabled actors. Some are comprised of an entirely disabled cast, pushing against the "token disabled character" phenomenon. Some of these companies made mighty impacts that remain to date, while some inadvertently enflamed the ostracization of disabled folk and do not accomplish what they set out to achieve. Whatever the case, disability theatre has metamorphosized far away from what it started as.

Deaf Culture and the Performing Arts

When searching for a branch of theatre that is conceived and performed by disabled individuals as a means of honoring disabled culture, one must not look further than Deaf theatre. While in the modern age some groups have used all-disabled casts as a way of spreading a message or conducting research through drama therapy or the like, the source of disabled theatre was conceptualized solely to connect disabled persons with non-disabled persons through a common ground and find artistic capability through disability (Kocchar-Lindgren 421-422). Deaf theatre is the most prominent form of disability arts due to its emergence as a celebration of culture and community. The birth of Deaf theatre can be traced back to the 1960s with the creation of the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) (Kocchar-Lindgren 421). NTD succeeded in widening the public understanding of Deaf culture by making it accessible to all audiences through performance and displaying the capability and strength of deaf individuals to those who have never viewed it. This success was primarily achieved through the mixed cast settings of the company, performing for audiences as a mix of both deaf and hearing actors, displaying unity and collaboration between disabled and non-disabled performers.

NTD is a prime example of the benefits of mixed casts; they produced shows performed by both deaf actors and hearing actors for a general audience to celebrate and honor disabled culture and how they can formulate enrapturing art with those of differing abilities. NTD's success demonstrates the contrast between mixed casts and all-disabled casts and what each aims to achieve. All too commonly in modern years, all-disabled companies are created and used to make a statement and "prove" to the general public that disabled people are capable rather than create art with disabled actors as an act of

appreciation. While these all-disabled casts are well-intentioned and not actively harmful, they do fail to tackle the main issue that they attempt to solve—inclusion and the path to acceptance. Companies such as NTD do not fall into this trap since that they are not aiming to solve or comment on anything; they exist for art's sake, not for social commentary. Additionally, the collaboration between hearing and deaf actors can cross obstacles that many believe inhibit inclusion in theatre, such as language barriers between American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English. NTD was among the first to create a system of combined sign language and speech in theatre and used this to an artistic advantage (Kocchar-Lindgren 421). By overcoming an obstacle in including disabled actors in a traditionally non-disabled environment, NTD used the combination of speech and sign language to make for a visually and audibly engaging performance, highlighting how unique and engaging diverting from the norm can be.

In modern years, Deaf culture has remained successful through companies such as Deaf West Theatre, in which Deaf and hearing worlds still collide to create art that is a mix of differing people and cultures. There is still a beautiful collaboration between deaf and speaking actors in musicals and plays, brought to life through innovative inclusion practices and accessibility, making for even better and thought-provoking performances. Through this act of collaboration between disabled and non-disabled actors, many audience members who may not have had education in Deaf culture and deaf individuals have the opportunity to change this. Additionally, the fact that this mode of inclusive theatre was born from the restructuring of theatre for the benefit of deaf performers proves that changes in how performance spaces operate to make them more accessible for disabled individuals is not as impossible as once thought and may even make for better

performances than before. It challenges the idea that some worlds cannot collide in particular art forms or that it would cause theatre to be too abstract or inaccessible for common theatergoers. Through NTD and Deaf culture, an entire branch of theatre performance was grown and serves as an excellent model for changes in accessibility for the future.

Modern Movements

A modern rise for acceptance and push for inclusivity emerged in the 21st century, which has since shaped how disabilities are perceived in the arts (Sandahl 622). As more acceptance and liberation proliferate in society, the arts will soon follow. The push for BIPOC representation substantially impacted theatre history—Norm Lewis' performance in *Phantom of the Opera*, Paul Robeson in *Othello,* Geoffery Holder's *The Wiz*, and Pearl Bailey and more in *Hello Dolly!* are to name a few. More recently in history, the LGBTQ+ community has begun to make strides, such as with successful Broadway shows including *Falsettos, The Prom, Fun Home*, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. While there is still much left to be done with representing both these groups, the impacts that they have had are substantial, and already, there is a sense of normalcy surrounding their inclusion into the arts. However, disability has only recently emerged in theatre through the release of shows that strongly feature them or disabled actors making their leeway in the industry. Be it the lack of understanding of casting, offering accessibility aids, or altering blocking and the performance composition for the benefit of the actor, there is a slight sense of fear of the unknown surrounding those with differing abilities in theatre. While casual inclusion is still behind due to these aspects and others, the depiction of

disabled characters in mainstream musicals and plays has begun taking significant steps to secure that future of acceptance.

A widely successful example of disability representation in theatre done right, according to Barr in her article, *Constituencies of Care: Imagining Possibilities of Access in US Theatre Pedagogy and Production*, is the Broadway run of *How to Dance in Ohio* by Rebekah Greer Melocik and Jacob Yandura. An adaptation of the similarly titled 2015 documentary, the musical follows seven autistic young adults who attend a formal dance to build social skills, both encountering and challenging ableism. The Broadway run of this musical broke boundaries due to the fact that all actors and understudies for the leading roles were similarly on the autism spectrum. While it is a freshly released musical with criticisms and fallbacks, the very fact that a musical following a cast of all-disabled protagonists—with similarly disabled actors portraying those roles—has made strides on Broadway is a groundbreaking occurrence in disability acceptance and opens the door for similar occurrences in the near future. Through her observations, Barr states that the production's "rehearsal process and access initiatives did something new, where accessibility was the baseline rather than the exception" (Barr 230). The show was produced with autistic actors in mind and prioritized accessibility to maintain the integrity of the story being told by providing for its actors. It is impactful productions like *How to Dance in Ohio* and their success that begin to tackle the lack of exposure to disabled performers and foster a sense of normalcy around the inclusion of disability. Not only does it tackle inaccurate assumptions surrounding specific disabilities, but it simply reduces stigma through standard inclusion, and the casting of autistic individuals

demonstrates the sheer talent, capability, and power of disabled voices that are more than worthy of a Broadway stage.

Another successful Broadway run that highlights disability is that of Simon Stephens' *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, based on the similarly titled book by Mark Haddon. The story follows a fifteen-year-old autistic boy named Christopher who attempts to solve the murder of his neighbor's dog, uncovering dark truths about his family along the way. Not only was this play praised for its artistic presentation, with a uniquely abstract set and alluring lighting design, but the immersive storytelling and connection with the show's protagonist did wonders for autism representation and acceptance. However, one of the biggest criticisms that could be made of *Curious Incident* is the lack of accurate casting for the show's protagonist. An overwhelming majority of the actors who portrayed Christopher were not autistic; instead, they had to consult with experts and those on the spectrum to understand the character they were playing and to portray him respectfully and accurately. While the performances of Christopher were not inherently ableist, offensive, or even inaccurate, there is still a level of discomfort surrounding the idea that no autistic actors were cast when there is such a vast pool of auditionees for a Broadway run. The first openly autistic actor to portray Christopher professionally, Mickey Rowe, made headlines (Collins-Hughes 2017). Many, even Rowe, commented on how the absence of disability representation and acceptance in theatre is a substantial issue (Sutton 2019). Considering the experiences Christopher goes through in the play, an actor that has never experienced firsthand the intricacies of autism may inhibit the authenticity of their performance. Thus, while a widely successful and beloved show that brought disabled representation to

countless audience members, *Curious Incident* stands as an excellent, if not uncomfortable, reminder of the lack of accurate casting of disabled roles in theatre.

