

# Unlocking Doors: Inclusive Leadership in Stage Management

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## DEDICATION

### **Program Philosophy**

"At [the Adult Enrichment Center] ... Our focus is in developing well rounded individuals that can relate to others and develop social connections outside of our program and their home. We strive to provide an enriching experience each and every day that is truly balanced and stimulating for them both intellectually as well as physically. We believe in having structure, as long as it provides a foundation for variety and choice. Individuals should have the options to pursue what's meaningful and valued to them. Our hope is that all our individuals learn skill sets that will allow them to succeed in everyday life situations. Our participants experience the world differently, they process experiences or events differently, and it is our goal to teach in a way they can understand and to help them succeed at integrating and participating in their communities. Individuals with Autism are not disabled they are simply different. We treat the individual not the diagnosis. We want all our participants to value their differences, to respect it in others, and to commit to being the best that they can be. We simply wish our participants to know that they are valued members of our society and that they all have something to contribute."

-- The Adult Enrichment Center in Santa Ana, California, attended by Chad Dominguez beginning on Monday, October 22nd, 2018.

*To my brother.*

## ABSTRACT

The stage manager, by the very nature of her job description, is at the nexus of imagination and reality; part of her job in realizing her director's creative vision is to realize it for all audience members, and therefore she has a responsibility to participate in her production's or company's diversity initiatives and inclusive practices. Movements including #ChangetheStage and #5050by2020 aim to diversify the landscape of working theatrical professionals. With the entertainment industry's growing social consciousness comes the task of re-examining our approach to artistic leadership, with an eye towards addressing the barriers (both architectural and societal) that limit accessibility to professional opportunities in American theatre and authentic representation on stage.

The stage manager ultimately serves many masters: general and company management, the artistic team encompassing the director and designers, and, of course, the company of actors. She is called upon to protect the interests of upper management and the cast simultaneously and to resolve any conflicts between them. It is her responsibility to recognize and articulate multiple points of view in order to mediate a dialogue and work towards mutually beneficial solutions. As diversity in casting continues to be a topic of intense concentration, stage managers should expect to work with more diverse casts in the years to come. As differing identities in the rehearsal room become more commonplace, stage managers will be called upon to develop an interdisciplinary approach to our vocation; insights from identity studies can help bridge the gap between artists accustomed to homogeneity and artists belonging to historically underrepresented groups.

In particular, this work focuses on the intersection between stage management and disability. Recent productions featuring disabled characters on and off-Broadway have included

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (character with autism), *I Was Most Alive with You* (D/deaf characters), *Amy and the Orphans* (a character with Down syndrome), the *Children of a Lesser God* revival (D/deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing characters), Deaf West's *Spring Awakening* revival (disabled and nondisabled performers), and Sam Gold's revival of *The Glass Menagerie* (a wheelchair-using actress cast in the role of Laura). This list is not comprehensive, but demonstrates an uptick in disability onstage, which has provided increasing opportunity for stage managers to work alongside disabled artists. This thesis will draw upon academic texts and interviews with working theatre practitioners in order to provide an overview of the current state of the relationship between stage managers and disability.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Unlocking Doors: Inclusive Leadership in Stage Management     | 0  |
| DEDICATION  | 1  |
| ABSTRACT  | 2  |
| TABLE OF CONTENTS   | 4  |
| INTRODUCTION  | 5  |
| SECTION I: History, Theory, and Representations of Disability | 7  |
| History of Disability   | 8  |
| Theory: Models of Disability and Corresponding Language       | 11 |
| Representations of Disability: Victims and Villains           | 16 |
| SECTION II: Interviews  | 21 |
| Stephanie Barton-Farcas                                       | 21 |
| David Sugarman  | 28 |
| Marybeth Abel   | 33 |
| Marco Naranjo   | 37 |
| Recommendations   | 44 |
| CONCLUSION  | 46 |
| WORKS CITED   | 49 |

## INTRODUCTION

The program at Columbia emphasizes a model of stage management which embraces the organizational roles of CEO and COO, and seeks to implement effective leadership within a theatrical company. Stage managers committed to inclusion must ask ourselves how our leadership styles are in conversation with issues of diversity. What is our role in the cultural awareness work being done to advance the values of diversity, inclusion, and belonging? What can stage managers learn from the leadership of neighboring arts organizations to better prepare them in facilitating diverse and inclusive rehearsal rooms? If we are the CEO/COOs of our artistic endeavors, then how can we better emulate the example set by progressive organizations' board of directors and promote diversity in our own industry? How can we learn to recognize ableism in ourselves and others, and what are the steps to dismantling discriminatory practices, intentional or otherwise, within the professional arena?

If stage managers are going to support disabled artists as equally deserving of recognition and legitimacy in American theatre, then we must assert that both theatre-going and professional theatre training must be accessible to everyone, regardless of disability or other minority status. As Matt Hargrave writes in the prologue of *Theatres of Learning Disability*, "If the book has an urgent purpose, it is 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). We can seek out stage management projects in which diversity and human variation are explored, and it is our task to ensure that each artist be given equal opportunity to thrive within and contribute to the artistic endeavor at hand. The artistic work produced by disabled communities does not belong exclusively to a non-mainstreamed audience, subject to a different, inferior, or "good-in-spite-of..." set of aesthetic values.

In *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Simi Linton argues, "Theories are needed ... that conceptualize disabled and nondisabled people as complementary parts of a whole integrated universe" (Linton 120). By embracing physical and cognitive differences in casting and employment, we not only expand the sheer number of people joining the entertainment workforce universe, but we also create shows that are more contemporary reflections of the multicultural face of America, and expand the breadth of critically recognized work available for modern audiences to consume. The stage manager of such productions must be prepared to acknowledge the experiences of artists historically excluded from theatrical ventures and must lead the way in creating an environment that encourages, enables, and empowers the participation of and contributions made by disabled collaborators.

## SECTION I: History, Theory, and Representations of Disability

This section aims to provide a starting point for stage managers about to work on a project with disabled artists, and an entryway into disability studies relevant to our focus on artistic leadership and team-building. Both stage management and disability studies are multidisciplinary fields; they draw on several other areas of study in order to embrace the complexities of individuals and groups in a variety of social and professional settings. Among the perspectives that the stage management team must consider as they prepare for the first day of rehearsal are those Stroman lists in introducing *The Disability Rights Movement From Deinstitutionalization to Self-Determination*:

[M]ultiple disciplinary perspectives are involved in the study of disabilities. Medical science focuses on the symptoms[,] causes and treatment of disabilities, while psychology looks at the personal meanings and other impacts that disabilities have on their recipients, while sociology focuses on societal reactions to those with disabilities ranging from stereotyping, discrimination and legislation. Political scientists focus on the forces that shape legislative responses to disability and the impacts of such legislation while disability theorists give special although certainly not exclusive focus on the personal and social responses to disability (2).

As leaders, it is important for us to recognize the varied forces and approaches to personal and collective identities. Different fields have been more and less prominent in public discourse over time, and thus the prominent worldview of an era is embedded into how one understands historical events. Stage managers collect medical history from the cast so that in the event of an emergency we are prepared to tend to a person's medical health. As rehearsals progress, we observe the dominant psychologies of the people around us so that we can better adjust our own language and communication styles. We are also aware of larger sociological and political trends and current events which inevitably will affect our own attitudes and outlooks and those of our colleagues. As practitioners, we must acknowledge that our work methodologies reflect and are

in conversation with larger social trends, including an increased societal awareness of the legacies of racism, sexism, ableism and other forms of discrimination and intolerance.

