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BUILDING A CANADIAN DISABILITY ARTS NETWORK: AN INTERCULTURAL APPROACH¹

A growing body of scholarship highlights the critical import of interdisciplinary dialogue between performance studies and disability studies. This dialogue seems particularly relevant for intercultural performance studies and in this essay I argue that an emerging Canadian disability arts presenters' network offers a useful opportunity for such an exchange. The metaphor of the network also provides a model for thinking about intercultural creation in ways that favour ongoing dialogue and debate over consensus. Since its inaugural meeting in 2006, this network has drawn together pioneering presenters of disability arts and cultural events, each involving a significant theatre component, from across Canada. Canadians have shown considerable leadership in local and international disability arts and cultural movements but there has hitherto been little coordination between presenters or professional support on a national level. This network's origins, membership, activities, and arguments shed light on diverse disability cultures at play in Canada and press intercultural performance studies to include disability as an important identity rubric while also attending to this diversity.

Un nombre croissant de recherches montrent l'importance du dialogue interdisciplinaire entre les chercheurs en théâtre et ceux dont les travaux s'intéressent à la condition des personnes handicapées. Ces échanges semblent être particulièrement pertinents pour les recherches en performance interculturelle. Dans cet article, Johnston fait valoir qu'un nouveau réseau canadien de diffuseurs des arts de l'invalidité constitue un site utile pour de tels échanges. La métaphore du réseau est à son tour un modèle qui nous permet de réfléchir à la création interculturelle de façon à favoriser le dialogue et le débat dans l'optique d'un consensus. Depuis sa première rencontre en 2006, ce réseau réunit des diffuseurs pionniers dans la présentation des arts et des événements culturels pour personnes handicapées. Répartis à travers le Canada, ils comprennent d'importants volets théâtraux. Le Canada a fait preuve de leadership dans les mouvements locaux et internationaux portant sur les arts et la culture de l'invalidité, cependant peu de contacts ont été établis à l'échelle nationale entre les diffuseurs et les services d'appui professionnels.

Les origines, la composition et les activités du réseau canadien, ainsi que les arguments mis de l'avant par ses membres, aident à mieux comprendre les diverses cultures des personnes handicapées au Canada et démontrent que les études de performance interculturelle doivent inclure l'invalidité comme importante rubrique identitaire et prendre en compte sa diversité



Over the past decade festivals dedicated to presenting the work of artists who have a broad range of disability experiences and cultural identities have proliferated across Canada. Theatre has played a large role in each of these events. Strikingly, all of the major festivals began independently in different urban centres (Calgary, Toronto, Vancouver) with little if any consultation between their initiators. Although each festival has aimed to draw people together, the impulse for each emerged from a distinct cultural context. More recently, federally sponsored initiatives, partially inspired by individuals associated with the festivals, seek to consult with and promote dialogue among the artists and presenters associated with these festivals and disability arts and cultures more broadly. The Canada Council “Moving Forward Action Plan 2008-2011” explicitly cites disability arts as an area for further consultations and research to inform and improve its policies and programs. Preceding this plan, in 2006 and 2007, Canadian Arts and Heritage sponsored roundtable meetings for artistic presenters of Canadian festivals that feature artists with disabilities. Initiated by Calgary’s Michele Decottignies, Artistic Director of Stage Left Productions and founder of Balancing Acts: Calgary’s Annual Disability Arts Festival (Canada’s longest-running disability arts festival), the meetings aimed to create a network among presenters which would explore possibilities for coalition and provide a forum for professional support and questions. This network initiative provides a rich model for exploring the fissures, challenges, and opportunities of intercultural exchange. It also highlights the importance of including disability and Deaf cultures in intercultural performance studies.

A growing body of scholarship promotes interdisciplinary exchanges between disability and performance studies. In their 2005 award-winning edited collection *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander argue that performance studies scholars have traditionally made assumptions that the bodies they study are normative, missing

opportunities to engage with disability as an important identity rubric akin to race, class, and gender (7). Challenging this tradition, they argue that disability and performance studies, despite having different histories and epistemological bases, invite interdisciplinary engagement due to the “theatricality of disability and the centrality of performance to the formation of disability cultures and identities” (5). Arguments supporting this kind of interdisciplinary engagement also animate the recent special issue of *Text and Performance Quarterly* on “Disability Studies/Performance Studies.” Editors Bruce Henderson and R. Noam Ostrander suggest that the issue takes as its premise not only the idea that “disability studies is always in some sense a form of performance studies” but also the reverse (1). They provocatively argue for multi-layered ways in which performance studies is always disability studies:

If performance studies is always concerned with the range of human activities involving the engagement of self in enacting social and aesthetic events, then what is always present is the fullness of human experience in all its complications. While it is far too reductive to say that ‘we are all disabled now’ (as Nathan Glazer said ‘we are all multiculturalists now’), it is not facile to assert that we are all involved in disability now, whether in our present state, in our relationship with the world around us, both personally and politically, or in our own futures. (2)