All-Disabled Companies vs. Mixed Casts

While theatre companies explicitly designed for all-disabled casts serve as a significant step forward for inclusivity and accessibility, they still represent the most prominent issue in disability arts—a divide between disabled and non-disabled actors. All-disabled companies—productions performed exclusively by disabled individuals—can offer an accessible entryway into the performing arts, enable confidence and community, and reduce prejudice. However, these companies are often a form of drama therapy, a method of helping a disabled person—specifically those under the neurodivergent umbrella—improve social skills, empathy, or a sense of belonging and community. However, the use of all-disabled companies negates the collaboration between all actors, making no significant strides in integrated inclusivity in theatre. Rather than making non-disabled dominated spaces accessible and incorporating actors of all abilities in the general scope of public theatre, all-disabled casts are a much more niche occurrence that many casual theatergoers will not see. They segregate disabled folk from non-disabled folk and fail to recognize the integration of professional disabled actors, leaning toward the act of drama therapy rather than genuine inclusion.

Including disabled actors in traditionally non-disabled spaces, in which there is a lack of common knowledge surrounding disability and subsequent prejudice, not only educates those who have misconceptions but demonstrates the ease of disabled performance and collaboration with peers. This confirms that disabled actors are no less than their counterparts and that their acting capabilities, or autonomy, are not inhibited by

their disability. The use of theatre for therapeutic means, such as companies modeled to aid social skills, can inadvertently eliminate one's autonomy and empowerment by not regarding their contribution as a benefit to the company but rather the company's benefit to them. Most importantly, all-disabled casts do not affect professional actors. Disabled actors who aim for the top of the professional pyramid, such as Broadway or Off-Broadway, gain no upsides to this movement since no all-disabled companies operate on such a professional level. Since many of these companies operate for drama therapy or social justice, they do not hold merit to professional spaces that casual audiences may view. And, often, professional actors simply wish to perform in standard theatre spaces rather than all-disabled companies due to both the work they will be participating in and the fact that they may not wish to be subjugated to just their disability (Collins 322). All-disabled casts have achieved significant feats unrelated to inclusion and integration. Using any mode of cast as a form of therapy can aid individuals who struggle with social skills, expression, independence, empathy, and the like (Lenakakis, Koltsida 258). However, these forms of casts apply mainly, if not exclusively, to those with higher support needs or those who are not professional actors. This fact does not disregard the talent and skills of those who fall under these distinctions. However, these companies do not significantly impact the broader scope of inclusion or the lack of representation in more popular professional spaces, thus lacking reach to the general public.

Additionally, companies such as Detour Company Theatre, Identity Theatre, and Theatre Breaking Through Barriers unconsciously play into "inspiration porn" (McAskill 201) by highlighting these disabilities and proving to the world that they are not less than others. This wish to prove can quickly turn derogatory. Performances within these

companies evoke pity rather than resonating with an audience member and promoting normalcy. When disability inclusion is viewed as a mode of artistry and capability rather than a social commentary, this proves a more substantial effect on viewers; as stated by Colette Conroy, “in the encounter between disabled performer and non-disabled audience, something significant is changed” (Conroy 6). When watching disabled and non-disabled actors working together onstage, an audience member might observe the competence and mastery of disabled actors more than on a stage consisting of only disabled performers. Audiences are not placed under the stress of accidental ableism for clapping and cheering at moments that may not be perceived as appropriate (Dokumaci 166). The most prevalent consequence of all-disabled companies, however, is the simple truth that disabled and non-disabled actors are separated from one another through this mode of segregation. Separating disabled individuals from their abled peers dishonors their wish to, as put by Collins, “be recognized as artists (who just happen to have an impairment), not as disabled artists” (Collins 322). A conglomeration of varying performers, disabled or not, demonstrates the beauty of difference and the vision of acceptance. Acceptance ignites the inclusion of all individuals in a space without any form of prejudice, positive or negative (Nijkamp, Cardol 2). As a result, all-disabled casts are not a reliable mode of inclusion concerning the kinship between disabled and non-disabled actors.

2: Understanding Disabled Roles

Introduction

There are many exceptions, alterations, and considerations to appraise when understanding disabled roles in theatre and how they are cast. There is no objectively unerring solution or mindset, nor is any solution immediately applicable without an understanding of the disabled roles themselves. In this chapter, I will examine specific examples of disabled roles and their respective successes and losses, addressing arguments over whether the disability of an actor or role matters in specific contexts, and examine the responsibility an actor has when cast as a disabled role. In doing so, I hope to offer a well-rounded inspection of the source of scarce representation in theatre.

Successful Examples

Forming a larger argument on the schematics behind casting disabled roles requires a deeper understanding of differing roles and their relevance to the story being told. While there are numerous disabled roles in many plays and musicals, three roles that cover vastly different disabilities—two of which are quite beloved—serve as an excellent look into how disabled roles are written, portrayed, and directed. Christopher Boone from Simon Stephen's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is on the autism spectrum, Tuc from Susan Zeder's *Mother Hicks* is deaf, and Crutchie from Alan Menken's *Newsies* has a "bum leg." These are all widely successful or influential in their own right, bringing disability awareness to audiences who may not be as familiar with the concept or even the disabilities themselves. However, though the conception of the character within their script or performance itself is exemplary and impactful, there are

deeper issues behind the lack of accurate casting. By dissecting each of these roles, one can determine how their casting has been done right, what factors are determined by the playwrights within their scripts, and how the way the characters are depicted plays a role in their societal impact.

Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is a demanding and multi-faceted role that requires a deep understanding of his disability, regardless of the actor portraying him. The play has profoundly impacted the way disability is viewed within theatrical productions by highlighting a respectful portrayal of autism through the lens of a delightful protagonist in a deeply moving story. However, the fact that few autistic actors have portrayed the role raises the question of why, considering the unbridled talent and number of autistic actors available to perform, as viewed through *How to Dance in Ohio*, discussed prior. It all narrows down to the accessibility of the production and whether those in the production team are equipped with knowledge sufficient to provide for an actor who may need accommodations. Autistic actors may request additional breaks, processing time, or various auxiliary support to make their work environment fit their needs, which a production team may not be prepared to provide. This emphasizes the need for well-rounded research and preparation in the hands of those who wish to tell the story. Regardless, Christopher is, for the most part, a disabled role done right; his exceptionally unique and personally crafted method of narration makes a larger statement on how nothing has to be done the same, even how a story is told. By seeing a performance of *Curious Incident* and witnessing Christopher's story through the lens through which he views the world, one gains a deeper cognitive empathy that demonstrates the power theatre has in disability inclusion.

The rampant international success of *Newsies* is nothing to be understated. An adaptation of the 1992 Disney film of the same name, the musical hit Broadway on March 29, 2012, and garnered enormous praise and admiration from millions. One attribute of the musical that attracted special attention is the character of Crutchie. As the loyal best friend of the protagonist, Jack Kelly, Crutchie is known for his endearing nature and traits such as his determination, positivity, and immense heart. The character also stands out for the fact that he is a disabled person in a widely mainstream musical. While his disability is undoubtedly a driving force behind his character arc, since he faces societal difficulties and antagonistic advances from others due to his attributes, he is not less than because of it. Crutchie is still a competent individual who advocates for himself, even when he unwittingly becomes the "damsel in distress" by the act one climax. While criticism can be drawn over this fact, there is no denying that Crutchie's hope and perseverance are inspiring and that his character is the heart of the show. However, one objective criticism that is not based on the character's writing is the fact that non-disabled actors famously portray him. It was only in a 2018 Axelrod Performing Arts Center production of *Newsies* that the world saw what was possibly the first disabled actor to play the role of Crutchie in a documented performance (Keller 2018). The actor in question, Patrick Tombs, commented, "Casting actors with disabilities rather than those without in roles that portray those disabilities is a key step to inclusion" (Keller 2018), acknowledging how crucial it is to cast disabled roles accurately from the perspective of a disabled actor. However, while there is a substantial lack of casting disabled actors in the role of Crutchie, the widespan success of the musical therein brought attention to a disabled character done mostly right.

