

Infrequently Asked Questions, or: How to Kickstart Conversations Around Inclusion and Accessibility in Canadian Theatre and Why it Might be Good for Everybody

JAN DERBYSHIRE

What is life if not a series of negotiations between the old and the new? It seems to me that one should always be seeking to talk oneself out of these stark oppositions.

– Susan Sontag

We must imagine Sisyphus happy.

– Albert Camus

I have a habit of liking to flip the familiar. In theatre this manifests as a driving obsession to look for artistic practices and models that work well for institutes, companies, and creators and ask: is this the way you've always done things? It's a good question to start the rock rolling on issues of diversity, inclusion, and accessibility. No matter what the answer is, I like to invite people to start a conversation, to ask who is involved in these successful systems and who isn't? Not everyone is interested. Heidi Taylor, Artistic and Executive Director of the Playwrights' Theatre Centre (PTC) in Vancouver, is. Together we developed *ACK Lab*, an investigation on 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. It was graciously funded 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 ten-day workshop during December 2015.

The Intense Conversations

ACK Lab started with Heidi and I, cloistered away in a tiny room at PTC, scribbling thoughts on a whiteboard and recording our conversations to review later. Very quickly our bi-weekly *ACK Lab* meetings evolved into a practice we would later dub *Infrequently Asked Questions*. It started innocently enough. Heidi would muster up the courage to ask questions she said she wished she knew the answers to but didn't. More often than not I knew part of the answer but not the other parts and this in turn generated more infrequently asked questions. The exchanges continued, heating up and cooling down as we worked our way through trying to demystify ways of thinking that polarize and oppose, in this case ability and disability. I remain grateful for Heidi's willingness to stay at the table to grapple with tough questions,



Jan Derbyshire and Heidi Janz.
Photo by Belinda Bruce.

like: why was an inaccessible space chosen for the new PTC offices? What was everyone thinking? She answered honestly, and with some degree of embarrassment explained the popular logic and recognized the rationalizations that went into making that decision.

The conversations ramped up from there and like a pair of Sisyphoi we'd roll the rock of wanting to change things up and up only to watch it roll back down again. Often the conversations would fall into a pit that began to reveal the depth of the problem: Canadian theatre is unfathomably behind in supporting the creation of high quality performance that profiles the excellence of disabled artists.

As a theatre artist who works in both mainstream practices and in the fractured and often sequestered world of disability performance, I have a passion for addressing the exclusion of artists with disabilities that is both personal and

political. I might not have noticed that persons with disabilities were sorely missing from theatre if not for three fateful events in my own life. First, I had a successful, financially self-sufficient career as a performer and writer, when what I identify as a series of brain injuries happened mid-career and excluded me from any sort of mainstream theatre practice for over four years. Slowly but surely, however, the love of theatre pulled me back and without recognizing it at the time, I was developing unique cultural practices that allowed me to work within my newly acquired condition of neuro-diversity. This also led me to create with Disability Arts companies where I met many talented artists who had no way of advancing their practice and professionalism inside mainstream practices. A few years in, my work landed me in Toronto, doing some creative producing with Tangled Arts, a disability arts company, formerly called the Abilities Festival. With several amazing artists, including scholar and disability justice advocate Catherine Frazee, we created site-specific, accessible pod plays reflecting the history and lived experience of disability along the Queen Street streetcar line. Jutta Trevianus, the Director and Founder of the Inclusive Design Research Centre and the Inclusive Design Institute at the Ontario College of Art and Design University, attended the event and was so curious about and appreciative of the work that she invited me into her university's Master of Design Program. Earning a degree in Inclusive Design collided with my theatre practices. Ever since then, I have been thinking about things like disability as a condition rather than a trait, and questioning who designs the world according to their specifications. How, for example, might we design processes and productions in theatre as one size fits one to include the widest spectrum of creators possible?



Jan Derbyshire, Heidi Janz, and John Webber. Photo by Belinda Bruce.

One of the principles of Inclusive Design is that by designing for the eccentrics, everyone benefits. This became evident in my subsequent work adaptations with co-creator Adrienne Wong during the making of *Me on the Map* (MOTM), an interactive project for young people on civic responsibility and planning. Adrienne started the project with no children and at the end of three years she had two. The conditions of pregnancy and childbirth could have been barriers to completing the project, disabling Adrienne's working life. However, the experiences of devising many one-size-fits-one ways of working came in handy with an artist who wouldn't identify herself as a disabled person. We lobbied for and won extended funding periods and the ability to work shorter hours over a longer period of time. MOTM continues to be successful and we have both continued to plan for longer creation processes with more "family and brain friendly" working hours in other projects.