While including disability experiences in the “fullness of human experience” seems critical for performance studies, it seems particularly relevant for analyses of intercultural performance. In the mid-1990s, Patrice Pavis’s landmark collection on intercultural theatre examined *culture* in primarily three registers: as a national, ethnic, or linguistic sign. More recent work, borrowing broadly from anthropology, feminist, and post-colonial scholarship, has sought to analyze the social differences that complicate the claims of culture. In *Casting Gender*, for example, Laura Lengel and John T. Warren underline the need to understand the particularities of women’s experiences in intercultural performance. Intercultural theatre, in these readings, must be understood also for its gender politics, its hidden echoes of colonialism, and its racialized discourses. Disability studies opens up frameworks for exploring how ableist assumptions and disability experiences also complicate claims to culture. Intercultural theatre remains a robust concept to interpret the mixing of influences from distinct tradi-

tions or cultural practices, but it also opens discussion to the many meanings of culture, its tensions and histories.

The culture in intercultural deserves to be interpreted broadly, and this essay seeks to explain how an emerging disability arts network in Canada can be usefully analyzed as an intercultural project. Analysis of the network highlights how questions about disability cultures and performance engage with broader intercultural performance studies questions in generative ways. As we shall see, in addition to questions concerning best professional practices, the disability arts presenters' network meetings raised precisely the kinds of questions that shaped several essays in Sandahl and Auslander's collection:

How do performance events contribute to disability 'cultures,' disability identities and communication between disabled and nondisabled people? What do these performances reveal about who is on the inside of disability culture and who is on the outside? What collaborative strategies have disabled and nondisabled artists used to bridge the gap between their experiences? Are these collaborations equal exchanges between mutually consenting partners, especially when the disabled artists include those with cognitive impairments or the institutionalized? (1-2)

My approach to the network and such questions assumes the existence of a polyvalent disability culture that contains within itself sufficient diversity to make an intercultural approach plausible and necessary. Although the concept of disability culture has been widely used, contested, and discussed in disability communities and scholarship over the last decade, it still requires prefatory explanation. Briefly, disability culture is not a monolithic term, which essentializes one world view or experience of disability, but a term which both presumes a sense of shared and open-ended identity rooted in disability experience and which "rejects the notion of impairment difference as a symbol of shame, and stresses instead solidarity and a positive identification" (Barnes and Mercer 102). Sociologists who have studied disability culture point to differences arising from particular gender, race, and class experiences of disability as well as the variegated engagement with a culture that many encounter for the first time in later life and from different disability experiences (Barnes and Mercer; Vernon and Swain). Such differences have led scholars such as Lois Bragg, a proponent of Deaf culture, to reject the term disability culture as encompassing too diverse a constituency that (unlike Deaf

culture) has no claim to a shared language or a historical lineage. Susan Peters, a disability studies scholar and anthropologist, counters Bragg's assertions by arguing that disability culture does have its own forms of language and gesture, for example, and questions the foundations of her claims to culture (590).² "[T]here are many cultures of disability," Peters suggests, and culture needs to be understood as syncretic, or made up of many and disparate elements (597). Building on Clifford Geertz's *Interpretation of Cultures*, she considers how disability culture

allows for an individual hybrid consciousness which maintains tactical solidarity while not being swallowed up by universal cultural patterns or norms. An individual with such a hybrid consciousness is a border crosser; i.e. one who blurs cultural, political or disability borders in order to adapt to different symbolic and material constructions of the world. [. . . T]his syncretic view of disability culture is necessary for deconstructing the hegemonic maps of difference created by society, for establishing ourselves as subjects and for producing our own cultural meanings, subjectivities and images. (585)

Peters's and Bragg's different perspectives turn not only on their different theoretical understanding of culture as a system of meaning, but also on their different conceptions of individual and collective disability identities.

Disability culture has also become identified with an artistic movement that investigates the artistry and experiences of disabled people and challenges dominant social norms. In his survey of disability and art practices in the UK, Paul Anthony Darke distinguishes disability art from the broader concept of art created by people with disabilities and suggests that it "is based upon legitimising the experience of disabled people as equal within art and all other cultural practices. [. . .] Disability Art is a challenge to, an undermining of (as a minimum), traditional aesthetic and social values" (132). The arts have not always held a place of respect in the disability studies community. Early disability scholars, note Sandahl and Auslander, "looked askance at the arts, seeing them mainly as purveyors of negative images of people with disabilities" (6). That negative perspective has changed, however, as disability artists have gained greater prominence and re-imagined the representation and meaning of disability. It is noteworthy that three recent texts in disability studies devote space to the role of disability arts in culture formation (Barnes and

Mercer; Barnes, Oliver, and Barton; Riddell and Watson). As these authors suggest, disability cultures must be understood in the light of their artistic contributions.