Mother Hicks flips the script in that its playwright, Suzan Zeder, states outright in her introductory note that the character Tuc should be played by a similarly deaf or HOH actor (*Mother Hicks* 5). While it cannot be proven that every theatre company honors this stipulation, this act of requesting the actor to be similarly disabled displays the importance of that character's disability in relation to their character, the story, and the world of the play. Zeder states in her note, "Although it may take a little extra time and effort to find and work with this actor, the benefits are overwhelming. It is the difference between someone copying choreographed movements and someone dancing in the language of their soul" (*Mother Hicks* 5). Through this statement, Zeder is acknowledging the authenticity of performance and the fact that non-disabled actors must perform disability when portraying a disabled role, which dampens its impact on audiences. Tuc is the play's narrator, using sign language to speak while the ensemble chorus acts as his "voice." This culture of unspoken language and poetry is interwoven in the storytelling and the feeling of the play; casting a deaf actor as Tuc not only respects the disability of the role but also honors the integrity of the story being told. By being authentic in how a character speaks and displaying the understanding a deaf actor would have of how Tuc expresses himself, the performance garners a more profound respect and immersion. This can be translated to shows that do not feature a disabled character with the same importance to the integrity of the plot. Even though Crutchie is not the narrator of *Newsies*, there would be a more profound genuineness to his character by casting a disabled actor which would make for a more emotionally impactful performance. The actor connects more with the role, so the audience follows upon viewing that partnership. This is why Zeder's adamance on accurately casting Tuc makes a larger statement on the

casting scene in theatre—she advocates for authenticity and true connection between actor and character. However, some may question whether this accuracy truly matters, whether a given character must be portrayed by a similar actor, or why such emphasis should be placed on respecting one's disability.

Do Their Disabilities Matter?

When looking at casting disabled actors in non-disabled roles or the converse, the most vital question to answer is whether the character's disability matters in the context of the plot, character identity, or the world of the script. One might argue that one should not define a character by their disability, as that can become inherently ableist, and a casting director should focus more on the actor's performance abilities and how they fit the role than whether they are similarly disabled. While this argument has merit, it too can fall under the inherently ableist umbrella by assuming that one's disability does not impact multiple aspects of one's life. One's personality and values are not defined by their disability by any means. However, one may argue that their disabilities are a significant driving force in their lives, and casting a non-disabled actor in a disabled role sees their disability itself as dismissible. The very act of viewing disability as detachable from a person can label disability as something that should be detached. However, this all denotes the need to define why disability is a significant factor in the casting scene, thereby highlighting the debate over when a character or actor's disability truly matters.

The most direct answer to this debate is that if it is not vital to the plot or character development for a role to be disabled or non-disabled, then there is no obligation to adhere to the character's given traits. Just as one can deviate from a character description that lists a role as blonde when it does not matter in the script, one

does not have to follow this and can take directorial liberties. This observation mainly impacts the act of casting a disabled role in a non-disabled role. While there will still be audience pushback from those uncomfortable with the idea of a well-known role being portrayed as disabled, there is little consequence to changing a character's abilities within a show that accommodates it. Audience pushback stems from societal norms and lack of exposure to the inclusion of marginalized groups that would be combatted with more frequent representation in the arts. Casting disabled actors in non-disabled roles would begin to make this advancement in acceptance, subtly proving that disability is not the hindrance that many assume it to be.

The argument for accuracy is the biggest hurdle when addressing conscious casting. Many may argue that it would simply not make sense for some roles in a given production to be disabled, given the time era, setting, or general world of the show. Audiences may tend to gravitate towards what is familiar or tangible are deterred by what would not occur in reality being passed off as usual. Such is especially the case with disability; while many may look past color-conscious casting, they may be less open to cross-abled casting, given the systematic beliefs surrounding disability to date. Many still view disability as a hindrance or a negative aspect that one resents. The idea of altering a character's abilities to be what many would consider a downgrade immediately evokes aversion rather than simply seeing it as a change. However, there are adaptable mindsets to combat this. Ability-conscious casting is a variant of color-conscious casting seen in many modern productions, such as the examples in the *Modern Movements* section of chapter one, serving as a mode of inclusion through exposure. The more often an audience views disability as a simply neutral aspect that can be applied to any character

that the plot allows without being treated as a negative, the more accepting they are of disability in theatre as a whole. Ability-conscious casting combats the push against casting disabled characters in non-disabled roles, all while proving that though disability should not define a person entirely, it, like race, is not a negative attribute to have and should be respected in the casting process. This is an especially vital distinction when addressing the relevance of a role's abilities and whether they matter.

The Actor's Responsibility

Keeping in mind the staggering percentage of disabled roles played by non-disabled actors atop the lack of disabled characters in media in general (Woodburn, Kopić 20), the appearance of this inaccurate casting will inevitably happen. Thus, what does a non-disabled actor do if cast in a disabled role? Do they decline the role and potentially end up in a financially detrimental position? Or do they accept the role and continue to fuel the stigma surrounding casting disabled roles in theatre? The question is not black and white, nor is the answer. The lack of a definite solution may contribute to the hesitation in working with disability in theatre, and thus the dearth of representation; the fear of taking a wrong and potentially offensive step as a director is unfortunate, yet understandable. While it should ideally be the choices of the director that lead to proper representation and casting practices, as soon as the contract is accepted, whatever the outcome of casting is, the responsibility is in the actors' hands. All parties must always take steps to ensure that proper representation is achieved and ableist performances are avoided. If a non-disabled actor lands a disabled role, there are multiple tools and applications to use to prevent a potentially offensive performance.

The most obvious yet critical factor is for the actor to conduct personal research. One should be fully aware of the attributes of the disability they are portraying, be cognizant of the cultural and social influences one might face, and educate oneself in accurate and inoffensive behaviors or processes one might have to go through. Portraying individuals under the neurodivergent umbrella can be more challenging than portraying those who use mobility aids, considering the visible mannerisms involved. However, similarly complex nuances surrounding both go unnoticed by some. Regardless of perceivable differences—which can always be debated—one should be educated in who they are portraying to improve their connection to the character as an actor. Just as one would research the background of any character they are cast in, a disabled role is no different and includes additional research on their disability. Mental acknowledgment is just as, if not more, important than any visible traits an actor can tangibly use. Thus, conducting personal research as an actor is vital for proper representation in multiple facets.

When one is cast, it is pivotal to consult with similarly disabled individuals to gain input from those with lived experiences. This consultation can help combat outdated or offensive terminology, receive insight into the culture formed around that disability, and receive peer review from that individual for their performance to ensure they are making respectful and purposeful decisions as an actor. Constant coaching from a disabled individual or group reduces the risk of offensive creative liberty conducted by the actor and diminishes the lack of education in the area. This may go hand-in-hand with research, as the disabled individual the actor consults with may suggest valuable resources that they deem reputable as one with lived experience in tandem with the

actor's findings. They may consult with the actor on their research and determine whether they are beneficial for their portrayal of the role, how much can be practically applied to their performance, if it even should be, or the like. An important distinction to be made is that an actor should not be seeking out methods of "acting out" a character's disability, nor should they be attempting to mimic behaviors that may not apply to every person under the metaphorical umbrella of that disability. Instead, the actor must use their research to find a deep emotional connection with that character through their lived experiences as a disabled person by gaining a comprehensive knowledge of their disability. Consulting disabled person is a highly effective alternative to personal research alone.