I brought all of this lived experienced and knowledge acquisition into a room with Heidi Taylor and we had hours and hours of passionate and sometimes uncomfortable conversations. I am thoughtful about how profound and intense our conversations were, and I wonder if they might not have been if Heidi and I didn't have the long term working relationship that we do. Heidi knew about my successful practices as a performer and writer before a series of brain injuries took me out of the game. As I found my way back, Heidi was one of many people who encouraged my unique and necessary cultural practices and welcomed me into PTC as an associate in the years 2008-2011. I am painfully and gratefully aware that the privileging of my past experience in the mainstream allowed me entry into systems with adapted personal practices that would otherwise have been unavailable. Heidi and I talked about that. That led us to think about how Canadian theatre is full of systems dominated by the realities and ideas of ableism and discrimination in favour of able-bodied and able-minded people.

Usually conversations about ableism in theatre focus on the built environment but Heidi and I extended this conversation to include not only the cultural institutions and

places where theatre creates and presents work but also the dominant cultural practices that inform the viewing and making of theatre. We then invited others into the conversation: dramaturg Kathleen Flaherty, Artistic Director Apprentice Derek Chan, and eventually the associate dramaturges of Delinquent Theatre, Christine Quintana and Laura McLean, who would be working with the Colony playwrights Janet Hinton, Heidi Janz, and Adam Warren.

We all had an open, direct discussion about doing the best we can, and what that might actually mean. We talked more and more about where ableism intersects with privilege. We talked about how, for the large majority of professional theatre makers today, including those of us at this particular table, the systems work. We asked: if a system works for you, why would you question it? Why would you bother to look around and see who isn't there? We grappled with the thought that even though theatre people are said to be good at imagining things for our creations, we seem to be deficient in imagining what we do not know, inside our theatre spaces. If something is missing and it doesn't matter to us, we wondered, why should we care? Or, more generously, why would we need to care?

We negotiated the "us and them" stance that exists in Canadian theatre. We questioned and demystified ways of thinking that polarize and oppose ideas like disability and ability. We invited everyone to reflect on ideas of Inclusive Design as it could relate to our theatre practices and places of work. Inclusive Design principles place the human who will be using the object, space, process, or practice that is being designed at the centre of the drive to innovate and create. At its heart, Inclusive Design is a profoundly human and humane philosophical approach and recognizes the uniqueness of individuals, some of whom are unique in similar ways, and others who are not.

Inside the philosophy of Inclusive Design, disability isn't talked about from the perspective of a medical model wherein disability is typically located in the individual body and understood as something permanent and limiting. Rather, Inclusive Design defines disability as a set of conditions that limit or prohibit a person's abilities.

We became exhausted, weighed down by the burden of knowledge that all theatre artists, makers, administrators, fundraisers, and patrons, are complicit, deeply and grievously, in agreeing upon a way of doing things that keeps a population of people from participating in the creation of theatre and very often even from experiencing it. We agree that we have deeply segregated systems in place, so deep that if we were excluding any other group of people we would be shouted down, perhaps even legally prosecuted for human rights violations. No one could imagine a theatre with signage up at the door that said, no blacks, no women, no short people. But this is what we have done with persons with disabilities. By the end of the series of intense conversations, we were all Sisyphoi standing at the bottom of the hill shadowed by a rock too big for a small group of eight well-intentioned people to move.

The Writers' Colony as ACK Lab

The only thing we could do was to pick a smaller rock. Our energy turned towards making the Writers' Colony a model of functional, practical, and artistic accessibility. From a national call for applicants' scripts, we selected three. We set criteria for high artistic merit, a practice carried over from previous colonies at PTC, and identified as a necessity here because of the

greater need of getting more plays by artists with disabilities to main stages in Canada. We needed to believe that play development by a mainstream company was moving toward this end. The writers, Adam Warren, Heidi Janz, and Janet Hinton, are all experienced writers. The assigned dramaturges and the PTC team began the work of posing the Infrequently Asked Questions (IAQ) towards designing one-size-fits-one cultural practices with each of the writers. The PTC staff set out to find accessible space and transportation.

The name ACK Lab was chosen as a nod toward Hacker culture, where everything isn't made from scratch but rather pieces of know-how and tools are repurposed to achieve something new. We quickly realized that trying to work with specific writer's needs and methods is already a long held principle of skilled dramaturgy. What we didn't understand was how much the physical world would affect the needs of our artists' preferred way of working. With respect to the request for shorter workshop periods and longer times to write, we ran into a barrier. The only accessible space that would meet the needs of all of our artists was out at the University of British Columbia. This space, graciously offered and desperately needed, added up to extra hours of travel time for our writers, actors, and support teams. It also left us all reeling about how little accessible creation space there is, in an oft-dubbed "forward-thinking" city like Vancouver. Casting turned out to reveal another set of challenges: Heidi Janz, for example, wanted to cast disabled actors for her work, but also wanted to have the benefit of experienced actors reading and offering feedback on her script. When the local professional theatre training and performing institutions are so marked by inaccessibility, finding a pool of deeply experienced professional disabled actors is challenging.