Analyses of intercultural theatre in Canada need to pay greater attention to disability culture for at least two reasons. First, following Peters's definition of a syncretic culture of disability, it is important to consider how those who express a disability culture experience hybrid identities. Sociologists and anthropologists have had much to say about the potentially disruptive place of disability culture in multicultural communities (for example, see Jakubowicz and Meekosha), but many Canadian theatre and performance scholars have not yet fully confronted ableist assumptions at play in their fields, whether they deal with mainstream or marginalized communities. Further, with a few notable exceptions (see the articles in Decottignies and Houston, for example), few have paid sufficient critical attention to the groundbreaking work of many Canadian disability artists, the vibrant and diverse disability arts culture scene in Canada, and the important debates and initiatives which are challenging artists with disabilities, guiding policy and shaping the way disability is conceived and experienced both within Canada and internationally. Second, again following Peters's definition, disability culture contains within itself realms of difference and contention that cannot be ignored. Exploring disability theatre in Canada involves also looking at the intercultural experiences of disability cultures. How do different disability cultures come together to generate solidarity when they hold different experiences and express their understanding of disability art using different language and cultural associations?

Taking up this second point in particular, I consider how Canadian disability artists are exploring elements of a common culture and mobilizing disability arts in a process of network building. Since 2006, a group of disability arts festival presenters and artists from across the country have sought to meet and discuss their work. The network remains open-ended. Its members, for example, have yet to agree on an appropriate name or acronym. The very process of struggling to name the network, however, points to the broader problem of intercultural creation in the disability arts in Canada. Creating institutions to represent common goals depends upon a difficult process of intercultural dialogue between different disability communities and members. As I hope to demonstrate, this process of finding solidarity has not meant consensus (Peters 589). In what follows, I will consider the

origins of this network; the people, festivals, and disability cultures it has sought to connect; and its primary areas of interest and concern. My aim is to understand the network as an exercise in intercultural creation.

It is important to note my own participation in the network owing to my background as an academic interested in recording and analyzing disability theatre activities in Canada and as the education and research director for the 2003 Madness and Arts World Festival. However, in these early stages I have been restricted in drawing from the compiled minutes of the meetings, which remain private documents. As a result, instead of recording the specific and “in process” opinions of any particular network participant, my observations focus on broad themes of discussion, different disability culture perspectives, and emerging questions and directions in the network and disability arts in Canada.

Origins

In 2006, Michelle Decottignies held a Canadian Arts and Heritage Sustainability Program capacity building grant which she received for her work with Stage Left in Calgary, a theatre committed to supporting disability artists which she founded and for which she serves as Artistic Director. Through this program, Canadian Arts and Heritage aimed to help “individual arts and heritage organizations that do not have access to assistance from a Stabilization Project to improve their administrative, organizational and financial structures” (Canadian Arts). Among its other activities, Stage Left has produced the pioneering *Balancing Acts: Calgary’s Annual Disability Arts Festival*, the eighth installation of which took place in 2008. Although this festival is remarkable as the longest-running annual disability arts festival in Canada, it also finds links with others in Canada and abroad. Strikingly, however, there has not yet been a great deal of interconnection or partnership among festival organizers. The disability festivals that have emerged in Canada have been primarily defined in local and international terms, driven by committed groups of artists and organizers and without much over-arching guidance from federal or provincial funding. Because the grant Decottignies received was expressly aimed at her own professional development and capacity building, she set out to connect with other presenters across Canada who, like herself, had helped to support disability arts by producing festivals or other events dedicated to programming disabled artists. Following the terms of the grant, she hoped that these presenters could find community and professional support

and work toward improving such efficiencies as developing co-productions or sharing touring costs, determining best practices for serving artists with disabilities, or problem-solving around such recurring festival challenges as media relations, or arranging travel and accommodation for specific disability needs.

Decottignies had two models in mind when she initiated the network. The first drew upon her work in helping One Yellow Rabbit's Artistic Director Michael Green establish the informal and highly successful Performance Creation Canada (PCC). As part of a practicum for academic credit at the University of Calgary, Decottignies had worked with Green to help research and write grants and produce the inaugural PCC in January 2004 at One Yellow Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo, in Calgary. As its website explains, the PCC invites artists, educators, administrators, funding institutions, presenters, agents, archivists, and critics to attend its meetings and is "dedicated to the nourishment, management and study of performance creation in Canada, and the ecology in which it flourishes" (Performance Creation Canada). From this practical experience and apprenticeship with Green, Decottignies knew how Canadian grants in the arts might be encouraged to fund work which pushed boundaries in important ways not yet explicitly identified by the particular funding parameters. Thus, while disability arts might not have been explicitly identified as a target area for funding, Decottignies could point to the significant levels of disability art activity in Canada and suggest ways that federal support would be warranted. The PCC was itself loosely modeled on the International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts (IETM), which also inspired Decottignies.³ Both networks are expressly informal and broadly inclusive and both aim to build upon momentum in a vibrant artistic community. Recognizing similar momentum in the growing number of festivals and events featuring artists with disabilities, Decottignies hoped the gathering and information-sharing of presenters would similarly help to sustain and build disability arts activities in Canada.

