

# Introduction: Performance and Disability

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On April 30, 2016, *Crippling the Stage: A Disability Arts Cabaret* presented “cutting-edge disabled artists from Canada and the United Kingdom.” The event, co-hosted by Alex Bulmer and Mat Fraser, aimed to put “disabled performers centre stage to celebrate Crippling the Arts Symposium presented by Tangled Art + Disability, a three-day event seeking to advance Deaf and Disability Arts in Canada, and enliven the vibrancy of Canadian culture” (“Crippling”).<sup>1</sup> As demonstrated in the present issue, this exciting international event was one of many important disability theatre initiatives offered during the 2015 and 2016 seasons, a period that also saw disability theatre artists working with the National Arts Centre, Stratford Festival, Banff Fine Arts Centre, Playwrights Theatre Centre, Playwright’s Workshop Montreal, and Luminato Festival. This issue, then, appears in a remarkably generative period of disability theatre activity in Canada. In the past five years, national institutions and granting councils have sought to respond to, catch up with, and foster new conversations among disability theatre and performance practitioners. In 2012, for example, the Canada Council for the Arts released an access and equality strategy targeting Deaf and disability arts.<sup>2</sup> While on one level this signaled a desire to “expand the arts” according to the council’s equity strategy, it also built from a recognition “that Deaf and disability arts are important evolving sectors and art practices in the Canadian arts ecology, to be supported, promoted and advanced” (Canada Council, “Executive”).

Each article in this volume builds from a similar recognition: that disability theatre and performance are evolving and lively fields of arts innovation and practice in Canada that deserve wider recognition and scholarly critical engagement. While Canadian disability theatre can point to historical antecedents with some shared principles, it is generally understood to have emerged over the past three decades as a host of disability artists and activists sought to recast and reimagine what disability means and entails in performance. Rejecting hackneyed stereotypes and performance traditions that encourage a kind of disability minstrelsy, artists have been developing new theatre companies, plays, dramaturgical processes, and performance practices. They have been raising fundamental questions about aesthetics, theatre practice, social inclusion, justice, identity, arts access, and the body. I have argued elsewhere that much of the critical early work emerged at local and international scales of theatre practice and dialogue. Unlike many theatre traditions in Canada that arose with national leadership and support, disability theatre seemingly jumped scales from the local to the global (Johnston). However, this situation has changed recently, as the 2012 and subsequent reports from the Canada Council, the creation in 2010 of a disability arts officer within that council, and its subsequent dedicated funding programs for Deaf and disability arts attest.

The 2015/16 seasons were particularly active in this regard and this issue’s Forum section shares the reflections and insights of some key artists and organizers of this work.<sup>3</sup> In her

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article “Inclusion: Building a Culture of Desire and Resilience,” award-winning playwright, performer, director, and disability arts activist Alex Bulmer considers her creative work experiences in Canada and the UK, highlighting the particular value of the UK’s Access to Work program. She explains the impulses behind and her complex responses to “The Republic of Inclusion,” an event she co-curated with Sarah Garton Stanley in February 2015 as a call for “a rigorous and provocative discussion about the state of inclusion in our theatre community,” which was held as part of Toronto’s PROGRESS International Festival of Performance Ideas at The Theatre Centre.<sup>4</sup> Two participants from that conversation were Vancouver’s Playwrights Theatre Centre (PTC) Artistic Director Heidi Taylor and award-winning playwright, performer, dramaturg, Inclusive Design specialist, and, most recently, Artistic Director of Calgary’s MoMo Dance Theatre, Jan Derbyshire. Derbyshire’s article, “Infrequently Asked Questions, or: How to Kickstart Conversations Around Inclusion and Accessibility in Canadian Theatre and Why it Might be Good for Everybody,” charts similar discussions in Vancouver in relation to PTC’s *ACK Lab*, described on its website as “a hacker approach to inclusion.” She explains how this approach favours innovation through remaking and repurposing over starting from scratch and prompted “an investigation of how to make the PTC Playwright’s Colony, a yearly writing intensive at PTC, more inclusive and accessible to persons with perceived or self-identified disabilities” (264).<sup>5</sup> The year culminated with a ten-day December 2015 workshop for the selected Colony playwrights Janet Hinton, Heidi Janz, and Adam Warren. Derbyshire provides a candid, self-critical account of how the colony unfolded. Taking a similarly candid stance, Sarah Garton Stanley, in her article “Changing the Shape of Things,” outlines the primary impulses, aims, and choices involved in the April 2016 launch of the National Arts Centre (NAC) English Theatre’s Cycle on theatre and disability. The initiative follows on the success of the NAC English Theatre Cycle on Indigenous Theatre and its subsequent commitment to launch a national Indigenous Theatre in 2019. From April 10–12, the NAC English Theatre and the Stratford Festival in Ontario hosted “The Summit: Changing the shape of Canadian Theatre and impacting the processes used for its creation.”<sup>6</sup> The event gathered thirteen artists/leaders and twelve institutional respondents to discuss theatrical work by and about artists from the Deaf and disability arts community. Reflecting on power, privilege and the benefits of institutional transformation, Stanley invites readers to think about the ways in which more equitable and inclusive collaborations might occur.