When working with disabled performers, it is important for the stage manager to familiarize herself with three broad topics: (1) the history of disability activism, (2) the major academic models of understanding disability itself, and (3) the archetypal representations of disability in the media. First and most obviously, that knowledge strengthens her ability to empathize with her cast and creative team, and to affirm or empower them as challenges arise. But it also provides her with insights into how the disabled artist's nondisabled colleagues, including the stage manager herself, may understand and perceive his disability: perceptions which will shape backstage interactions whether they are explicitly acknowledged or not, and which she must strive to recognize in order to create a healthy and productive working environment. Studying the history of the disability rights movement, the major academic models for defining and conceptualizing disability, and the most common artistic depictions of disability moreover helps the stage manager cultivate her awareness of cultural factors at play and demonstrate her commitment to appreciating disability within the context of social identity and community, which in turn improves her understanding of who the disabled artist is as a person and what he brings into the rehearsal room, and helps her more effectively engage with him. The disability studies literature helps the stage manager understand the community with which the disabled artist may identify and/or how they are understood. Finally, familiarizing herself with these topics can provide tools to establish rapport and trust among the company and to increase the room's sensitivity and awareness of obstacles to inclusion.

### **History of Disability**

The history of western disability begins with the notion of charity and the assumption that it was the responsibility of the disabled person and his family to obtain whatever special accommodations and medical assistance were necessary for him to participate in society. Disability was generally understood as a medical condition or sickness needing to be cured; the burden of pursuing that cure fell upon the individual and his loved ones, and when they were unable to shoulder that burden, the person with disabilities was commonly institutionalized and secluded. Alternatively, certain forms of disability and “otherness” were sensationalized and exploited for financial gain in circuses and freak shows (Kuppers, 45), which similarly deprived them of pathways by which to pursue full and equally valued participation in society. Major social changes in the twentieth century were not necessarily for the better: advancements in technology and genetic breakthroughs saw the rise of eugenics and the idea that disabled people tainted the gene pool. It was for a time considered progressive in the United States to systematically sterilize people with disabilities: an extreme form of exclusion from public life. During the Second World War, the Nazis sent people with disabilities, including ex-circus-starlet Lia Graf, to concentration camps, deeming them “useless” and “life unworthy of life” (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

People with disabilities began to find their voice two decades later, when the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties catalyzed a social movement across multiple categories and types of disabilities that came to a climax in the seventies. Previously, the public had focused its attention on charities and organizations associated with individual disabilities, including blindness, deafness, polio, muscular dystrophy, etc., but the disability rights movement emphasized a collective power of disabled citizens across intersecting racial, gender, sexual, and disability lines. A number of issues such as employment discrimination, harmful societal prejudices and

attitudes, access to public transit, and the need for deinstitutionalized independent living were common to many disabilities; they prompted protests and grass-roots organizing which unified individual disabilities into a single movement. Eventually this led to the passing of federal legislation including revisions to social security establishing Supplemental Security Income (SSI), the Architectural Barriers Act of 1968, the 1973 Rehabilitation Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1975, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 (Stroman, 70). The ADA defines Americans with Disabilities as:

- (1) Any person with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities.
- (2) Any person with a record of such an impairment.
- (3) Any person who is regarded as having such an impairment (Stroman 7).

The first definition is based upon a medical understanding of disability, locating impairment within a person's body, while the other two are social, describing processes in which disability may be imposed externally. Stroman notes, "the ADA of 1990 was important in recognizing that discrimination may occur based on the presumption of the presence of disability even when there is no disability present" (7-8). Social progress fostered the development of disability studies and the establishment of disability as a constitutionally protected class and culturally recognizable minority.

The history of disabled people and of the disability rights movement, including its key contributors and organizations, specific events, and resulting legislation and policies is vast, rich, and extensive; the term "disability" is like a tree trunk from which various branches of study originate and offshoot. The discussion above provides a general primer or an introduction, but the stage manager would also do well to research the specific history of the disabilities relevant to her production. Individual disabilities have histories that stage managers should research as

they are relevant to the script and/or members of the cast. No single disability can in the abstract be highlighted over others; any number of them, from Deafness to cognitive impairment to cerebral palsy, have played a role in legitimizing the experiences of disabled people and in focusing attention upon the social and architectural obstacles to inclusion and accessibility. It is important for stage managers to recognize the value of researching such histories because they shape the collective consciousness and attitudes toward disability present in the rehearsal process. A dramaturg who has been hired for the project will undoubtedly be an invaluable resource, but on the first day of rehearsal how often is it the case that the stage management team is undistracted and fully available to focus on a dramaturgical presentation?

A stage manager who has familiarized herself (and ideally her team) with the history of a particular disability will also have a starting point for eventually learning an actor's personal history (if and when it comes up). As Victoria Ann Lewis writes, "Despite three decades of collective struggle and the passage of several landmark disability civil rights laws, our contemporary streets our theaters and mass media are still haunted by the ghosts of a disability past" (xv). A knowledge of history provides context which serves stage managers in understanding and communicating differing perspectives and initiates critical questions of how we can apply what we have learned from the past to creating a space in the near future or present which provides artists, both disabled and nondisabled, with the support that they need to thrive creatively.

This line of critical questioning inspired by history prepares us to discuss major theories and models of understanding disability, and how surveying these topics directs stage managers in designing a work culture that removes limitations and emphasizes diversity and inclusion.

### **Theory: Models of Disability and Corresponding Language**

Academic texts on disability studies, as well as materials on performance theory and aesthetics specific to disability, typically begin by introducing two or three (or more) models of disability through which the reader can grasp how disability has been theorized and conceptualized throughout history and in contemporary thought. These models of disability are used to define the origin of disability and its intervention, correction, measurement, or treatment (Stroman, 16-17). They inform a number of other fields including language, personal psychology, public opinion, and public policy. The three models most commonly specified are the moral, medical, and social models, all three of which appear prominently in the collaboratively developed play *P.H. \*reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities*. Victoria Ann Lewis and Doris Baizley led a group of disabled writers and actors in Los Angeles in creating and then mounting this play in 1994 as part of the Mark Taper Forum's Other Voices program. In *Bodies in Commotion*, Lewis describes:

In *P.H. \*reaks* we manipulated time and space in order to assign to disabled figures in the past a sociohistorical awareness that would not be articulated until the late twentieth century. The play encompasses three time dimensions corresponding to the division of moral, medical, and movement (minority or social) constructions of disability. The moral encompasses ancient and medieval times; the medical in our version centers on the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and the movement begins in the 1930s, picks up again in the 1970s, continues into the 1990s. By manipulating theatrical time and place, and by doubling and tripling the roles that each actor assumed, we were able to construct characters with multiple manifestations through historical time, whose accumulated experiences of discrimination and prejudice justified their giving voice to an oppressed status (Lewis, 120).

The fact that these models were conscientiously written into dramatic literature (Part One: Magic, Part Two: Medical, Part Three: Movement) is evidence that there is an ongoing conversation between disability studies and theatrical performance, and that stage managers have a place in this exploration given their highly participatory role in taking new works from page to stage.

### *The Moral Model of Disability*

In the moral model of disability, it is assumed that the person with a disability is being punished for his sins, or for the sins of his parents or ancestors, by an all-powerful religious entity (Retief & Letšosa). In this model, the disabled person is morally responsible for his own disability as deemed by a higher power (Disabled World). In *P.H. \*reaks*, the character Father John cries to Wild Man, cast with an actor with a speech impairment, “The devil still controls you!” and asks “What horrible perversity has brought forth this beast?”; Eileen Gardner, Ronald Reagan’s assistant in the Department of Education, allegedly argues that “There is no injustice in the universe... The handicapped assume the lottery of life has penalized them at random. This is not so. Nothing comes to an individual that he has not summoned” (Baizley & Lewis). The cruelty, arbitrariness, and inappropriateness of this perspective need hardly be elaborated.