After an initial period of outreach and organization, two national meetings occurred in Calgary (2006) and Toronto (2007), as well as in several regional centres, to gather people committed to the development of Canadian disability arts and cultures.⁴ The people Decottignies invited to these meetings represented a diverse group, many of whom had not met before. Most of the participants came from Toronto, Calgary, and Vancouver and included performers, producers, and scholars. In alphabetical

order, the participants were Lisa Brown, Artistic Director of the Workman Theatre Project (Toronto) who inaugurated the Madness and Arts World Festival, now held internationally; Deborah Cohen, Executive Director and Producer of Abilities Arts Festival, Toronto; Michelle Decottignies and her successor as Artistic Director of Balancing Acts, Nicole Dunbar; Catherine Frazee, a founder of the Society for Disability Arts and Culture (S4DAC) and kickstART! in Vancouver, and a professor of disability studies at Ryerson University who organizes the Arts with Attitude and other annual disability arts events in Toronto; Bonnie Sherr Klein, award-winning documentary film-maker and one of the founders of S4DAC; Geoff McMurchy a principal organizer of S4DAC and the Artistic Director of Vancouver's kickstART! festivals; David Roche, a disability arts comedian who has performed in numerous international, American, and Canadian disability arts festivals and sits on the board of S4DAC; Edmonton dramaturg and director of Speaking of Schizophrenia (SOS) Players, Sam Varteniuk; as well as the current author and several administrative staff.⁵ This group was not meant to represent disability artists at large, nor in these first stages did it include every potential participant. All participants had firsthand experience of producing major festivals or events involving artists with disabilities broadly defined and all had some sense of the joys, challenges, pitfalls, and problems attending this kind of enterprise. The mixture of people was meant to build new connections and consolidate emerging relationships while also testing the waters for the value of a network. For Decottignies, it seemed appropriate that such voices of experience should gather to share strategies and ideas for best practices while also perhaps finding ways of mutually supporting one another and the artists served by the various festivals and events. This process would not occur without some friction, however, as participants drew together from sometimes quite different subject positions and held different views about the relevance, responsibilities and purpose of disability culture. Realizing a network also meant recognizing the differences embedded within it.

Networks run another risk: by connecting people they may be perceived to be excluding others. While some questioned whether the network was too exclusive even at these early stages, others suggested that the network might be too inclusive by involving members who came only recently to the concept of disability arts and culture. Arguments among early network participants arose concerning the decision to focus on presenters and the criteria for

identifying someone as a presenter. Further, in between the two national meetings, Decottignies organized regional meetings in Calgary, Vancouver, and Toronto which invited local artists with disabilities and disability arts activists to respond to the concept of the network and suggest critical issues and areas of concern. While some artists saw strong potential in the network for promoting disability arts in Canada, others questioned why presenters should be taking the lead in organizing a network and wondered what place would be made for artists. In the absence of a comprehensive network and other supports for artists with disabilities, many such artists expressed wholly understandable concerns that this network might just become another cultural, artistic, or political table at which they did not have a seat.

Disability Art(s) and Culture(s)

The meetings represented an intercultural exercise in part because many of the participants developed their events independently out of local and discrete cultures of disabled people, in separate regions and with sometimes strikingly different views on the content and purpose of disability arts. *Arts Smarts: Inspiration and Ideas for Canadian Artists with Disabilities*, a guide to disability arts in Canada, usefully outlines the range of potential meanings that the term might encompass: “An artist with a disability may identify strongly as a person with a disability or as a member of the disability community, or they may not. Most of us have more than one thing that makes up our identity—disability, sexual orientation, race, religion, gender and so on.” (39) Not all artists with disabilities, for example, take up disability experience in their work. Some may take up disability experience but do not feel connected to the growing disability movement and its attendant senses of culture. Some festival presenters repeat Darke’s aforementioned terminology and use the designation *disability artist* to distinguish an artist whose work is grounded in disability experience and seems connected to the activist aspects of the disability movement. The term stands in contrast to the designation *artist with a disability*, whose works are not explicitly activist with relation to the disability movement but developed out of a different set of sensibilities, aesthetics, or social purposes. For example, it might be more important for an artist with a disability to achieve success by resonating with any number of different artistic communities. Further, some artists with disabilities acknowledge or credit their disability as a contributing factor in their art-making while others do not. A topic that highlighted divisions between the network

participants concerned the question of how to view art developed in rehabilitative or therapeutic contexts or in ways that involve both a disabled artist and a facilitator. Some network participants have separated this kind of art-making in its own distinct category. This distinction as well as choices about distinguishing professional and non-professional or community-based artists with disabilities gave rise to debates among the network participants about the relevance of such categories when the lives of some artists with disabilities may not easily accommodate normative professional training or work patterns.⁶ Moreover, the vast range of disability experiences—physical and mental, visible or invisible, life-long or acquired, medically and socially recognized or not—as well as their degree of severity and the ways in which class background, ethnicity, sexuality, and age “exacerbate or modify” these experiences can create further layers of potential distinction and difference (Vernon 394). This range of perspectives points not to mere differences of opinion about disability experience or semantics, but opens a much broader discussion about the *cultures* of disability, their boundaries, constituencies, and meanings.