Rounding out the Forum section is Pippa Ruddy’s review “*PUSH(ed) to the Periphery: The Intersection of Disability, Race, and Gender at the 2015 Parapan Am Games.*” Ruddy interrogates several critical programming, marketing, ticketing, and accessibility choices made at Toronto’s Panamania, the arts and culture initiative associated with the Pan Am/Parapan Am Games held in Toronto during July–August 2015. She pays particular attention to the three Panamania productions commissioned for the programming during the Parapan Am Games: *Obeah Opera – A Nicole Brooks Vision*; *PUSH! Real Athletes. Real Stories. Real Theatre*; and *MIX*. Ruddy’s analysis attends to the tangle of gender, race, and disability issues associated with these three productions to ask a series of provocative questions about organization, inclusivity, and attendance.

The original questions in this volume’s call for papers similarly turned on the difference that disability inclusion makes for performance practice and reception:

Where have disability theatre and disability performance developed in Canada (or not)? With what means and challenges? What artists, companies, policies and practices have supported or hindered expansion? What fundamental questions do disability theatre and disability performance raise for arts criticism more broadly? For example, how have performance scholars and reviewers imagined disabled people among their target readership (or not)? How have performance theories been shaped and challenged by disability studies perspectives? What debates have animated scholars and practitioners? What is the cutting edge of the field and why?

Overwhelmingly, respondents to the call centred their attention on theatre involving artists with learning, cognitive, intellectual, and/or developmental disabilities, as well as artists who locate themselves along the spectrum of neurodiversity. Each author explains their particular use of terms, and the lack of consensus both in this volume and beyond support Matt Hargrave's analysis of the instability and ambivalence associated with terminology in the field. In his provocative 2015 book *Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad or Plain Ugly?* Hargrave claims as his primary purpose the need to "refute unreservedly the notion that there is 'a theatre of learning disability'. Rather, theatre is an art form, both supple and robust enough to admit all forms of human variation" (14). In view of the remarkably diverse ways learning disabled artists and people have participated in theatre, Hargrave proposes a more rigorous articulation of the "poetics of the theatres of learning disability; not as a retreat from social realities – oppression, indifference, plain cruelty – but as a way of bringing focused attention to the *craft* of theatre: that which materializes through a complex intersection of techniques, sensitivities and affects" (14). Likewise, the contributors to this issue are interested in the craft of theatre and the particular ways in which theatres of learning, cognitive, developmental, and/or intellectual disabilities can highlight assumptions about normate theatre techniques and practices, negotiate between different frameworks of lived experience and situated knowledge, and marshal affect in fresh and challenging ways.<sup>7</sup>