### *The Medical Model of Disability*

In the medical model, disability is understood as a medical condition existing solely in the body. The model emphasizes treating the disabled person’s condition as a sickness that needs to be cured or eradicated if the individual is to succeed in society. The medical model “... is sometimes referred to as the ‘personal tragedy’ or ‘individual’ model of disability. This model places the burden on the individual and presupposes disability is a ‘problem’. The ‘medical model’ thus became a unifying symbol of ableist society, a ‘normative’ construct that does things *to* disabled subjects rather than *with*: a society dominated by professionals who unquestionably regarded disability as a deficit” (Hargrave 29).

A perfect example of disability as understood through the medical model might be the character Mr. Merrick in Bernard Pomerance’s *The Elephant Man*. Although she is not physically disabled *per se*, Saartjie Baartman (the Venus Hottentot) of Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus*

reflects the scientific racism towards deviant embodiment that underscored early medical practices prior to the twentieth century: a provocative example of a racial stigma being expressed in terms of medical anomaly. The medical model is also closely associated with charities and informed much of the rhetoric of the Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon (see Representations).

The process of defining a human being by his medical history is now widely understood as dehumanizing, and the language born from the drive to retire the medical model is “person with disability” (PWD), or “person-first” language.

*The Social Model of Disability and the Identity Model of Disability*

In the social model, disability is understood as a primarily social construction where disability exists outside of one’s own body. Koppers explains:

... the disability experience is split into two moments. The first is ‘impairment’: a relatively neutral term for a particular embodiment, for instance blindness, using a wheelchair or a cane, needing help with reading. The second term, ‘disability’, appears at the moment when this particular impairment enters the value scheme of a particular society. As long as a society’s aesthetics... allow for difference, no disability exists. In a society that has gently sloping ramps or level entrances to most buildings, someone who does not locomote easily on two has relatively few problems. Likewise, in a society that values many different kinds of knowledge, someone with a print disability or who is unable to read, or with cognitive difference, could still be understood to be a wisdom-holder (Koppers, 7-8).

Theatre practitioners such as Stephanie Barton-Farcas demonstrate inclusion and accommodation reflecting the social model through the ways in which they take responsibility for providing accessible materials and physical space, and how they value differences as strengths in a diverse world. In *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the main character's special education teacher, Siobhan, exemplifies this model when she convinces the headmistress to allow the school to administer the advanced A-Level mathematics test for Christopher Boone, the protagonist on the Autism spectrum. Siobhan recognizes that making Christopher wait until he is eighteen to take this test, as is typical at this school, would be an unnecessary obstacle and

would waste an opportunity for her student to validate his unusually adroit mathematical prowess. The test was important to Christopher because he knew that it was a critical step in advancing his education and working towards college admission. By convincing the headmistress to move forward with the test and coordinating the logistics of securing a testing space and a proctor, Siobhan helped Christopher bypass disabling policies which would have otherwise prevented him from achieving a major milestone in both his educational and personal development.

A cousin of the social model is the identity model in which disabled people are a recognized minority group. Brueggemann notes:

Under an identity model, disability is primarily defined by a certain type of experience in the world – a social and political experience of the effects of a social system not designed with disabled people in mind... Because the disability experience is socially constructed, the identity model largely depends on the social model. The difference between the social model and the identity model is that the latter claims disability as a positive identity, a way to describe oneself and to be part of a community, in a way that the former does not by definition entail (5).

The language born out of the social and identity models is “disabled person”, or identity-first language, recognizing that the word “disabled” is less indicative of medical history, but rather of a shared cultural identity similar to the distinction between deaf (little “d” meaning hearing loss) and Deaf (big “D” meaning that the person is a member of the larger Deaf community). Sarah Norman from *Children of a Lesser God* is the quintessential character of the identity model expressing the power of Deaf pride through lines like "I can't say what I feel about being deaf through a hearing person" and "Until you let me be an individual, an *I*, just as you are, you will never truly be able to come inside my silence and know me." The identity politics of this play predate the term *identity politics* itself and provide a lens through which we can understand the success and media attention of the Deaf President Now (DPN) protest at Gallaudet University in

1988 which resulted in the appointment of I. King Jordan. Appointing the first Deaf president of "the world's only university in which all programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students" sparked momentum to galvanize support for what would eventually become the Americans with Disabilities Act two years later (Fast Facts).

Because it frames people with disabilities as a community to be accommodated and welcomed (rather than as degenerates to be disdained, as the moral model dictates, or sufferers with a responsibility to cure themselves, as the medical model proposes), the social and identity models of disability lead stage managers to consider architectural barriers to accessing rehearsal space, as well as the initial social reactions and perceptions of nondisabled collaborators. Questions for stage managers inspired by the social model include: Are the hallways of our rehearsal space big enough for a wheelchair of x and y dimensions to turn around completely? Do we need any scripts printed in large font? Do we need to ensure that our signage is also labelled in braille?

A stage manager who has absorbed both a preliminary history of disability and an overview of the models of understanding disability (moral, medical, and social) is equipped to deconstruct how disability is presented through canonical artworks and mass media. The ability to evaluate these images and representations is especially critical because it allows the stage manager to place her production's creative process within the context of previous depictions of disability, and to identify how the current project aims to participate in the dismantling or amplifying of these representations.

### **Representations of Disability: Victims and Villains**

Having an overview of the history and theory surrounding disability prepares us to examine how historical stereotypes are established, ingrained, and perpetuated through cultural

works, and how such depictions of disability inform the artists and artistic endeavors with which we stage manage. The representations in the media and the arts shape how we view, understand, and interpret disability. If we recognize what those representations have been, and how those representations do or do not serve us in meeting a real person, we can start deconstructing our own understanding of disability as we have seen or experienced it, as distinct from what we have been told previously by external forces.

Critically focusing on archetypes is particularly important if a member of the company has never met someone with a disability before, because that nondisabled colleague's only exposure to disability prior to this project may have been through characters often disabled as plot devices ("narrative prosthesis") rather than disabled as an authentic representation of a real person (Mitchell and Snyder). The characters of Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol* and Captain Hook from *Peter Pan* typify how disabled people are codified into two major archetypes: victims and villains. The proliferation of these two archetypes is significant enough to merit a place in the title of Victoria Ann Lewis's anthology *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights*. In the introduction, she describes an ordinary moment of crossing the street with a colleague. This colleague was wearing a tailored three-piece suit and also drove an electric wheelchair. As they were about to cross, a woman dropped money into his lap because "for this charitable passerby the only explanation for the presence of a significantly disabled person in a public setting was that he must be a beggar" (xiv). She recounts how insulted she felt on behalf of her colleague and uses this anecdote as a segue into introducing the anthology. She argues that "contesting one's status as a tragic-but-brave object of charity would most likely only result in being labeled as its opposite, the only other role available, that of the bitter cripple, eager to attack and revenge him/herself upon the more fortunate, nondisabled world. The

typecasting of the person with a disability has been set for centuries -- either ‘victim’ or villain” (xiv-xv).

Note that both victims and villains are situated as “lesser than” relatable heroes. The unwarranted and unsolicited charitable gesture Lewis describes exemplifies the same sense of superiority with which disabled characters have often been written by nondisabled authors. In the case of the villain, this character is resentful of their supposedly rightful place as a second-class citizen and is motivated by jealousy to cause harm to befall others. In the case of the victim, this character is deemed saintly or inspirational for accomplishing ordinary tasks such as getting out of bed in the morning and leaving the house or for riding the bus to go to work. The villain must be shunned while the victim must be coddled. Both reactions are inappropriate and yet both are still highly commonplace.