We double cast her play. It is unfortunate that one of our deep failings was in the auditioning process for artists with disabilities. A shortage of time for preparation had us conducting auditions like we always do. We had made some adaptations for larger text and line retrievers (people who read off the page and whisper the line to the actor) but we didn't account for how new this process was for some of the actors. We learned the hard lesson, that adaptation is not inclusion. Most of the actors were found through a call that went out to disability-specific companies with the usual practice of group auditions, or no auditions at all. We also neglected to consider the inefficiency of the local specialized transit, a notoriously inadequate system. This is especially problematic during inclement weather. Although we arrived thirty minutes early to set up we found one of our actors huddled against up against an inaccessible and locked door, soaking wet with rain. This was invaluable learning for us but at what cost to our actor? The two other playwrights chose to work exclusively with professionally-recognized actors. In one case the actors were kept as readers for the entire ACK Lab, and in another case Adam Warren opted to take the place of his actor and experiment with what his director, Christine Quintana, called "Dram'act'turgy," her preferred term for dramaturgy with acting in it.

The most experimental cultural practice emerged in working with Heidi Janz and the double cast for her script. For one of the workshop days the two casts worked together improvising scenarios around scenes in the play, which were greatly informed by the lived experiences of the disabled actors sharing with the professional actors. This was a successful lab day in terms of integration. Several actors commented on being forever changed, and remembering why agitprop theatre is still relevant and important. Several expressed

gratitude for the opportunity to work on the play and to meet actors with disabilities. The improvised scenarios as well as conversations between care attendants, actors, and other writers seemed to open up Heidi Janz to new possibilities for her script. This was extremely interesting because I followed her instinct in setting up improvised scenarios between the two casts. Despite all the influx of new inspiration and ideas, a recurring rock of thought continues to roll around in my mind about this workshopped day. I continue to struggle with ideas of integration, where relatively untrained actors with disabilities mix with professional actors. I wonder about the benefit of sometimes striving to do what the professional actors do versus the benefit of being given the opportunity to learn to work from your own impulses. This speaks to me of the lack of inclusive and accessible training programs for theatre makers and actors. In this so-called integrated or mixed ability scenario, I also continue to question if the burden of vulnerability and risk is equal for all participants involved. These questions have been added to the seemingly unending list of IAQs. At the ACK Lab colony we also introduced designers to the process for the first time. This was largely due to my experience in witnessing how persons with disabilities often form counter theatre/performance communities where practices and productions often play without being noticed by mainstream producers and other professional theatre personnel. I greatly enjoy this work as it often has great artistic merit but typically there is no budget of any kind for lighting or set design.

We wanted to see how bringing in designers to present design ideas might impact the writing. Again Heidi Janz's piece was most affected by this experiment. Her second draft outline, completed at the colony, broke open into a more nuanced and layered script once she had the knowledge of how a lighting design could affect the flow of her piece and how a slightly abstracted set design could symbolize accessibility barriers and the need for assistance.

After all was said and done, the feedback from the ACK Lab participants and the writers was largely positive. Many responses raised more IAQs. Was it a success? It is unlikely that any of these plays will see a mainstream production soon in Vancouver. Some disability plays are done here, mostly old classics and community devised pieces, and all work is appreciated. But I feel strongly that we need new and provocative disability-themed and written work on mainstream professional stages to influence and change what we have come to think of as the Canadian canon. What I think was most successful was the creation of a shared space, filled with diverse participants who came together not only to reflect upon the way we've always done things, but to experience what is needed, through *doing*, to invite full participation for artists of difference and to continue to demystify ideas of polar opposites like ability and disability. It is my greatest hope that these conversations and experiments – both failed and successful – will continue.

It is also my hope that all companies and individual artists privileged enough to work in mainstream venues, even those that consider themselves diverse and inclusive, take time to ask themselves, each other, and artists with disabilities IAQs like:

- 1) What are the conditions of theatre that disable people's participation as creators, participants, and patrons?
- 2) Where are we complicit in allowing this very real act of segregation?

- 3) In integrated practices, how can we challenge longstanding assumptions about effective story structure, staging, and leadership? For whom have these effects worked and for whom have they not?

Many barriers, both physical and attitudinal, are coming to light as a result of a growing number of conversations and experiments in inclusion and accessibility that are taking place in theatre spaces across the country. I feel immensely grateful to see so many more people signing up for Team Sisyphus to push forward the hard work of developing more models of functional, practical, and artistic accessibility. I invite you to consider this article more as an on-going discussion, rather than as a positioning of myself as expert. I can't represent all artists with disabilities, as the biggest things we share are likely our differences. I am still learning, still navigating this space between old and new ideas, knowing that more will be revealed. I would only like to encourage the idea that as creators, innovators, and makers within arts and culture, we are all designers. We plan the processes and develop the practices by which we train for, create, produce, administrate, and disseminate our work; we choose the facilities and can encourage or fight for renovations. Diversity and inclusion issues are consistent and thorny considerations within the workforce that supports, fuels, and populates our stages. Applying principles of Inclusive Design is one way to open up existing systems and spaces, and to devise new ones. Here's to a more virtuous cycle of theatre making.