The given circumstance of a non-disabled actor being cast in a disabled role is not ideal. More than anything else, directors and casting directors should strive to be as all-encompassing and inclusive as possible by honoring the wishes of disabled groups to reserve disabled roles for disabled actors. However, no one can control the choices made globally due to a lack of education, auditionees, empathy, or so forth. Thus, performers must make additional efforts. One can achieve a deferential and empathetic performance by utilizing such options as personal research and consultation with disabled individuals and still succeed in a respectful performance.

The Statistics

With the foundation surrounding disability and the arts and a better understanding of disabled roles in mind, this chapter focuses on the schematics of casting disabled roles. In order to develop clear solutions to combat the lack of inclusion and adopt inclusive practices, one must fully understand the "why." There are many obstacles in the way of

casting disabled actors, ranging from reasonable to highly opinionated, that must be addressed. By presenting comprehensive answers to the very issue of casting disabled roles in the next chapter, this chapter will provide evidence of the adverse effects inaccessibility induces. Additionally, it is extremely crucial to base objectives around the opinions of disabled individuals themselves. Thus, the lived experiences and sentiments of disabled actors will be a focus. In this chapter, I will examine the statistics proving the lack of accurate casting, dissecting why this presents a significant issue, combatting arguments against disability inclusion, and conducting interviews with two disabled actors to gain better insight into the former topics.

While there is still a bafflingly scarce amount of academic research conducted on theatre and disability, it is still a well-documented fact that non-disabled actors portray the majority of disabled roles in media. Even further, an exceedingly small percentage of roles in media are disabled to begin with. Woodburn and Kopić elaborate upon their film study discussed previously, stating:

> While streaming platforms had a better percentage, they also had a lower overall count of characters with disabilities. When looked at more traditionally, these numbers dwindle exponentially to only 6 (2.2%) characters with disabilities being featured on all the platforms (TV and streaming) and only two of them being played by actors with disabilities (0.75%) … given that the latest US census estimates that 18.7% of Americans live with a disability, at 0.9% of representation among regular television characters, this is a grossly disproportionate under-representation of the largest minority in the country. (Woodburn, Kopić 1–4)

Though this study specifically covers television, it can be easily translated to theatre, leaving an even smaller percentage of representation, given that theatre is not as widespread as television. These findings prove that while disabled individuals could be considered one of the most overlooked minority groups, they are also a prominent percentage of the population in the United States (Woodburn, Kopić 4). This is a significant case of exclusion that directly hinders the success of professional disabled actors.

More data surrounding this phenomenon is to be gathered despite the scarcity of disability research in theatre. According to Patterson's study, "Actors' Equity Association ("AEA") … even reported that barely 1% of contracts they issued from 2016 to 2019 went to artists who self-reported living with a disability" (Patterson 485). This correlates to theatre practices and raises the question of why there is such a baffling small percentage in this conclusion. Considering Patterson's later observations on the surplus of accommodations for disabled patrons as opposed to actors (Patterson 484), one may gather that the priority of theatre companies is to cater to their patrons and less so for their actors. Theatre companies aim to attract paying customers by providing a comfortable and accessible viewing experience. However, these companies must remember that they must always be prepared to accommodate disabled actors, regardless of whether they are producing a show that features disabled roles. By not preparing to accommodate actors, it implies that the company does not see disabled actors as a norm, thereby highlighting that little thought is placed on the success and prosperity of disabled artists. In order to consider this further, one must dive deeper to examine why this matters.

Why it Matters

When presented with the statistics proving the lack of accurate casting in media, it raises the question as to what this data means and what tangible impacts it has. When viewing this data, it is crucial to recognize that real, working individuals are in the equation, and when translating these studies to professional theatre, it means their careers are on the line, making this a humanitarian issue. The bottom line is that when roles are not available for disabled actors to play, they are robbed of their opportunities for the sake of those who already thrive within the industry. Considering it is still rare for non-disabled characters to be played by disabled actors, the latter does not have a fair advantage within their field. In other words, this imbalance in casting means that the already scarce openings for disabled actors are being willingly given to those with substantially more opportunities (Woodburn, Kopić 20). This issue also impedes the outreach of superlative performers with few openings to make an impact, be it casual theatergoers, disabled audience members, or simply an audience who wishes to see an impressive performance. This may fuel the scarcity of chances disabled individuals get to see themselves in media, but not as a role that a non-disabled performer portrays.

Autistic actor and co-founder of the National Disability Theatre, Mickey Rowe, who is most commonly linked to his performance as Christopher in *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, suggests in an interview that disability is what makes disabled actors excel:

> I think so many people with disabilities really have to do the extra work and perform every day in different ways, and that's something that really shows onstage … But also what these people fail to recognize sometimes is that when it

comes to being people with disabilities, our lived experience is a type of experience that you can never get in a drama school or on a Broadway stage. (Sutton 2019)

This observation differs significantly from the commonly held ableist assumption that disabled individuals are not as competent as non-disabled actors. Instead, Rowe puts forward that this mindset overlooks the applicable attributes of disabilities—such as the natural inclination to perform for neurotypical or non-disabled individuals daily—that lend themselves to an exceptional actor. This notation indicates that the perceived risk of hiring an actor who may need certain accommodations does not outweigh their skill as a performer. Furthermore, while many still view disability as a hindrance or woeful curse, one may argue that it can instead benefit performance. This emphasizes the point of this section—that disabled individuals are not less than in any shape or form and deserve as much success as their non-disabled peers.

Disability is often viewed as a hindrance. But what if one dove further into, as Rowe puts forth, the artistic benefits of disability? When studying the schematics of disability in theatre, it is easy to forget how flexible theatre is as an art form. However, at its core, theatre endeavors to push the imagination, break boundaries, empower individuals, and stretch the possibilities of art. While diving into this specific topic is beyond the scope of this thesis, understanding that theatre companies and directors should embrace the potential for innovative artistic novelty is crucial, as it combats the internalized pushback against giving a platform to what is not the norm. However, there are many varying arguments against disability representation, nontraditional casting, or the like relevant to this thesis that will be discussed further in the next section.

Common Arguments

Though liberation in favor of disability representation is evident in 2025, there is still pushback. One of the most prominent obstacles preventing disability representation is the mindset of those who have yet to grow from outdated standards and beliefs. This may be a substantial inhibition to shifting practices in theatre companies, as put by Worthington and Sextou:

> Due attention must also be given to psychological shifts in understandings of disability and theatre that are being navigated in theatre workplaces. If these are not considered … it is possible that the environments, structures, and attitudes experienced in theatre settings will be neither be helpful nor appropriate. (Worthington, Sextou 2)

Thus, many of the defining factors as to why disability inclusion and the casting of disabled actors are scarce are the limiting beliefs of theatre companies and audience members. While definitive practices can substantially impact exclusion, these practices may not even be adopted, much less make an impact, if individual mindsets are not challenged. This section will examine multiple arguments against the casting of disabled actors to combat limiting beliefs.

Arguably, one of the most insensitive arguments is that disabled actors cannot perform as well as non-disabled actors. Supporting this acknowledgment, one actor interviewed by Woodburn and Kopić states, “The largest challenge I've had is folks’ preconceptions. When they find out I'm low vision they worry that I can't do the job as well as others” (Woodburn, Kopić 22). This account highlights the fact that disability is commonly seen as a negative trait for performers to have. Even if an individual does not

outright believe one's disability will impede their skills, there is still a deep-rooted, systematic belief that views disability as limiting. However, when referring back to Rowe's observations in the *Why it Matters* section, it is clear that this argument holds little merit. Disabilities do not hinder an individual's acting abilities. Rather, they present the need to think creatively or be prepared to cater to any accommodations an actor requests. Subsequently, this proves there may be a preference for convenience when casting to avoid any additional work on the company's part. Companies may deter from casting disabled actors based on whether they can perform a specific task in mind or not (Patterson 497). The solution to this argument is not a practical application. Instead, there is a need to mutually address and reconsider how disability is viewed in the arts and culture. Thus, the responsibility lies on theatre companies and their directors to research how to address disability and the culture surrounding it to combat internalized ableism. This is relevant even with shows that do not feature disabled roles, considering that companies must be open to the fact that disabled actors may audition for any roles, disabled or not.