The annual Muscular Dystrophy Association’s Jerry Lewis Labor Day Telethon is an example of how the victim archetype was perpetuated in mainstream media. Jerry Lewis retired from the telethon in 2011 and in subsequent years the MDA renamed the event the Show of Strength Telethon until the organization decided to end the tradition on May 1st, 2015 (MDA website). Jerry Lewis helped the MDA raise millions of dollars from the late fifties until his retirement, but criticism of the telethon’s rhetoric reveals a narrative of pitying people with disabilities, assuming that they are suffering, broken, helpless, and unable to lead rich and fulfilling lives. “Jerry’s Kids” were poster children chosen for their innocence and ability to convince viewers to donate money by tapping into their pity and fear that a curse as terrible as physical disability could potentially befall someone in their own family (Haller 137). Grown-up “Jerry’s Kids” led by Mike Ervin protested the telethon by forming a group called Jerry’s Orphans and sought to end the event because of the stigma and oppression it created by treating

children with muscular dystrophy, and their families, as props within an ableist narrative; a narrative which heightened Jerry Lewis as a humanitarian in the eyes of nondisabled people and as a hero or savior worthy of unconditional worship in the eyes of his “children” (Ervin). As Laura Hershey writes, “For years we had been protesting against the barriers which keep people with disabilities from using buses, public buildings, and other facilities. Now we were taking on one of the biggest barriers of all: the paternalistic attitudes which prevail in our society, and which are reflected so dramatically in the annual telethon” (Hershey). The orphans felt that the telethon was patronizing, condescending, and unnecessary for funding the services and equipment required for independent living and locomotion (The Kids are Alright). Moreover, they hoped that the public would recognize the telethon’s underlying bigotry and assumptions of superiority when Jerry Lewis published an article “If I Had Muscular Dystrophy” in Parade Magazine on September 2, 1990 in which he describes a wheelchair as a “steel imprisonment” and having muscular dystrophy as making someone a “half a person” that “cannot expect the outside world to assist... in more ways than they already do, and [being] most grateful for the help receive[d].” Naturally, it would be unprofessional for stage managers to infantilize any member of the company. Taking a page from Jerry Lewis’s book would be offensive, but looking closely at the telethon also serves as a significant cultural touchstone for how disability was aired on national television and how the “pity party” was broadcast into the homes and minds of American people across several decades.

Other major controversies surrounding disability depiction in film include “Million Dollar Baby”, “Whose Life is it Anyway?”, and “Tropic Thunder”. The first and second films implicated the “victim” trope, invoking disabled characters as figures of pity and raising questions about how much (or how little) society values their lives. The third made disability an

object of supposed comedy – “butt of the joke” might be an even more trivializing and othering representation than either “victim” or “villain” -- and heightened an awareness of the usage of the word “*retarded*,” or the R-word (Haller).

It is imperative to consider artistic representations of disability not only in order to examine the perceptions held by stage managers and actors, but also in order to examine those held by the audience. As collaborators in the rehearsal room, we are ultimately a new work’s first audience and charged with bringing the work to a larger audience over the course of the rehearsal and production process. Victoria Ann Lewis quotes, “‘Most of any present is made up of the past,’ critic Terry Eagleton notes in his discussion of cultural change. Our perception and experience of the present moment is made possible by our considerable inheritance from the past in the form of language and social structures” (Lewis, xiv). If we can articulate how a new work’s representation of disability compares with historical representations, we can better understand how the material being developed is in conversation (or not) with audience expectations and preconceived notions: whether it challenges them, rebuts them, complicates them, complements them, or simply plays into the same old insulting tropes.

## SECTION II: Interviews

This section compiles and critically examines interviews conducted with four disability-conscious theatre practitioners with experience working in New York City. Each of these conversations uniquely reflected the values and interests of the interviewee while exploring perspectives on artistic leadership and topics pertaining to disability on a day-to-day basis. The nature of stage management requires that we communicate and interact with all of a theatre company's departments, from production to design and management, to the front of house, and even to press and publicity.

### **Stephanie Barton-Farcas**

Artistic Director (Nicu's Spoon Theater Company)

Thursday, February 28th, 2019

Stephanie Barton-Farcas founded Nicu's Spoon, the first radically inclusive theatre company in New York City in 2001, and recently compiled her years of experience into one of the few books written about theatre and disability from a practical, day-to-day perspective. She went to a United States Institute for Theatre Technology conference (USITT) and met the senior editor of Routledge while lamenting the lack of literature published on non-theoretical approaches to including disability in the creation of live theatre. Thus, Barton-Farcas wrote the book on the topic (*Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*). Accessibility and sharing her wealth of knowledge is a core value underscoring both her book and the sample Microsoft Word documents and pre-production paperwork included as additional resources available online. For her next book, *Acting & Auditioning for the 21st Century: Tips, Trends, and Techniques for Digital and New Media*, Barton-Farcas intends to record and publish an audiobook format, expanding the number of ways in which a disabled audience can consume her material.

One of the most prominent anecdotes regarding inclusion in stage management in Barton-Farcas's work concerns a young man named Marco Naranjo (a separate interview with Naranjo can be found below). Barton-Farcas calls Naranjo "sharp as a tack" and "has had his share of frustration trying to make his way in the world." She describes how The Secret Theatre in Long Island City, Queens had originally placed their technical booth on the ground level but that Nicu's Spoon unexpectedly discovered that after The Secret Theatre made renovations, the booth was moved upstairs, only accessible via ladder. Naranjo, the assistant stage manager on this show, uses an electric wheelchair and consequently was unable to go upstairs to run projections on *Red Noses* as originally planned. Their solution was to re-route the projector cabling to an accessible location backstage with clear visibility of the onstage action. There was no headset communication between Naranjo backstage and Juni, the stage manager upstairs running lights, so he took his own cues from a script that he had prepared over the course of tech. Barton-Farcas emphasizes that:

Many companies would not have bothered to do all that rewiring (or possibly would not have hired Marco to begin with) as it was time-consuming, but I made sure we did it because that is what we do and it was important for Marco and his future career that he know how to run things like this. He needed the experience... For him, as a disabled stage manager, it becomes about connections and recommendations, what he has already done, and *what he can do*. He can organize, coordinate, and delegate, but he cannot ... build his own ramp. Unfortunately, most of the time, even in New York City, there is no access and no ramp and one has to be built or he has to turn down the work. This is not his fault, it is ours, it is the architects and theatre owners. How can he build a career if once he is hired he cannot get into the spaces? (167-168).

In terms of theatre architecture, she firmly agrees that backstage areas including the booth and dressing rooms intended to serve theatre personnel are not given the same accessibility considerations as front of house which caters to ticket-purchasing guests. She argues that if a theatre receives any endowments, that a portion of these funds should be earmarked for building

ramps to enable wheelchair mobility and making provisions to provide accessible performances: ASL-interpreted, sensory-friendly, providing onstage tactile tours for blind patrons, etc.

Barton-Farcas concurs that the words we use in conversations shape societal values, so she utilizes what she calls “artist-first” language -- referring to artists simply by their names. She asserts that this does not erase or ignore a person’s disability, but rather normalizes it because a person’s disability only becomes relevant when there is a safety issue or if it is specifically related to the physical action directed onstage. By referring to an artist by his name alone, we acknowledge the fact that his disability is part of his identity and personhood, and thus the conversation centers on the work itself and the collaborative process. This allows aspects of disability to become an assumed, established, and literally unremarkable presence in the background, leaving space for the room to shift its attention productively on the art it is creating.