Three of these articles turn on Canadian performances of the controversial international touring production *Disabled Theater* directed by French choreographer Jérôme Bel and performed by ensemble members of Zurich's Theater HORA, a company that since 1993 has "believe[d] that people with learning disabilities are endowed with abilities and strengths which can be used to produce a competent social and cultural result in an artistic field" (Theatre HORA). While earlier stagings of this work have been rigorously critiqued, the three articles here build a context for understanding the 2015 Montreal production and reception of the work.<sup>8</sup> The first two, Katherine Zien's "A Mobile Social Realm: Labour, Sovereignty, and Subjecthood in *Disabled Theater*" and Arseli Dokumaci's "Affordance Creations of Disability Performance: Limits of a *Disabled Theater*," are offered together and play with the journal's traditional form in order "to create a dialogue while retaining our respective voices, similarly to how the actors in *Theatre HORA's Disabled Theater (hereafter DT)* maintain a sense of individuality while coming together collectively in the environment of the piece." Dokumaci locates the authors' need for this formal choice in a common goal: "Through our dialogue we hope to decentre and distribute academic writing into a series of flexibly ordered 'notes toward a thesis.' If these notes subscribe to a common thesis, it would be the aesthetics of affective discomfort" (171). Moreover, both articles chart conflicting affective responses and the role of discomfort in relation to the production's ethical dimension. In the fourth scene of their

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dialogue, however, the authors diverge to pursue different questions. Zien traces the politics of labour and the many ways that normate assumptions concerning a binary of professional/amateur fall apart in light of this work. Attending to the historical context for *DT*'s arrival and performance at a particular moment in Quebec's history, Zien explores how the production becomes "*a mobile social realm* with pedagogical effects – exerting a teaching function, for normate and cognitively disabled audiences alike, around self, state, and society. Creating a new event-time and -space in which to enfold audiences in other types of labour relations, HORA's theatre work furthers the production of critical (anti)sovereignty" (181). Dokumaci, by contrast, introduces James Gibson's "affordances," a term he coined in the 1980s as part of his ecological approach to perception, and which has found traction in a range of other fields for thinking about disability and performance studies. She demonstrates how disability presses theatre to "**face the limits of its own 'niche'**, i.e. the extremities of its already actualized affordances." Citing several productive dialogues generated locally by the Montreal production, Dokumaci insists that "[w]hatever *DT* has 'failed' or 'achieved' to do as a theatre piece, it (as an event) has certainly afforded new possibilities – possibilities that have already been and continue to be taken up in Canada and beyond" (194).

Ashley McAskill's "Come and See Our Art of Being Real': Disabling Inspirational Porn and Rearticulating Affective Productivities" compares the 2015 Montreal performance of *Disabled Theater* to the 2014 Vancouver performance of *Stuffed* by Theatre Terrific, Western Canada's oldest theatre involving disabled actors. McAskill reads both works in connection with late Australian comedian, writer, and activist Stella Young's provocative 2014 Ted Talk on "inspiration porn," instances when disabled people are objectified as incarnations of normate inspiration and/or narratives of overcoming. As McAskill argues, "[c]oupling inspiration with porn prompts the sticky questions of prurience and pleasure involved in holding disabled people up as objects of inspiration" (203). Her invocation of "stickiness" builds from affect theorist Sara Ahmed's analyses of how some bodies and communities can become stuck in particular emotional framings. McAskill identifies how theatre companies working with disabled actors are challenging and/or unsticking such framings.

Like Dokumaci, Zien, and McAskill, Jenn Stephenson is interested in the emotional framings and ethical dimensions of theatre involving autobiographical performance and disabled actors. Her article "Please Look at Yourself': Insecurity and the Failure of Ethical Encounter in Autobiographical Performance" brings the insights of her award-winning work on autobiographical performance to bear on *RARE*, the controversial creation of celebrated Canadian playwright Judith Thompson and an ensemble of performers in their twenties and thirties with Down Syndrome. Stephenson first demonstrates how *RARE* features the hallmark dramaturgical structures and tropes of the autobiographical performance genre, as well as the genre's limits and ethical pitfalls. Moreover, she notes that "a recurrent criticism raised with regard to this kind of community-engaged work that brings paying audiences into autobiographical encounters with strangers is that this fabricated meeting that has been specially marketed to sheltered elites is an inferior substitute for real, personal, engaged experience" (221). For Stephenson, the case of *RARE* provides a valuable opportunity both to engage with disability performance theory and to consider "how all autobiographical performance is entangled in ethical questions about how the encounter with actuality in the theatre is shaped and to what end" (222).