A prominent yet straightforward argument is that accommodations may be difficult or inconvenient for companies to adopt (Patterson 490). This argument has a practical lens that holds some merit. It is reasonable that a theatre company would choose not to hire an actor who requests additional accommodations due to financial or time-sensitive reasons or simply because the company cannot provide what they request. However, with a deeper understanding of accommodations, it becomes clear that they are not as costly as one might presume. It is crucial to realize that accommodations have a broader scope than aids for those with physical disabilities (Reynolds 14). Many

accommodations requested do not include material additions but rather additional breaks, altered visual or auditory stimuli, or the like (Reynolds 15). These would require communication and integration into the rehearsal process based on the actor's needs. However, practical applications for mobility aids, visual impairments, and so on through architectural additions can be easily addressed with universal design (Reynolds 14). If an actor requests accommodations that are not included in whatever the venue offers, the financial or timely implications would not be inconvenient to the point of impeding the rehearsal process. Combatting this issue, however, may require a reconstruction of how companies view disability accommodations and depart from supplying the "absolute minimum" to their actors per legal requirements (Patterson 490).

Another implication is that an actor's disability may conflict with the director's vision for the role being cast. This insinuates that directors, when casting, may already have a stagnant interpretation of a given role that does not allow for conflicting alternatives. While it is true that directors must have specific attributes in mind for a role when casting, Sandahl argues that not adopting "the concept of "neutral," the physical and emotional state from which any character can be built" (Sandahl 256) during casting is limiting. Going further, she states, "Actors who cannot be "cured" of their idiosyncrasies to approach neutral may be considered physically and emotionally "inflexible," unable to portray anyone other than themselves or those like them" (Sandahl 256). This details how not adopting a flexible mindset as a director will demote disabled actors to only portray characters similar to themselves. Often, that possibility is not even subconsciously considered (Patterson 491). However, a cognizant and informed director will not base their casting of a role on physical attributes or certain abilities unless the

script specifically calls for such. While the answer to this argument may ultimately hinge on the director's vision for the role, it is vital to recognize that the director should base their interpretation of the character on a well-informed understanding of the script and its plot. The choice should not be influenced by a desire for a non-disabled portrayal merely because it is considered the standard.

A particularly relevant consideration is that directors cannot inquire about an actor's disability unprompted without violating the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA). HIPAA is defined by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as such:

> The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996 establishes federal standards protecting sensitive health information from disclosure without patient's consent. The US Department of Health and Human Services issued the HIPAA Privacy Rule to implement HIPAA requirements. The HIPAA Security Rule protects specific information cover the Privacy Rule. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024)

Thus, a director does not have the legal right to ask an actor whether they are disabled or not, much less what kind of disability they have. This raises many questions regarding what path a director may take when seeking disabled actors to portray a disabled role. One possible solution to implement a required question in an actor's audition process, be it on paper or a verbal inquiry, which asks what the actor's relationship to disability is in their life. This creates an environment that encourages disabled individuals to relate their experiences to the character without feeling pressured

to reveal their identity. This, in turn, combats the difficulty with accurately casting individuals with invisible disabilities—individuals with a disability that cannot be immediately perceived by others (Kelly, Mutebi 2). However, there is much more nuance to this dilemma that warrants further explanation in chapter four of this thesis.

As demonstrated, numerous arguments, conversations, and mere observations are a byproduct of such a nuanced topic. While some may have more concrete answers or solutions, some are less black-and-white and require a thorough understanding of every viewpoint. However, the perspectives of those being affected by these factors must be prioritized, and above all, the prosperity of disabled actors must be the focus. In the next chapter, I hope to focus on the lived experiences of disabled actors and emphasize the importance of their stances on many of the issues covered.

3: The Interviews

The Questions

In order to gain a broader understanding of the lived experiences of disabled artists to fortify the need for change, I conducted interviews with two anonymous theatre artists to gather their personal stories from the field. These stories were collected to open up a more personal lens to help better shape the objective of this thesis. The first interviewee, notated as **A**, is a professional actor of stage and screen who is an incomplete quadriplegic. The second interviewee, notated as **B**, is a graduate from a regional comprehensive university theatre department and an autistic performance artist. The goal of these interviews is to address some of the issues covered in this thesis and offer the perspectives of disabled individuals who may or may not have experienced them in the theatre industry.

Question 1: Have you experienced any difficulties that arose from a lack of accessibility for your disability in a theatre space?

> **A:** Yes, of course. I have had two back-to-back Broadway experiences where the companies honestly bent over backwards to make those spaces accessible. In one instance, they built me a dressing room offstage right because just getting downstairs is so inaccessible and those theaters are so old, and that dressing room had an ADA friendly shower and bathroom, and that was incredible, what they did. I was blown away by that. In the second Broadway show, they installed a stairlift to get me downstairs, and I also had a changing area offstage so I didn't have to ride up and down the stairs when I didn't want to. But there are a lot of

smaller theaters in Chicago or New York that are super cool spaces, but there's just nowhere to be offstage if you're in a chair. It's tight quarters. And if you don't have a dressing room and want to lay down and stretch out, or your legs are getting spazzy or cramping, that's just not an option in a lot of these theaters. They may have an equity cot, which is impossible for me to get in and out of. There was a theater in Chicago that talked so much about how inclusive they were, but if you were a wheelchair user, you couldn't even get cast at that theater, because their rehearsal space didn't have an elevator. And so I would be doing shows, and their casting director would come and see me, and be like, "Oh my God, you're great, we gotta get you over to the theater," and then he'd be like, "Oh… right." Disability is often the caboose on the conversational train of inclusion. So yes, I have definitely encountered some barriers, and I've also correlatively encountered a stunning willingness to find solutions that comes at no small cost to producers, so that's been heartening.

B: I would say so. With [my disability] being an invisible disability, it's something that doesn't necessarily go noticed in the moment a lot. Because that's something that happens with people on the spectrum—you'll go your entire life and then a memory will zap back to you and you're like, "Oh, they were being rude to me." In a theatre space, I would say the biggest thing that I now notice immediately as opposed to it being years down the line is that a lot of theatre is outside of performance space communication, and with a very communication-focused disability like autism, there is the big hurdle of those people basing whether or not they want you in the show on how you are to be around. But I

didn't prepare for that segment, so when they're asking me questions about my personality in the audition room, I might not have exactly what they're looking for because I didn't think of that. Theatre is a very social sport, and that's definitely something that I can see at the beginning now instead of learning the pattern of it and looking back.

Question 2: Likewise, have you experienced pushback in your pursuit of a given role because of your disability?

A: I was up for a really exciting role, and I went to a second or third callback at the casting director's office on some form of video interspace, and as I went outside the door and started gathering my stuff to leave, the casting director said to the other casting director, "What did I tell you? That's our guy." Then as I was gathering my bags to leave, I heard them say, "Yeah, he's a great actor, but he's in a wheelchair." And this is after a month's long process of these tricky sides, this incredible director to work with, and just getting closer and closer and closer, and I remember it just went through me like a missile. It doesn't matter if I beat everybody else, it doesn't matter if I'm the most prepared, it doesn't matter how I look, what they're interested in for the character—at the end of the day, I'm working against this thing that I actually can't do anything about. It was a flagpole moment in my career because it really hurt and stung, but it was also galvanizing, in terms of "Well, I need to make my own opportunities, and I need to hustle at a rate or intensity that is outside of my comfort zone."