Language in the rehearsal room will also inform the language of the press used to promote the show. With the help of stage management, she will address the cast and ask if anyone does not want to be interviewed through “a disability angle.” Some artists may be more open about sharing their disabling experiences than others, especially depending upon whether their disability was recently acquired or congenital. Coincidentally, Barton-Farcas uses the exact same phrase as Marybeth Abel of “a whole different ball of wax” to signify the difference, and naturally the way in which a particular actor is waxing in relation to his disability at the time will determine his level of enthusiasm about interacting with the press. Although it ultimately falls upon general management to oversee press releases, stage management will naturally be involved with surveying the cast and relaying specifics pertaining to different actors’ preferences. If an artist does not wish to speak about a particular aspect of his identity, experience, or medical history, he should not be compelled to do so. Just as spoken language

shapes the room's attitudes during rehearsal, the written and photographic language of the press will help shape the audience's expectations before they come to see the production. Barton-Farcas is a proponent of neither cropping out, obscuring, hiding, nor photoshopping identifiers of disability including prosthetics, wheelchairs, crutches, seeing-eye dogs, etc., because including this visual information promotes a positive and accurate representation of her company. Imagery contributes as much to fostering inclusion as written and verbal language. All methods of communication should be in sync, marching to the same mission underpinning the company. She understands the role that language and communication play in educating nondisabled audience members, and she realizes that educating nondisabled audience members begins before they come to the theatre and (hopefully) continues after they leave.

Barton-Farcas describes a range of reactions she encounters while educating nondisabled people on what it means to be inclusive and accessibility-minded. She negotiated with her publisher over the inclusion of both the audiobook format and the Microsoft Word document versions of her sample paperwork. The publisher did not object outright to these inclusions, but needed Barton-Farcas to explain why they were necessary. Barton-Farcas was originally inspired to write her book because she found that theatre companies were not necessarily sharing which tools and resources had worked well on their productions with other companies trying to become more inclusive themselves. Her Microsoft Word documents are intended to serve as modifiable templates and worksheets, while her audiobook provides access to written material for blind readers. In Barton-Farcas's example, the other party was open to acknowledging that there was more it could do to fulfill a greater vision of accessibility.

When Barton-Farcas works on a production that has cast both disabled and nondisabled actors, she establishes protocol and sets the tone on the very first day of rehearsal. She will

instruct the nondisabled cast members on matters of etiquette while disabled artists are present to share and disclose information as they desire. She leads with honesty, transparency, and open-mindedness. Her goal is to stimulate an environment in which people ask each other questions rather than make incorrect assumptions, and everyone is invited to freely play and explore creatively in the rehearsal process. As far as the stage manager is concerned, Barton-Farcas relies upon the stage manager as the captain of a ship relies on the first mate. She trusts her stage managers to inform her of the things she needs to know while protecting the privacy of privileged information coming from actors and other members of the creative team. Such productions remind us that across theatre, film, television, and other artistic media an enormous debate still rages about best practices to adopt governing writing and casting. Disabled actors are devalued when roles portraying disability are given to nondisabled actors, so the more we can do to teach others that disabled artists are talented and available, the more often they will be employed. Barton-Farcas's sincerest wish for changing the world is in "making people in power, people who cast, people who train, who have money, meet disabled artists" because putting these two groups together has a huge impact when it results in both disabled and nondisabled artists working side by side on the same projects.

She is well versed in the ADA and hopes that in the future a task force of disabled people will reassess the 1990 legislation to address accessibility online among other areas of daily life including higher education and reproductive healthcare. More specifically to the theatre industry, she hopes that Equity will work towards strengthening their support for disabled artists through the terms of our contracts and the language used to describe them. Barton-Farcas recognizes that although "not every theatre is working with disabled artists and not every theatre needs accessibility, [Actors' Equity Association] should have an entire rider of provisions for working

with disabled artists” to specify accessibility requirements. Preferably, these conditions would be written independently of the ADA, while making references to specific passages, such as the one quoted in Section I defining Americans with Disabilities and building ramps. She recommends that such a rider can be modified and appended to contracts at all levels from The Broadway League down to New York City Showcase Codes.

Asked about the role she feels labor unions could or should be playing in advancing disabled people, Barton-Farcas emphasizes a lack of accessible pathways into entertainment industry unions in the first place as part of the problem. Yale has accepted a disabled actress into its MFA program, Jessica Yates of the class of 2021, and the University of California, San Diego is the alma mater of Reagan Linton, now the Artistic Director of PHAMALY Theatre Company in Denver. However, these instances of educational institutions training disabled artists and preparing them for their chosen careers in conservatory settings remain exceptional. Such programs often include the opportunity to join Actors’ Equity Association, but if we are not admitting and training disabled artists, then we are not diversifying the talent pool. The same could be said for training disabled stage managers. Barton-Farcas wholeheartedly feels that everyone, including our unions, can do more to educate themselves and others about the social barriers to inclusion and issues surrounding disability, access, and equal employment opportunities.

Discussing representations of disability inspired Barton-Farcas to elaborate on her casting process. It is important to her that she cast according to talent and not according to disability so that both the actor and audience will have the opportunity to see people in roles that they had never considered possible previously. She describes depictions of disability as “saints and sinners” echoing Victoria Ann Lewis’s anthology *Beyond Victims and Villains*. She actively

avoids "overcoming narratives" in which disabled people are praised for ordinary, unremarkable accomplishments. The trope of deeming disabled people in these settings as courageous and brave is codified as "inspiration porn". Inspiration porn (often viral videos on social media) centers focus on the nondisabled character as a hero and champion of equality, casts the disabled character as an object of pity, and gives permission for a predominantly nondisabled audience to feel *inspired*. Barton-Farcas agrees that effective theatre should inspire people, but not in a way that reinforces the idea that disabled people are innately inferior. She also makes a point of casting disabled people in sexually charged roles in an effort to dismantle ill-informed notions that disabled people cannot or do not have the ability to live sensually and romantically rich lives. She casts disabled artists as parents, workers, and dancers and warriors when the occasion calls for choreography and fight sequences. She directed a production of *Richard III* in which a woman took off her prosthetic leg, beat a little person to death with it, and then dragged herself offstage which was well-received and highly memorable for the audience. She casually proposes to "open up some brains a bit",<sup>1</sup> a reference to the fact that she wants her audience to dismiss the notion that disabled people should be limited to only certain roles and environments. Barton-Farcas considers this kind of unconsciously-held bias to be the result of a widespread lack of socially endorsed vision or creativity on behalf of disabled people and the value they add to society.

She agrees that there is a relationship between how disability is represented in art and media and how it is understood by its audience, because "art and media inform everything" and plays a significant role in "training and teaching the nondisabled to expand their worldview."

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<sup>1</sup> A particularly striking turn of phrase in light of Nicu's Spoon's recent 2011 production called *How the Day Runs On*, which set *Our Town* in the middle of a George A. Romero style zombie apocalypse.

This has been a core value for Nicu's Spoon since the very beginning and informs the artistic approach of other companies including Los Angeles based Deaf West Theatre.

**David Sugarman**

Freelance Stage Manager (Deaf West, Broadway League)

Wednesday, February 27th, 2019

David Sugarman was the first assistant stage manager on the 2015 Deaf West revival of *Spring Awakening*. Prior to *Spring Awakening*, he had seen Deaf West's first musical production, *Big River*, and then worked on their production of *Pippin*. He came to work with this company having no previous exposure to Deafness or disability.

Sugarman sought to communicate more effectively with his Deaf artists, taking some American Sign Language (ASL) classes before starting to work with Deaf West (he would come to wish he had taken more). He reports feeling immersed into an entirely new culture with its own history, artistry, controversies, and interpretation and language. Interactions that we as stage managers would normally take for granted, like chatting backstage, become much harder with less mastery of ASL. "[O]ne of the other things I learned about myself [was] how much of having a relationship with people is based on language, and if you don't have that..."