Consider, for example, how the mandate language of the various festivals represented in the network discussions points to their different approaches. While disability arts are cited in the titles or taglines of KickstART! Festival of Disability Arts and Culture, Balancing Acts Annual Disability Arts Festival, Abilities Arts Festival: A Celebration of Disability Arts and Culture, and Ryerson’s Arts with Attitude evenings of “Disability Arts and Culture,” each extends its reach in different ways. Some elaborate their aims more explicitly to leave room for artists with disabilities who may not focus on disability experience in their work. For example, the kickstART! and kickstART2 festivals outlined their aims: “to present and produce works by artists with disabilities and [. . .] promote artistic excellence among artists with disabilities working in a variety of disciplines” (Society). The phrasing does not insist upon disability artists with clear ties to the disability movement. The mandate of Abilities Arts Festival is similarly broad:

Abilities Arts Festival is a disability arts organization that promotes diversity, inclusiveness and the power of art as a means of enriching the cultural fabric of our communities. Through multidisciplinary, visual, film and performing arts festivals, workshops and special events, Abilities Arts Festival showcases artistic excellence by artists with disabilities. The festival uses dynamic and powerful artistic

presentations by artists with disabilities to positively impact attitudes and to help ensure an arts and culture sector that is both inclusive of people with disabilities and one that is enhanced through their participation. (Abilities Arts Festival)

Here the “powerful artistic representations” need not take up or be overtly grounded in disability experience.

By contrast, other festivals situate disability arts as an active part of disability identity or culture. At Ryerson, an early incarnation of Art with Attitude in 2002 described the event as “An Evening of Deaf & Disability Arts and Culture Showcasing dramatic, comic, musical and artistic work boldly grounded in the experience of Disability and Deaf identity.” Since 2003, this has been shortened to “An Evening of Disability Arts and Culture Showcasing artistic work boldly grounded in the experience of Disability” (The Ryerson RBC Foundation). Stage Left also privileges artistic work that is grounded in disability identity and culture. The company explains its festival aims in the following way:

Balancing Acts: Calgary’s Annual Disability Arts Festival (DAF) is a celebration of creative self-expression by people with developmental, physical, or sensory disability, mental illness, brain injury, and/or chronic illness. Balancing Acts articulates distinct explorations, representations, and declarations of disability identity, highlighting the creativity of disabled performers and offering artistic expressions that celebrate and challenge both the ethos and the perception of disability culture.

Balancing Acts also promotes the professional advancement of disabled artists and fosters an appreciative, educated audience for disability culture through the presentation of thought-provoking, innovative performances, visual arts displays, arts-based workshops, and panel discussions. The work of over 100 disabled artists is showcased over the week long festival, with a primary focus on performances of originally created work and on diversity in performance and across disability. (Stage Left)

Each of these festivals has a mandate to serve a specific group of artists and audiences, each of whom in turn identify with a different subject position within the spectrum available to artists with disabilities. All of the presenters listed above have been thoughtful about how they describe the community they hope to

serve and, although the distinctions between the groups are sometimes slight, these mandates point up some different approaches to and conceptions of disability culture.

Complicating matters further at network meetings was the participation of people whose work seemed to share many common aims but did not emerge out of a context overtly connected to the field of disability arts. Of all the groups participating in the network, Workman Arts produced the only festival not to incorporate the term disability. The impulse for its Madness and Arts World Festival was the company's desire to connect with other companies or artists who shared the aim of developing and celebrating the work of artists who have experienced mental illness. With the tag line of "Exploring the mind through the arts" and an express aim to "celebrat[e] creativity and mental health," the festival aimed primarily to connect artists with experience or interests in mental illness and did not explicitly identify with the broader disability arts movement in their planning or publicity (Madness and Arts). A number of the artists featured at the first festival in Toronto, however, also participated in the other festivals and are connected with the broader movement and active in their local disability arts communities. Although people with mental illness often express feeling less heard within the disability movement, there are many disability culture activists with mental illness experience. Further, the first Madness and Arts World Festival mandate to celebrate artists with mental illness experiences and to challenge stigma against mental illness fits squarely within broader disability arts' activist aims.

Critical Issues

Given that the network's title, its most appropriate constituency and next steps are still open for debate, it is premature to outline its recommendations regarding best practices or ideal operational strategies. What is perhaps more interesting at this stage is the range of critical issues and questions which have shaped and will continue to shape discussions. What follow are three examples of critical issues that have driven discussion and will continue to be debated.

1) Festivals: A vibrant but sustainable format for disability arts?