B: It depends. For me, it wouldn't be so much of disability as it is that I am a fat person as well, so not only is it like, "We don't want this character to have your

autistic nuances—we also don't want this character to be over a size 12. Sorry!" But I have definitely faced more pushback of being someone of a bigger body. There have been times where I am already cast in a role that I will, when in talks with the director or table reads, get asked about my motivation or what I think my character wants, I will say, "Well, as someone who has lived this long with autism, there are parts of this characters that could be applied the same way." I don't do this with every character ever, but there have been a lot that I feel like I am in this role because this character is autistic, and I will bring that up in a table read or rehearsal setting, and then suddenly the room will go quiet. And I think that's something that a lot of autistic actors have probably had happen to them. But I always worry that it's one of those, "You're making everything about your disability!" But no, you guys put me in this role—if you've seen me in it, clearly there's something spectrum-esque going on. But in terms of pursuit, it's definitely been an appearance thing other than a performance thing.

Question 3: Some individuals still believe disability may inhibit performance or are deterred by seeing the "other." What is your stance on this belief?

A: Whoever maintains such a belief is an idiot. Period. Shaming is not the best tactic, but sometimes shaming does work. Sometimes these claims [that] it'll inhibit a performance [is from] a fear of being sued. It's almost a legal worry—if the demands of the role are too much, there's too many shows and they're tiring this person out, then are they liable? It's more of a liability fear sometimes when it's coming from a top level of producers and studio heads. It still stems from ignorance about disability in general, but weirdly sometimes it's almost as if they

think they are doing the disabled artist a favor of not casting them. Because the demands of the job would be so much that they don't want to tire out or exhaust the person. But that's not their decision to make. I also think that it speaks to a knowingly persistent and wrong conflation of disability and health, because those are two different things.

B: At least at a community or collegiate level before we get to Broadway, I think it is doing a big disservice to the world of performance as a whole to act as though there is a certain set of characteristics you have to meet to be able to do this. Because that's not true, and it's not fair. When they were doing ancient verbal storytelling, they weren't being like, "So actually, only the people in the village that are able to come down here and story-tell three days a week and not get tired or have struggles socializing [can join]." That's just not what this art form is. And when it comes to the social environment, [we need] an open space where someone who struggles with communication could not have to worry about snippy comments because someone misunderstood what someone said. Or in terms of physical stuff, I know a lot of dancers who have EDS—it's just a matter of acknowledging that this is for fun. That's what I mean when I say not so much professional, because if you make the non-professional world more accessible, we could make the professional world more accessible.

Question 4: What do you believe is the biggest reason for the lack of accurate casting for disabled roles in theatre?

A: Fear. I think, specifically in this country, disability means to non-disabled people a way too uncomfortable mirror that holds up an uncomfortable truth that

our bodies are beautiful, and our bodies are fragile, and that your status in the non-disabled world can be revoked and changed at a moment's whim. I think that truly [messes] with some central ideal of American independence or invincibility. So, disability is basically a blatant pillar of reality and pragmatism, and I think that really scrambles people's psyches a bit, where they want to avoid it. I think we've relegated it into inspiration stories. Because that makes us feel good, when we can look at that and learn something, and think, "Thank God I'm not that." And that's not the lesson to take. It is a fear thing, I believe, and also beside the existential and individual fear of "I don't want that to happen to me," the people making the decision are also [under] fear of whether that person can sell tickets and has an audience. But, of course, this is iterative, because if you keep making those decisions based on those fears, it proves the premise, because you're boxing out an entire demographic of artists who have not had the chance to prove themselves, and prove that they absolutely can to the job just as well, if not better, and can sell out a show.

B: I think that there is this weird neurotypical, non-disabled idea that disabled people can't do anything for themselves, and that includes telling their own stories somehow. I don't think it's fair to not give someone agency in telling that story. Especially when the character is written to have a disability—because there are many times where over time it will become an accepted "head-cannon" that a character will be a certain disability, but when a character is explicitly written to have it, like Nessa Rose in *Wicked*, there's no reason that an actual actress who needs a wheelchair couldn't play [her]. I think non-disabled people want to be

like, “Look! We’re being so cool and accepting by having this character with a disability!” But outside of the actual performance, they don’t want to be around the person with the disability. They can for an hour and a half during the show expand their worldview to include disabled people, but not during the rehearsal process. And this isn’t even just a small-level theatre thing. There are a lot of professional theaters that don’t want to pay money to have their stages be wheelchair accessible. They don’t want to pay money to have extra showings that are low-sensory friendly, or showings where it’s okay that you bring your kids or anyone that struggles to stay in a typical theater setting. I think that’s what it is at the heart of it—we want to tell these stories, but we don’t want to challenge our outside-of-performance worldview. It’s the idea of disabled acceptance but not the practice.

Question 5: What do you, as a disabled artist, wish theatre companies or directors would take foreword to combat the issue of casting and exclusion?

A: First step: make sure the place where you’re holding auditions is disability friendly. Also, we don’t need to be called in for disabled-identified roles. I’ve turned down a lot of things where the character is defined as disabled and the storyline is about their disability. The more I can disrupt that viewing experience by putting the audience into a contextless space, where the chair is not dramaturgically explained as part of my character, that actually “normalizes” disability, because they kind of come to a fork in the road where they have to spend their time obsessing over it or just accept it. And when they accept it, this beautiful thing happens. Not centralizing that normalizes disability. For casting

directors, it's all well and good to take on projects that are disabled-friendly and champion disabled stories, but also think of us for roles where disability is not part of the story, and to simply fold us into the world as we fold ourselves into the world.

B: I think it is important to acknowledge that the social aspect of theatre is important, but just how you acknowledge in a theatre space that everyone in that room has come from somewhere different. Everyone brings a different perspective. That could also mean that someone's lived experience, some's communication style is different from what you're used to, and that doesn't necessarily mean that it's wrong. I feel like the rehearsal space is very scary. You are 100% within your right to approach your director or choreographer and say, "I can't do this because *blank*," or "Is there any way I can adapt to this because *blank*?" But you know that there's going to be someone standing behind you while this is happening who is going to go tell someone else, and by the end of the day there's a rumor that you're a diva because you refuse to do a dance move that hurts your body, or you would prefer to have an intimacy coach because you're not very good at communicating needs and wants on a person-to-person level. I think that [you should open] the process with a, "There are no wrong questions." There should not be any improper frustration toward someone just because where they're coming from or what they're trying to say is not as easily understood as it would be if it were coming from someone else.

Question 6: What is your stance on the frequency of non-disabled actors portraying disabled roles?

> **A:** I would love to live in a world where that's okay. But for that to be okay, it presumes that the numbers are equal, and that for every opportunity that a non-disabled actor has to audition for a disabled character, a disabled actor has had the same opportunities to audition for that character, as well as characters that are not identified as disabled. And that's just not the number breakdown right now. You're talking about the largest minority in the world and the least represented in pop culture. And so, especially these days, I'm very cautious to ever want to censor any kind of art, and to let the market of imagination decide whether people want to see it or not, and [let actors] embarrass themselves if they decide to pretend to be disabled to win an Oscar, but I wish we could hit the pause button for a little bit to try to regain some territory. It's been a generational erasure of talent and artistry by virtue of non-disabled actors taking these roles. The hidden contract in non-disabled actors playing disabled characters is that, "I'll go through this temporary pain for the tradeoff of you getting to see me walk up the stairs to get my award." And that's who we're clapping for. Again, this all ties into that American fear of death, and how disability makes people confront that. Which is a long way of saying my point of view on it is that it is more than tiresome, it's lazy, and it's arrogant, especially if it's from an actor who is already quite established and doesn't need to take on that role, and not another actor whose lived experience would only enrich how they portray it.