Sugarman quickly encountered a rebuttal of the medical model of disability: he learned early that not all Deaf people considered themselves disabled or impaired for living in the world without verbally speaking or hearing, and thus working with Deaf actors brought to light incorrect assumptions: that all Deaf people lip-read, that sign language is universal across the world, and that signing a written script is a simple and clear-cut matter of translation. While many people can lip-read it is not always the case, ASL is only one of over one hundred different signed languages, and adapting ASL for performance is highly involved. It requires a sense of detailed choreography, careful consideration for and interpretation of the text and its style,

cohesion with other artistic elements, and reinforcement of major themes. It is an art form unto itself. Sugarman describes the ASL department as another arm of the creative and artistic team alongside the director, designers, and all of their corresponding assistants and associates. Related to ASL and accessibility, he recalls that calling the supertitle projections used in scenes performed exclusively in sign language was a challenge because of the high volume of visual lighting cues it created that he had to watch closely through backstage monitors.

Through Deaf West, he also came to recognize nuances of navigating in between hearing and deaf settings, especially when an interpreter would need to be present. He relates that “that can be very political and sticky also.” Sugarman reports wishing that he had known more ASL and had been more aware of sensitive topics and issues in Deaf culture: Alexander Graham Bell and oralism (teaching deaf students to speak and lip-read, often in a setting where ASL is forbidden), the extent to which speech is still emphasized in the classroom and in daily life, cochlear implants, and who provides or pays for interpreting services at social gatherings. Sugarman’s involvement with Deaf West is significant because “since *Spring Awakening* there’s been a lot of Deaf culture getting into mainstream performing arts.” Deaf theatrical performance has gained traction in the years since *Spring Awakening*. Many of the actors who made their Broadway debuts in this production have gone on to make other Broadway and regional appearances, including Ali Stroker, Russell Harvard, Joshua Castille, Alex Boniello, and Treshelle Edmond.

In addition to Deaf West, Sugarman’s stage management career has intersected with disability through autism-friendly performances on Broadway. The Theatre Development Fund (TDF) coordinates the planning and execution of relaxed performances (also called autism-friendly or sensory-friendly performances) in which autistic people and their families are invited

to see technically modified Broadway shows. Like Marybeth Abel (the production stage manager of *Wicked*, interviewed separately below), Sugarman finds such shows impactful for audience members and performers alike. Performances often sell out within a few hours of tickets becoming available because the demand for these performances far exceeds the supply. Unfortunately, they are not offered more frequently because developing an autism-friendly version of the show requires additional tech time, and in some cases, full orchestral rehearsals so that the performers will know what to expect differently in terms of their technical cues. The productions that tend to offer relaxed performances are often Disney-affiliated, spectacular family-friendly musicals, and successful long-running shows.

Sugarman has been involved in such performances with three different companies: *Mary Poppins*, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, and *Cats*. The process used by TDF and its Autism Theatre Initiative (ATI) involves close collaboration with Lisa Carling, the Director of Accessibility Programs, and Harry Smolin, a young man with autism who is an avid theatre-lover (Viswanathan). TDF consultants watch the show as originally executed, and then advise the company on how to adjust technical elements to better accommodate autistic audience members and their families. For stage management and technical crew, these changes include leaving house lights up throughout the performance, bringing sound levels down to ninety decibels or lower, and assessing other special effects. For house management, there are quiet areas and activity corners set up in the lobby for patrons to take a break in a calm environment with minimal sensory stimulation and highly trained volunteers distributing fidget spinners and stress balls in conjunction with ushers and other front of house personnel.

After the cast is rehearsed and TDF watches and approves the implemented changes, they provide an informational training to everyone backstage to prepare them for an autism-friendly

audience. Sugarman and Abel both report that the most memorable aspect of this preparation was the speech that Smolin had prepared for the casts: Smolin sets the company up for success by explaining what seemingly unconventional behaviors they can expect from the audience (leaving their seats and coming back again, flapping, self-stimming, constantly moving, walking through the aisles, etc.) and what it means to him personally to have the opportunity to see live theatre and share the experience with others who are on the Autism spectrum (Fierberg). Sugarman recalls how emotionally powerful and touching Harry Smolin's words were. Smolin began his career as a consultant with TDF as a teenager when they first launched the program. Having done a few of these performances, Sugarman reiterates to his cast that they will be more aware of seeing their audience and that it will be an emotional experience participating in a relaxed performance because they will know right away how special and impactful these opportunities are. Both Broadway stage managers enjoy these performances immensely and appreciate what it means to provide an inclusive and non-judgmental environment for this underserved community comprised of individuals who would otherwise be unable to go to the theatre with their families. As a stage manager, it will become important to understand the gravity and mission of these performances, but also to maintain the promptbook recording the technical cueing as part of the show's long-term maintenance along with supervising swings, understudies, and performance coverage.

Sugarman's experience on *Spring Awakening* highlights the problem of disabled mimicry, the practice of using a nondisabled actor to portray a role written for a disabled character. For many years in Hollywood, it has been acceptable to cast famous nondisabled stars in roles in which they would depict mental illness or disability, several of whom have won Oscars for their performances. Because so few opportunities exist for disabled performers to

work at the highest levels of film and television production, the act of overlooking their talent in favor of a big name is increasingly viewed as inappropriate. In casting the understudies for *Spring Awakening*, Sugarman was faced with the challenge of reconciling the company's desire to be respectful and politically correct with its need to make money efficiently: hearing actors had been selected to cover the roles of Deaf performers. The cast of *Spring Awakening* consisted of two main groups, the teenagers and the adults. Of the adults, there were two women (one hearing who spoke and one Deaf who signed) and two men (also one hearing and one Deaf). These four principal adult roles were divided between two hearing understudies. The female understudy covered the two female roles and the male understudy covered the two male roles. It seemed that hiring two Deaf actors to cover these four roles would not be possible because oralism in education was a major theme, and thus it was an integral part of the artistic vision of the show that certain parts be performed in spoken English while others were signed. This made possible a scenario in which a hearing performer would go onstage for a Deaf part. Because *Spring Awakening* was a limited engagement, and for the most part management could anticipate when Deaf performers were taking time off, they hired interim replacement Deaf performers to cover these roles, but Sugarman expresses concern that if the show had run longer, it would have been the case that a hearing understudy would perform in ASL in Deaf roles for the sake of commercial expediency. Why would a producer employ four people to stand-by backstage each night just in case an actor called out when it would be more cost-effective to only hire two? These decisions are outside of the control of stage management, but since we work so closely with both upper management and the cast, it is vital to understand how coverage calculations are received and handled.

When offered the opportunity to stage manage a production which clearly strives for inclusion in its artistic representation of disability onstage, Sugarman advises open-mindedness, learning as much as possible, asking questions, and not making any assumptions. Although it can be embarrassing to discover that a particular behavior or turn of phrase once thought to be acceptable is no longer correct, we must not let a fear of making such missteps prevent us from serving and facilitating the process. From working with Deaf West, he has gained “respect, admiration, and interest in the world of Deaf culture and ASL... and awareness of all these things that [he] didn’t even know were issues.” His experiences were eye-opening and he hopes to work with this company again in the future either in Los Angeles or on Broadway.