Building on their experiences and familiarity with festivals, participants explored the successful strategies and major accomplishments of festivals but also attended to their problems and potential pitfalls. Network participants shared best practice ideas concern-

ing such topics as grant-writing; paying artists with disabilities who receive social assistance in ways which do not compromise the artists' incomes; organizing accessible transportation and accommodation for visiting artists and audiences; securing reliable sign language, Braille, or other support services; preparing safe travel arrangements and border crossings for individuals traveling with anti-psychotic or other medications; co-producing works; arranging artists' touring and many other practical recurring issues. They also discussed some of the benefits and problems associated with accepting funding from corporations (particularly pharmaceutical corporations), government arts councils, and private foundations. As many of the presenters involved in the discussion had only rarely had the opportunity to meet with others engaged in similar work, the discussion suggested a useful means for improving the efficiency and sustainability of disability arts festival activity in Canada.

Opportunities afforded by the various festivals and events represented in the network are a vital part of the contemporary disability arts scene in Canada. Festivals have played a major role in bringing together artists with disabilities from Canada and beyond, providing opportunities for artistic development, appreciation, networking among peers, and information sharing. In their respective communities they have offered new ways for local art, disability, and broader communities to coalesce as well as engage in fruitful dialogue and the re-imagining of disability beyond traditional, often stigmatizing ways. Many artists with disabilities who have participated in these various festivals have described finding a profound sense of communion and have left feeling inspired and less isolated in their work.⁷ While it is not uncommon for meaningful micro-communities to form during festivals of any kind, the risk is always that festivals or other itinerant events usurp the place of more sustained presenting opportunities. One can think, for example, of the frequent complaint that while fringe festivals offer exciting opportunities for performers and audiences alike, they can become such a primary focus that they exhaust performers' and audiences' resources (time, money and otherwise) and take away from more sustained programming during the year or longer term development projects. It can become challenging for artists both to stay on the festival circuit and pursue different kinds of production goals or audiences. This issue is particularly important for those network participants who are keen to see disability arts have an impact not only among disability cultures but in broader cultures they have identified as

disabling. The network is asking how best to strengthen the opportunities of the festivals while also advocating for greater funding and sustained supports and widespread showcasing opportunities for individual artists with disabilities.

2) *Standards: who sets them and what are the criteria?*

Debates and discussions also turned around standards and means for recognizing achievement and artistic excellence as well as the possible articulation of a disability arts aesthetic. The basic fault line in discussion remains whether or not disability arts and artists should generate their own aesthetic criteria to judge work and set standards. In one direction, presenters felt that to develop standards at variance from more general notions of artistic excellence would be to relegate disability arts to its own particular communities and limit broader public recognition and engagement. In another direction, however, presenters who see disability arts as part of a broader activist disability culture interested in exposing ableist and discounting assumptions in dominant culture wish to highlight standards which might provide a different kind of baseline, one which recognizes and celebrates disability arts on its own terms.

Catherine Frazee has perhaps done the most of any of the network participants to articulate a disability arts aesthetic, which she outlined in a panel address to the KickstART! festival in Vancouver in 2001. Rather than simply accept normative and frequently oblique standards of excellence, Frazee pushed the festival audience to place importance on *authenticity*, of voices connected to experience; on *engagement*, demonstrated through focus, commitment, risk-taking, and sincerity; and on *transformation*, in shifting knowledge and perception, changing experiences from “oppression to emancipation...” and in presenting “a distillation of raw emotion to new language and forms.” Fundamentally, Frazee called for recognition of *audacity*: “speaking back to power; pushing the boundaries of existing forms and exploring new forms; bold or insolent heedlessness of restraints of prudence; propriety or convention, challenging and stretching mainstream notions of grace, beauty, lyricism or craftsmanship. Confronting the dominant narrative and reinventing ourselves.” While other standards for excellence might privilege refinement or polish, praising, for example, a “polished performance,” Frazee pointed to some assumptions and limits behind this term. Rather than suggest artistic merit, polish, she argues, raises questions of “artistic confidence” and “access to resources (editors, staging, costumes, opportunities to refine work through workshops and peer collabo-

ration).” These artistic standards offer robust means for assessing works that might vary widely in form due to their connection with different kinds of disability experience and artistic practice.

Like the socially activist aims of Disability Art noted earlier by Paul Darke, Frazee’s standards both challenge core aesthetic values of contemporary cultures and contribute to a “process of representing a more accurate picture of society, life, disability and impairment and art itself” (Darke 132). How, I wonder, might Frazee’s standards encourage Canada’s broader artistic communities to assess in new ways a performance of Shakespeare’s Richard III or Hamlet, Tennessee Williams’s Blanche Dubois or Laura Wingfield? Could the network develop an awards system that recognized artistic excellence (or, negatively, highlighted aspects of a disabling society) following Frazee’s terms? As widely relevant as Frazee’s set of standards might seem for artists involved in the disability arts movement and beyond, they may not resonate in all disability cultures. Just as the range of options for artists with disabilities is vast, so too are the possible tools for artistic assessment. Some artists with disabilities, for example, may choose to seek virtuoso status according to standards particular to their artistic field. Excellence, as these discussions suggest, can be a plastic term.