B: Able-bodied actors in disabled roles [is] gross because there is a difference between, for example, if a straight actor was playing a gay character. There is no physical characteristics to that. Being an able-bodied gay person or straight person—that's the same body. But if you're wanting to have a disabled character on stage, why are you writing it to the point that an actual disabled person could not play it? I'm specifically thinking of Crutchie in *Newsies*, because in every single casting notice for Newsies, when they get to Crutchie, they're like, "They should still be able to dance." They're still going to be disabled in all these dance numbers. But there are a bunch of kids with EDS or kids who are otherwise cane users where this is a role that could be written for them. But because you're insistent on the idea that this character must also be tap dancing for some reason, it is a disabled character that is played primarily by able-bodied people.

Question 7: Do you think casting an non-disabled actor in a disabled role can be done "right"? What factors do you think influence this occurrence?

A: The reasons [casting non-disabled artists] usually is done is money. I think it can be done in a right way if it's subversive or if it's intentional—if the character shapeshifts through their disability, or if they have 10 different disabilities throughout the course of the play or TV show or movie—it would only be able to be done in a meta commentary about disability and the business.

B: I think, to an extent, that can be done properly. However, everyone's going to get real normal about it. Because there is a very popular British actor who was in a West End performance of *Frankenstein*, and for a couple of nights a week he would play Frankenstein, and for a couple for nights he would play the monster.

And his performance as the monster was fine, but then in an interview he said that he based Frankenstein's monster's performance off of autistic people. There was [also] this DCU TV show called *Peacemaker*, and Vigilante, who is one of the side characters… [it] is not in cannon that he is autistic, but a lot of people watching it were picking up on stuff. And that actor came out and said that he wanted the character to give off the autistic vibe that he has in writing—and this actor is not on the spectrum at all, but he was well-informed and actually talked to autistic people. He did it because he wanted this character to be truthfully portrayed. But this is just my example of how wide that span can go. But it really comes down to a matter of respect and how you want that portrayal to be. Because if the character is written to have this invisible disability, there is something that is inherent to that that if you haven't gone through it, you really can't portray it correctly. There is a very beautiful show called *The Language Archives*, and it is never said in the length of the play that the main character George has autism, but the crux of the play is that he is a linguist, he loves languages, he can say billions of things in billions of different languages, but he can't communicate one-on-one with people. And so, it's very apparent that he is an autistic-coded character, and productions of that show can fall apart if the person playing that character instead blazes through this. Because then it just makes him look like [a bad person] instead of a tragic, on-off love story of him and these women because of his communication style. The first preference is definitely to have a disabled actor in the role, but on the off-chance that you legitimately cannot find a disabled actor,

the second-best is to find an able-bodied actor who is a decent person who wants to have an earnest portrayal of something.

Question 8: As a takeaway, what do you wish more people knew about disabled performers or disability as a whole in theatre?

A: That it *is* harder for us. I don't generally like to get into qualifying people's different measures of struggles or hardships, but in my case, my day starts a lot earlier than most people's by virtue of what I have to do to get out of the house. By the time I show up for rehearsal, if it's an earlier rehearsal I have been up for 6-7 hours and already getting a little tired. For any disabled artist out there in theatre, working against architecture that wasn't built with them in mind, it's important to know that if they're still there showing up to do a play, to put their heart out there for the audience, that means they love it. And that means that they also love you, the audience in a very big and real way. Otherwise, why put yourself through this? The business is hard enough for non-disabled folks, and then you add in all these other structural and invisible barriers. If they are showing up for you, then maybe listen to them when they have something to say about how to make their work environments have more than a bit more dignity and grace.

B: Kind of like what I said earlier about acting like this storytelling art form has a secret amount of categories you have to hit to be able to do it, the beauty of theatre is that [there are] people who may be completely different from you, but you are sharing something, and that is the want to perform or share a story. Having a space, like theatre, that even if they don't share the same disability as

you, you are sharing the same passion for what you're doing, and it makes the rest of it a little easier because you have this thing in common by default. Especially when you're working with actors that are really into their craft and are willing to talk to you about what is going on in the page and in the scene, that really helps over the hurdle of, "I'm not gonna know how to talk to these people, I'm not gonna know how to interact with these people." And being able to be welcome into an environment like that that is just people sharing their excitement to be doing what they're doing, it kind of goes back to what I was saying earlier about having an open environment. Because if you're willing to build relationships with these people, then that opens the floor for you to be comfortable. To be like, "Can I stand over here when this is happening because I'm right by this speaker and it makes me uncomfortable?" [or,] "Is it okay if we choreograph this a little differently?" It opens your comfort to know that there are people in your corner. To summarize, all of you are here because you want to be doing it. Whether or not someone is disabled or non-disabled should not change that. And you don't need to treat it like it's some big thing, either.

Discussion

This section will dissect and analyze the major themes evident through the interviewee's respective answers. The first observation is that improper casting is undoubtedly substantial and presents real consequences. Both interviewees noted that, in an industry that is already difficult for disabled artists to find work, the normalization of casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles strips away opportunities structured around their identity. As put by **A**, it truly is more difficult for disabled artists to work within the

field due to the variety of challenges they face stemming from various forms of inaccessibility. Because of this fact, companies and directors must consider ways to make their spaces and practices easily accessible for disabled artists. And, as put by **B**, if a disabled artist pushes through these adversaries, they are genuinely passionate about their craft, and their voices must be heard. **B** also mentioned that theatre may bring various individuals of differing backgrounds and lived experiences, which may be uncomfortable for some. However, that is what makes theatre such a beautiful, collaborative art form.

The interviewees also emphasized the issue of a non-disabled actor portraying a disabled role through their conversations. **B** noted that for most disabled roles, there are viewable characteristics, mannerisms, or differences that a non-disabled actor has to mimic, which borders on mockery. This not only pulls autonomy away from disabled artists but makes the performance less sincere, seeing as how a non-disabled actor has never lived through the experiences they are portraying and lacks a personal connection. **A** stressed that this practice must not be entertained, as then non-disabled actors will be rewarded for a performance that essentially erases a disabled individual's chance to share their own story. They reiterated the irrefutable data proving the disadvantage disabled artists are at and that casting non-disabled actors in disabled roles will only be justifiable when the numbers are entirely equal.

Another theme is that, as **B** stated, if a disabled role is written to the point where it is not accessible for a disabled artist to portray, the issue lies in how directors or playwrights do not consider the people they represent in their conception. This highlights the fact that, often, the problem lies in the source. Roles written for a particular identity or culture might not accommodate them, and those individuals cannot easily portray

them. However, how roles are written is not definite—directors may reshape or re-interpret how the role is portrayed through their production. As detailed through the interviewee's answers, combatting this issue lies in the practices put in place and how willing directors are to re-imagine certain aspects to make for a more accessible space. **A** articulated the everyday encounters those with mobility aids face and that the spaces some companies rehearse in mean that some disabled actors cannot be cast since the space is inaccessible. This builds off of **B**'s observation that while some companies claim they are inclusive, they do not actually adhere to their promises.