Finally, in their article “*May I have this dance? Teaching, Performing, and Transforming in a University-Community Mixed-Ability Dance Theatre Project*,” authors Lisa Doolittle, Callista Chasse, Corey Makoloski, Pamela Boyd, and Annalee Yassi reflect on a series of research and community-based initiatives in Lethbridge, Alberta.<sup>9</sup> Initial workshops entitled Upstart led to the pioneering 2014 for-credit topics course “All-Abilities Dance-Drama: Production Development” in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge and culminated in the mixed-abilities production *Unlimited* presented at the same university in March 2015. The article draws from the authors’ personal reflections as well as their engagement with further qualitative, and quantitative data. They reflect on ableist institutional barriers that affected the successive initiatives’ structures and participants’ experiences, and they attend to the artistic impulses and choices that drove the class work and final performance. Like Zien, Dokumaci, McAskill, and Stephenson, they interrogate the ethical dimensions of the initiatives both candidly and self-critically, taking particular interest in how communities and universities can engage ethically in the context of disability arts and research. Like the other authors in this section, they acknowledge the distances between theatrical and non-theatrical community exchanges and the prevailing ableism informing both.

The articles herein do not offer consensus or a unified research program, nor was this the intent of the original call. Collectively, however, they provide a sense of the rich possibilities for scholarly research and the urgent need for more scholars to engage with disability theatre aesthetics in order to appreciate, theorize, and challenge the field. As Canadian disability theatre and performance practices are finding new structures of support and advancing their work, scholarship must also be on the move.<sup>10</sup>

## Notes

- 1 The event was presented by the British Council, Tangled Art + Disability, Invisible Flash, and the Harbourfront Centre.
- 2 For general policy see Canada Council for the Arts, “Expanding.”
- 3 A forthcoming special issue of the *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* on the topic “Crippling the Arts in Canada,” edited by Eliza Chandler, promises to build from the Crippling the Arts events. Another important 2015/16 event in this vein is the August 2016 IN-Justice Equity Training, part of The Arts ExCHANGE Project, described in its recent call for participants as “a unique, cross-continental collaboration between Stage Left Productions (Canada) and Third Way Theatre (Australia): two renowned Theatre of the Oppressed companies founded and led by diverse women who invite daring agents of change to go beyond the social justice status quo.” For further information see The Arts ExCHANGE Project website. <http://artsexchange.weebly.com>
- 4 In her article, Bulmer outlines how the event came to be: “The event was possible through *The Collaborations*, part of English Theatre at Canada’s National Arts Centre, with support from Ontario Arts Council and Canada Council for the Arts. It was programmed as part of the inaugural PROGRESS FESTIVAL a joint production between SummerWorks and The Theatre Centre. *The Republic of Inclusion* was co-curated by Alex Bulmer and Sarah Garton Stanley” (263).
- 5 Derbyshire also notes that the initiative was supported by “the Bly Capacity grant, a LAMDA initiative and a Canada Council Leadership for Change grant. It involved six months of intense conversations and a 10-day workshop during December of 2015” (264).

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- 6 The event was also supported by the Canada Council, the British Council, Playwrights Theatre Centre, Playwrights Workshop Theatre, the University of British Columbia, and the University of Waterloo.
- 7 The important disability studies term 'normate' was coined by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson; in her 1997 book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*, she offers the following definition: "This neologism names the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate's boundaries. The term normate usefully designates the social figure through which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants" (8).
- 8 A 2015 book, edited by Sandra Umatham and Benjamin Wihstutz, collected essays from a range of international contributors to account for the production's complex choices and their polarizing effects.
- 9 These initiatives were partly funded by the Arts for Social Change (ASC!) SSHRC grant and also involved partnerships with the Lethbridge Association for Community Living, the Southern Alberta Individualized Planning Association, and the South Region Self Advocates Network.
- 10 I am grateful for the generous assistance and insights of this journal's editors Marlis Schweitzer, Kim Solga, and Barry Freeman, translator Louise Ladouceur, editorial assistants Shelley Liebemuk and Kelly Vivash, as well as the anonymous reviewers, all of whom helped in the preparation of this special issue. I am also grateful for the research assistance of Stefan Honisch and Rebecca Gold as well as the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

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