3) *Funding and public engagement:*

Discussion of artistic standards leads to questions concerning engagement with funding bodies, artistic juries, critical press, media, and publicity. Network members wondered about a variety of advocacy roles that a strong national disability arts network might take in each of these fields. Coordinated efforts to share precise information and articulate the startlingly high number of artists and audiences served by disability arts events across Canada could positively impact how funding bodies value these events and disability artists more broadly. Helping funding bodies to identify artistic peers could also provide critical feedback and support for artists and presenters alike. Further in this vein, although a number of Canadian arts critics are beginning to gain familiarity with and feel responsible for thoughtfully reviewing disability arts events, many retain outmoded means for thinking about disability and perpetuate stigmatizing patterns for representing disability. Worse, others shy away without seeing engagement as their professional responsibility. Many network participants felt that helping to educate critics and other media representatives, as well as funding agents, in the history and core concepts

connected to the disability movement and contemporary Canadian disability cultures would be useful.

Funding is also connected to a word that resonated for many presenters: burnout. Most of the assembled presenters have now worked for many years producing festivals and other events on shoestring budgets, hammering out new models for cultural articulation and intercultural engagement, often without a blueprint to follow. While all remain committed to their enterprises, several expressed concern about the sustainability of their respective events in the absence of adequate funding as well as organizational, professional, and other supports.

For many network participants, institutional practices in the United Kingdom suggest possible goals for the network to pursue. Following intense debates and activism among a variety of different communities of artists with disabilities in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, the UK Arts Council introduced a monitoring committee, directory, and officer focused on Arts and Disability as well as dedicated funding for artists and organizations working to raise the profile of Disability and/or Deaf Arts and Culture (Abbas et al. 1). Rather than hoping simply to be included in government funding schemes which target “diversity,” a category which all too frequently misunderstands or ignores artists with disabilities, these more specific government supports could provide the foundations necessary for sustaining disability arts festivals and disability arts over the long term.

In response to initial lobbying by Decottignies, other network members and disability artists and their supporters across the country, the Canada Council explicitly recognized disability arts in its document “Moving Forward: Canada Council for the Arts Strategic Plan 2008-2011: Values and Directions,” released in 2007. For example, under the section entitled “Values and Achievements,” the Council lists its,

[...] historic commitment to diversity and equity and to inclusive policies reflecting Canada’s rich and complex cultural reality—languages, cultures, racial groups, genders, generations, arts practices and regions—is one of its greatest achievements, and it must be reinforced, expanded (for example, in support of disability arts) and strengthened (to ensure that the Council can respond to evolving arts practices).

The explicit reference to disability arts was immediately welcomed by Decottignies and other disability arts presenters

although they were concerned to learn more details about the Council's specific plans for achieving this goal.

The promise of new funding opportunities raises new questions, of course. Will the activism and artistic and social challenges of disability arts be fostered and maintained through new funding models and council recognition? Or will it be institutionalized and normalized as only one further branch of identity performance in a multi-cultural Canada, a branch that does little to shake the ableist roots and history of the tree? Writing out of his experiences with disability arts over time in the United Kingdom, Paul Darke argues that Disability Art has lost the promising edge of its primary impulse, an impulse not rooted in trying to be part of the hegemony of normality but in trying to expose the fantasy of such normality:

Disability Art was an art practice with a theoretical basis that was about revealing the 'hidden force of the effects of the majority culture's social uses', not just in relation to disabled people but all people. Too many of us have forgotten the theoretical basis of the Disability Art movement, and the success of a few Disability Artists has been at the expense of the many. As a result, Disability Art and Disability Artists have become, largely through no fault of their own, a tool of the 'hidden forces' used against disabled people to legitimise their (our) continued mass exclusion from not just art culture but culture more widely. (Darke 141)

Darke's cautionary remarks may resonate most for those network members who prize above all the socially activist theoretical basis for disability arts. Although the precise vehicle for Canada Council support has yet to be articulated, disability artists may find themselves on the cusp of a new set of questions. Having received support and recognition, where does the future spirit of solidarity and activism among disability cultures come from and where does it go?



Although many participants in the network expressed ideas and shared experiences that resonated across the group, consensus about how to respond to core issues and concerns remains elusive at this time. Rather than viewing this as a weakness, participants might instead be emboldened by the debates and recognize the vital role networks can play in shaping intercultural landscapes.