**Marybeth Abel**

Production Stage Manager (*Wicked*)

Saturday, March 16th, 2019

Marybeth Abel was interviewed in the interest of exploring acquired disability in stage management on Broadway. In introducing how acquired disability affected her personally, she described her experience as “a whole new ball of wax” because she had never sustained a workplace injury before and had used very few sick days over the course of her career. In November of 2017, she fell in the lighting booth during the first act and knew immediately that she had seriously hurt herself on the job. She was then carried out of the booth and placed into a spare wheelchair backstage. The show went on, and the associate director, who happened to be in the theatre that night, recommended that Abel go to the urgent care in the associate director’s neighborhood and then see a specific doctor that she recommended the next morning. At urgent care and with the doctor, Abel discovered the severity of her injury. She would have to stay in bed twenty-four hours a day with her foot elevated for three weeks before surgery to reduce the

swelling. After surgery, she had to stay in bed for eighteen hours a day for four weeks before eventually returning to work in a boot and a knee scooter “in the dead of winter”.

Abel repeatedly reiterates how fortunate she was, both in the moments immediately following her injury and throughout the long-term recovery process, to be working on a highly successful Broadway hit musical and to have the support of the entire staff working at *Wicked* as a community to help her. She remembers telling herself that she had to focus on her personal healing and know that the rest of the stage management team would be successful in rehearsing and “putting in” new actors without her. She describes her inner dialogue at the time, “The show *will* go on. The show will be maintained beautifully. I have to just step back and not worry about it.” Beyond her own team, upper management made sure that she had the accommodations that she needed (the doctor ordered her not to walk across the angled, raked stage in the dark) and her worker’s compensation claim took effect swiftly and continues presently at the time of this writing. In the class that she teaches for Columbia students, she continually emphasizes the importance of learning everyone’s names and establishing relationships not only with the cast and the crew but also with security guards, cleaning staff, porters, ushers, and house managers. During her recovery period when she was unable to use stairs, she had the rapport with staff members to ask them to turn on escalators for her, easing navigation throughout the building. Because she had taken an interest in the people around her and invested the time and energy into being on a first name basis, these coworkers came to her aid in ways that would have been unexpected before her injury. The standard training that the front of house staff had received in accommodating patrons with disabilities ended up benefitting Abel as well. She speaks highly of the level of ADA compliance at the Gershwin and how much easier it was for wheelchair-using audience members to see *Wicked* as opposed to seeing a performance in a pre-1950 venue.

From this topic, wheelchair use on Broadway entered the conversation in a variety of ways from current productions to Abel's previous experiences. The Circle in the Square Theatre neighbors The Gershwin and is currently home to the St. Ann's Warehouse *Oklahoma!* revival. Ali Stroker, the first wheelchair-using actress to debut on Broadway in the 2015 Deaf West production of *Spring Awakening*, plays Ado Annie Carnes. This character's most well-known song is "I Cain't Say No" which describes her unwillingness or inability to decline sexual or romantic advances from attractive gentlemen. By casting a wheelchair-using actress, the audience must confront their preconceived notions regarding paraplegia and sexuality since Ado Annie Carnes is an unmistakable romantic female lead. From the perspective of logistics, it means that the stage managers and the creative team must confront issues of architectural access that stand in an actor's pathway backstage and establish which wheelchair will go onstage, in addition to the usual considerations for costuming and dressing room space which occur universally in any production.

Physical access and onstage mobility were themes that had come up for Abel even before her injury. Before coming to *Wicked*, Abel was the production stage manager on *Les Misérables* and she shared an anecdote about a "walk-on" experience. For several years, *Les Misérables* auctioned off a "walk-on" to benefit the not-for-profit Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS Broadway Flea Market & Grand Auction, an event which takes places annually in the Theatre District. The winning walk-on participant would have the opportunity to wear a costume and appear onstage with the cast during a live show amongst the ensemble during a large musical number. They would be taken downstairs to wardrobe located in the basement for a costume, and experience the show from the perspective of a performer. It was like a backstage tour combined with being an extra background actor. Unbeknownst to Abel, the winner of that evening's walk-

on used a wheelchair but the Imperial Theatre where *Les Misérables* was playing had a step from the backstage area on the street level to the deck on stage and there was no elevator down to the basement. The stage management office on the street level was originally a dressing room before it had been converted, so for that evening, the stage management team cleared a station for the walk-on participant so that she would have an accessible dressing room. Her wheelchair was modern, so it was not going to fit artistically within the world of the French Revolution. Luckily, there was a prop cart that the participant said she could sit in while an ensemble member pushed her after being lifted over the single step between backstage and the deck. Ensemble members were portrayed as destitute miscreants, some with disabilities or untreated medical conditions, and the cast and crew ultimately found that evening's performance richer and particularly memorable having someone with a disability join them onstage in the process of presenting *Les Misérables* for a Broadway audience. This anecdote highlights several themes of stage management and disability: physical access backstage, quick problem solving, maintaining the artistic integrity of a show while addressing performer needs, and depicting disability and the authenticity that comes from including disabled performers.

In *Wicked*, Nessarose (the Wicked Witch of the East in the Land of Oz) uses a wheelchair for most of her performance up until a point in the second act where she dons a pair of legendary enchanted shoes and she is magically and miraculously granted the ability to walk upright. The fact that Nessarose must walk bipedally during this scene means that casting a wheelchair-using actress has not been considered a viable option in the past, even though the musical already utilizes Foy rigging and employs ensemble members to fly across the stage as winged monkeys. In Abel's personal experience, she recounts how fortunate she felt that the spare Nessarose wheelchair stored in the rehearsal room was available for her to use in the immediate aftermath

of her worksite injury. She also emphasizes how invaluable the backstage elevator and front of house escalators were throughout her recovery. The Gershwin Theatre, owned and operated by The Nederlander Organization, opened in 1972, so it is one of the newer Broadway houses, and, as a result, it is more architecturally accessible to navigate in a prop wheelchair or in a post-operative knee scooter.

As the conversation came to a natural close, Abel reflected upon how her experience with disability shaped her current perspectives. The fact that *Wicked* has a rehearsal hall in the same accessible building as the stage is a rarity, and it means that Abel does not have to negotiate multiple work sites. She is hesitant to pursue developmental work or new projects outside of *Wicked* because the number of stairs in a building and physical access are considerations that are now at the forefront of her daily routine. As a result, she has a new relationship with performers and dancers who are injured who leave the show to go on disability either temporarily or permanently. Previously, her interactions with these cast members had been more clinical and procedural, and within management, the logistical question had always been a matter of who would come in to fill the role. Now, she empathizes more profoundly and finds that she can empower cast members to pursue their recovery as positively and productively as possible by sharing her own experience. She questions what would have happened if she had been in a different theatre and if she would have been able to return to work at all.

The “what if” questions of Abel’s hypothetical scenario are reality for Marco Naranjo in his early career as a freelance non-union stage manager in the off-off-Broadway arena.

**Marco Naranjo**

Assistant Stage Manager (Nicu’s Spoon)

Saturday, March 9th, 2019

Marco Naranjo graduated from Pace University in 2014 with a bachelor of arts in English with minors in Theatre and Creative Writing. He is an aspiring stage manager and uses an electric wheelchair. He is featured in Barton-Farcas's book in a case study in chapter two titled "What is Inclusion?" which explores his role as the assistant stage manager on Nicu's Spoon 2015 production of *Red Noses*. He is driven and ambitious, but also keenly aware of the various barriers and external limitations which stall his career advancement, primarily physical architecture and access to a network of professionals under whom he can continue to hone his skills. Unlike Abel, his disability is congenital and he has used a wheelchair since he was very young. He has always had a visible disability, so the calculations of maneuvering through the MTA elevators, when they are in fact in service, and locating ramps, curb cuts, and automatic doors is second nature to him. By sharing Marco Naranjo's various experiences, we can better understand his personal history, his insights, and struggles. By noting the challenges that he faces, we can learn how we can participate in the removal of barriers that inhibit his upward mobility and work towards creating an inclusive culture within stage management.