The interviewees also commented on the source of inaccessibility in theatre, with **A** outlining general and financial fear. As stated, many subconsciously feel intimidated or afraid of their own vulnerability as a human. Many can only digest disabled stories when they are a source of inspiration or symbol of personal perseverance rather than an individual simply existing. Companies, however, may be fueled by the fear of legal action if they were to push an actor's limits or if they do not make as many ticket sales. **B** touched on how some question the autonomy of disabled individuals and do not believe that they can carry their own stories. While some may spout their acceptance for disabled individuals, they are not comfortable with them outside of a theater space. There is also an air of financial inconvenience, as companies may not be willing to hold extra accessible showings, adjust their space for mobility aids, or the like.

There is no doubt that mishandling the casting of disabled roles and overlooking disabled actors in theatre has irrefutable impacts on disabled individuals, even if they cannot be seen, and the issue must not be ignored. There should be care not only when working with material that features disabled roles but also continuously kept in mind

when working in the theatre industry. The lack of research in this field has left the issue in the hands of those impacted by its absence when it should be a widescale issue apparent to all involved in the professional theatre industry. When working in a field that exists to tell the stories of humans, one must not overlook the beautiful diversity among them. Casting disabled roles and working with disabled artists is a topic that must not be ignored, and the research covered in this chapter presents the many variables as to why it must be addressed and considered.

4: How Do We Fix It?

What Directors Should Consider

As stressed throughout this thesis, much of the responsibility lies in the hands of directors, casting directors, and theatre companies. For the sake of concision, this chapter will focus on directors specifically. This first section will examine the less concrete considerations directors must have in mind throughout their theatrical career to reduce stigma, open opportunities, and foster inclusive and accepting environments. The second section will present viable solutions in the form of practices they may adopt to accompany these considerations.

The obstacles HIPAA presents were discussed briefly previously in this thesis and how it prevents directors from outright questioning an actor on their disability. This is an understandable barrier that keeps the director from knowing whether the actor is disabled. However, a director may work around this. One solution is for a question to be included in an audition form—or expressed verbally by the casting team—asking an actor about their connection to disability or neurodivergence, depending on the production and the character they are casting. This opens a conversation on the topic, allowing disabled actors to feel comfortable discussing their disability if they deem fit or for non-disabled actors to discuss whether they have a disabled individual in their life, have been included in disabled spaces, or the like. A mandatory question not only tells the director whether the actor is disabled but informs them whether a non-disabled actor is educated in disability acceptance. This would be especially valuable if there happened to be no disabled actors in the audition pool and the company wishes to cast a well-informed actor if it came down to someone who is non-disabled. Additionally, not making the question

mandatory makes autonomy a deciding factor and does not force anyone to share anything they are uncomfortable sharing. While this is not a complete solution, considering there is no guarantee whether the actor will answer the inquiry, it would still make a substantial difference by, at the very least, showing awareness of the topic.

One must not underestimate the impact of research and education on a given topic in the arts. By placing utmost importance on proper education in disability culture, inclusion, and history, a director may begin to abolish any preconceived notions against disability inclusion and understand the importance of offering opportunities. A well-rounded director is knowledgeable in multiple fields that have to do with equality in the workforce, especially diverse casting, and puts forth practices based on this knowledge. Research is already a fundamental building block in the directorial process of producing a show. Still, it should also continue outside of this process to ensure a well-rounded company that offers equal opportunities. There are ample opportunities to build off of this notion and integrate practices that make research in diversity a non-negotiable aspect of professional theatre, the likes of which will be discussed in the next section.

Practices Companies Should Adopt

There are many variables to consider for combatting the lack of disabled actors cast, making it a nuanced subject that may deter some with its lack of an objective answer. However, there are tangible practices one may adopt that, when combined, open the doorway to casting disabled individuals as a regular process. For instance, in Kira Patterson's article, *Affirmative Acting: The Role of Law in Casting More Actors with Disabilities (A Note in Five Acts),* she suggests a form of training to increase education in disability inclusion. She proposes "A required training for theater companies throughout

the country … through which they could gain a better understanding of the necessities and risks associated with creating and implementing an affirmative action plan" (Patterson 501). This would begin to combat the issue at the source by decreasing the confusion, stigma, and anxiety around addressing disability as a director. By educating themself in disability culture and what they as a director should be prepared to address, directors may become more excited and open to casting disabled actors. Likewise, as stated, this training may inform directors and companies on employing inclusive practices, thereby putting it at the forefront of their minds.

One simple action is to be explicit about one's casting wishes and appropriately promote these stipulations. Thus, if one is directing a show that includes a disabled character, they may increase their reach to disabled performers by stating their desire to cast said role accurately. In tandem, when considering casting disabled actors in non-disabled roles, directors should be especially explicit in their promotion of the show or audition form that they seek out actors of all abilities. Often, the act of casting a role that does not fit the norm is not at the forefront, ending up as an afterthought. To avoid this, directors must give casting the attention it deserves and seriously consider their decision's impact. By implementing required training, as mentioned above, directors will be informed of the scarce opportunities presented to disabled performers and understand the weight of handling a role fit for them. Most importantly, directors must work with their companies to ensure that they are able to uphold their promises, such as selecting a theater space that is accessible for mobility aids and making necessary adjustments to the space if it is not.

Lastly, when considering two actors for a disabled role—one non-disabled and the other disabled—a director must evaluate how ability influences their casting decisions in relation to the plot. In other words, by understanding what ability has to say in the larger context of the play, one must not let bias over an actor's attributes or abilities impact their decision on who would be the best fit for the role. Unless the role has inadmissible physical demands, directors should sideline physicality when considering an actor with a physical disability and first address the heart and personality of the character. When directors begin to see disability as a trait that does not take away from a character by default, the decision between two actors becomes a solely performance-based choice that acknowledges each actor's attributes without letting them be the determining factor. By continuing this mindset, the competition between non-disabled and disabled actors becomes less of a prominent issue.

Going Forward

So, what does this mean for the future? While these practices hold merit in and of themselves, they cannot do much if not implemented by directors and theatre companies. Thus, research such as this must be applied within the foreseeable future. There should be a deeper drive for progress within the arts that puts change into motion. Thankfully, there is. An increase in liberation and progress through the arts to uplift marginalized communities is evident in 2025 through the emergence of queer-centered or race-centered works, and observations can also be drawn from the presence of AIDS-centered works through the 80s and 90s (Elam 1). Many view the art form as a means of revolution and social commentary in the face of societal pushback. Theatre, in itself, is a revolutionary art form; it exists to create a space for everyone of all bodies and minds to share their

stories. Thus, when one excludes a significant minority, one goes against the notion that everyone should be seen and heard. Those in a position of power in the theatre industry must understand this and utilize it with all future endeavors within a company or community.

Conclusion

Excluding disabled artists in theatre should be universally inadmissible. Just as with ethnic or queer communities, disabled artists are influential, talented individuals just as deserving of being center stage as non-disabled actors. In an art form enriched by community, empathy, and cross-cultural connection, it is crucial to amplify the voices and share the stories of all individuals of all abilities. As such, the lack of casting disabled actors in any role and the mishandling of explicitly disabled roles in theatre is a prevalent issue that has been overlooked for too long. It is essential for those in power in the industry, such as directors, to be aware of their impact on the opportunities available for disabled actors and make appropriate changes or adjustments to make the field more accessible. By increasing education in disability arts, reshaping casting practices, prioritizing equity, and destigmatizing accommodations in theatre, companies and individuals may make lasting impacts on the very issue of disability exclusion. Not only will significant changes combat inaccessibility and systematic prejudice, but they will also honor the integrity of the community-based art form. In sum, due care and attention must be actively placed on the casting of disabled roles and upholding the inclusion of disabilities in theatre due to the very apparent humanitarian issues that arise without it.

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