Networks have particular functions in social and artistic policy formation, and perhaps particularly so for disability cultures. In *A Seat at the Table: Persons with Disabilities in Policy Making*, Boyce et al. suggest that policy networks often lack consensus and are remarkable for their capacity to contain competing coalitions while also affording opportunities for the generative exchange of ideas, early opinion formation, consensus building, and broad diffusion of ideas to such spheres of influence as government policy makers (162-163). Further, they suggest some broader reasons for competing viewpoints by noting that in the disability field, the broad motivations for membership are characterized by

[...] a moderate consensus on deeper values (the debate on disability rights versus protection of persons with disabilities); the sense of collective identity (within a hierarchy of disabilities and invisible disabilities such as epilepsy and chronic fatigue syndrome); the size of the potential membership domain (under 15 per cent of the population); the geographical distribution of members (dispersed); the resource base of organizations (poor); and the nature of primary, informal social relations with others (stigmatized). In combination, these factors indicate a relatively low logic of membership and thus contribute to difficulties establishing a cohesive disability sector in Canada. (161)

In the more specific field of disability arts, further difficulties arise from the dearth of specific disability arts government funding pools and supporting structures and from the relative absence of artists with disabilities on funding panels aimed at assessing artists by a jury of their peers. While the impulse to find points of collective identity is strong, the factors driving diversity within disability arts cultures are many. The network's chief strength seems to be its ability to assemble voices from diverse cultural pockets of disability arts activity to engage in debate, argument and generative intercultural exchange.

At the January 2007 Performance Creation Canada meetings in Calgary, Decottignies was invited to represent the emerging Disability Arts and Culture Network on a panel dedicated to Canadian performing arts networks. Panel organizers were adamant in their advocacy for the importance of networks in Canadian culture:

Communities are built on the cooperation and collaboration between groups and individuals. A nation is built upon the tacit and explicit collaboration between communities. Canada's networks are the nerve systems that allow for the exchange of thoughts and ideas that define national character. Canada benefits greatly from the strength and variety of its vibrant networks. (Performance Creation Canada)

Although the early days of this disability arts network have caused understandable anxiety among artists or other presenters who fear being left out of yet another artistic forum and although the network's current members are also concerned not to replicate the kinds of elitist structures which have elsewhere excluded artists with disabilities from full participation, the general value of a network connecting the diverse voices of artists with disabilities and the artistic presenters who feature their work has not been disputed.

The metaphor of the network provides a different model for considering intercultural creation. Much work in intercultural performance studies has emphasized a hybridization of forms and a blending of performance traditions. For intercultural creations to be generative, however, a melding of positions or forms does not seem strictly necessary, particularly when the intercultural dialogue touches on deeply felt claims to subtle distinctions under a broader banner of cultural connection. Recognizing this network as an intercultural enterprise helps to highlight the inherent danger in thinking of Canada's disability culture as a monolith. To do so would risk overlooking a rich panoply of diversity much as imagining a monolithic Canadian First Nations, Francophone, Women's, or Queer culture risks discounting the significantly different histories, languages, contexts, and/or senses of community in diverse First Nations, Francophone, Women's, or Queer cultures. Peters's argument for a syncretized view of disability culture takes root in processes of intercultural dialogue, contests of meaning, unresolved differences, and openings for new thinking, "whether or not the chosen disability culture is singular or plural; and whether or not the choice is based on an aesthetic, political, linguistic or syncretic view of disability culture" (599). This emerging disability arts presenters' network offers a timely reminder not only of the growing importance of disability arts in Canada, but also of the important and generative differences that can co-exist within a culture which is constantly in the making. ❁

NOTES

- ¹ I would like to thank Ric Knowles, Glen Nichols, Christopher Jackman, Matthew Evenden, and the anonymous referees for their helpful comments. I am also grateful to the network participants for sharing their process. This paper was researched and written with the support of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council standard research grant.
- ² Although Bragg's keynote address generated valuable critical debate, it has not been published. I rely on Peters's summary of Bragg's core argument.
- ³ A note in the glossary section of the IETM website explains the acronym and founding of the network: "Created in July 1981 in Polverigi, Italy at the Polverigi International Theatre Festival. An idea of Philippe Tiry, Roberto Cimetta, Velia Papa, Hugo De Greef, Gordana Vnuk, Patrick Sommier, Steve Austen, Jean-Paul Thibaudat. Called the 'Informal European Theatre Meeting.' In 2005, it was decided that the initials would be kept along with the new strap line, 'international network for contemporary performing arts.' IETM is an international non-profit association under Belgian law; the statute was confirmed in 1989" (International Network).
- ⁴ The first meeting was held 16-19 March 2006 at the University of Calgary's Faculty of Social Work. Student Holly Genois kept notes as part of a practicum credit. The second meeting ran 22-24 February 2007 at the Ryerson RBC Disability Studies Centre. A regional meeting open to all interested disability artists was hosted at the University of British Columbia on 24 April 2006. A second regional meeting held by Stage Left occurred on 30 November 2006. Workman Arts hosted a regional meeting in Toronto on 21 February 2007.
- ⁵ Other participants included Ghislaine (Jessie) Fraser who was the office manager at S4DAC at the time of the first meeting and, in Toronto, disability scholar and Ryerson researcher Richard Ingram.
- ⁶ Victoria Ann Lewis discusses some of the barriers which linger for artists with disabilities who choose to access traditional training programs in "O Pioneers!"
- ⁷ For example, the website for the International Guild of Disabled Artists and Performers describes how founder Philip Patston was inspired to form the guild after performing at KickstART! in 2001. See International Guild of Disabled Artists and Performers.

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