Naranjo credits his love of the theatre beginning with the Broadway shows he saw with his mom while growing up in New York City. They saw several shows a year because they took advantage of discounted tickets and by the time he started researching colleges to attend after high school he was initially interested in Pace because of its proximity to and standing relationship with "Inside the Actors Studio." He dabbled in theatre mostly serving as an ASM due to a lack of backstage accessibility. The rehearsal spaces at Pace were accessible but unfortunately, the wings, crossover spaces, technical booth, and backstage hallways and storage areas were not, a common occurrence in New York City. By the time the productions he worked on at Pace moved into the performance auditorium, Naranjo moved into the audience and

worked almost entirely from the house timing scenes, generating paperwork, and taking notes. It removed his ability to carry out duties backstage and it cut him off from coordinating and communicating in real time with the rest of the stage management team, cast, and crew because he did not have a headset. At the time he went to Pace, he reports that they did not have headsets in their inventory, or, if they did, they were not utilized. He helped preset during pre-show and clean up during post-show where possible, but it was highly discouraging to hear that his experiences as an assistant stage manager excluded running a deck track, managing backstage traffic, and interfacing with everyone involved behind the scenes during the run of performances. Thus far, he has not managed assistants himself but he has executed productions in which he collaborated closely with the director and the cast to assign backstage duties in the absence of an assistant or crew member working underneath of him.

By the end of his time at Pace, he had grown disheartened over the fact that the academic administrators had told him that he was not allowed to double major in both English and Theatre. This seemed counterintuitive because he watched other colleagues complete their double majors and he did not understand the logic or reasoning behind why he was prevented from doing the same. Overall, he felt that the theatre program was not designed with him in mind. The BFA in stage management program was initiated after he graduated. He had stayed in touch with professors and it was through their connections and network that he eventually met Stephanie Barton-Farcas and began his stage management career at Nicu's Spoon. He assisted Juni Li on *Red Noses*, and then went on to manage shows independently including the 2015 production of Barton-Farcas's *Richard III* in which all of the characters (and also the stage manager) were disabled except for Richard. (The fight sequence at the end of this production is referenced in the interview with Barton-Farcas above.)

The culture at Nicu's Spoon was family and community oriented. It was ensemble-driven and led from a desire to set everyone up for success. Naranjo reports that Barton-Farcas was invested in actors and wanted them to discover and achieve their personal best, while also making sure everyone knew what was expected of them and letting them know how they could improve when they made missteps. She wanted her actors and the artists surrounding her to be adaptable and malleable so that they could work as much as possible in a variety of settings beyond Nicu's Spoon. Although it was a positive environment, Naranjo recalls putting pressure on himself regarding the avoidance of perceived failures, making mistakes, or leaving a bad impression of himself stage managing his first professional production because he knew that his reputation would ultimately shape his future opportunities. In his case, the work he did at Nicu's Spoon did lead to working with another company.

After *Richard III*, Naranjo stage managed a production of *Hamlet* with Nine Theatricals based out of New Jersey, and he cites the inaccessible entrance to the 13th Street Rep Theatre as his biggest challenge working on this show. His electric wheelchair weighs hundreds of pounds, so members of the cast had to carry him and then his wheelchair up and down the eight stairs leading from the sidewalk up to the main entrance of the brownstone for each performance. The building is landmarked which makes adding an elevator impossible and currently there is no ramp. Any new theatre being built must be ADA compliant, but the landmarking of pre-war buildings adds another layer of complexity to accessibility in New York City. From this production "it really hit hard that [Naranjo is] going to have to think about accessibility a lot more than someone else." To the best of his knowledge, the only venues with wheelchair accessible booths in the city include the Gural and Mezzanine Theatres at the A.R.T./N.Y. location on 53rd street and the Acorn, Beckett, and Clurman Theatres at Theatre Row.

Depending upon the design, a black box theater or rehearsal space can be made to accommodate wheelchair access, and Barton-Farcas's solution of moving boards to a more accessible location is always an option, but the fact remains that conventional theatrical design is conceived without disabled stage managers in mind. Stairs, egress, and accessibility is something that Naranjo will always have to consider when pursuing stage management jobs, searching for an apartment, and making daily commutes.

Inaccessibility in public transit has been a rallying issue for decades, but the 2019 death of Malaysia Goodson brought a reinvigorated urgency and scrutiny focused at the MTA (Goodson suffered a fatal fall while carrying a baby stroller down a flight of subway stairs). It is unfortunate that a tragedy had to occur to make clear that a lack of funding is no longer an acceptable excuse for deprioritizing or disregarding accessibility at subway stations. Wheelchair-users are not the only people who benefit from ramps and elevators: so, do people with cardiovascular or other health concerns, strollers, heavy grocery bags, carts, walkers, and other mobility devices. Naranjo takes Access-A-Ride (an MTA transit service specifically for commuters with disabilities) during inclement weather, but otherwise, he mostly relies upon only a handful of accessible stations and always checks the status of elevators at his closest stops in order to plan accordingly for service changes or unexpected delays. He always has a backup plan and alternate routes in mind before leaving his house. He will sometimes take the bus, but weather permitting, he drives himself to most places in between train travel. In an ideal world, one hundred percent of MTA stations would be ADA compliant, but even though this is not the case, Naranjo feels that the progress legislated by the ADA contributed to positive changes which he now has the luxury of taking for granted in his life. Curb cuts and grab bars were not as ubiquitous in the seventies and eighties as they are now. The ADA serves as a symbol of

liberating disabled people from the confines of their homes who previously had been hiding away from plain sight. The changes regulated by the ADA affords disabled people the freedom to go out independently to explore the world and continue to chip away at the structures refusing to include and accept them. Physical access throughout the city creates hurdles for Naranjo, but social and institutional attitudes are also at play when it comes to overcoming obstacles to equal opportunity.

Even with all of the connections that he has made through Nicu's Spoon and onwards, his stage management jobs are few and far between, especially now that Barton-Farcas and the company have moved to Hawaii. There are other companies in New York City with mission statements that claim accessibility as one of their values, but who do not hire people with disabilities or know the types of accommodations that would be needed or which questions to ask to even begin the process of becoming more inclusive. At that point, it appears as though the company in question is more interested in its public appearance and in securing grants and funding than it would care to admit, and is less concerned with modeling inclusive leadership beyond printed words on paper and online. This leads to a sense of discouragement for people with circumstances similar to Naranjo's in an industry which is already challenging at the outset to "break into." He currently feels that joining Equity is unrealistic because he has only done a few shows since graduating from Pace, and the Equity Membership Candidacy (EMC) program is a steep climb to interning or apprenticing for twenty-five weeks at a local regional theatre.

Because he does not work in theatre frequently enough to consider professional stage management a feasible career path, he works full-time in a cubicle for the New York City Board of Education in a customer service position answering phone calls, so he may pursue a master's degree in public administration in the future. Like Barton-Farcas, Naranjo wishes that progress

within the theatre industry would accelerate because at the current pace, he finds that making changes takes too long across all scales of production value. For all the problems that the MTA faces in terms of ADA compliance, they at least demonstrate an acknowledgment that they have improvements to make and an understanding of how they hope to reach their accessibility goals. The same cannot be said for many small theatre companies, which leads Naranjo to ask, “if the world can somewhat adapt, then why can’t the theatre industry? ... Why can’t they be willing to take a risk on someone who is disabled just to see what they can do?” He vividly recognizes the catch-22 of not gaining the experience required for higher paying and more regularly recurring theatre jobs due to a lack of previous experience. In commercial theatre, minimizing financial risk and ensuring a profitable bottom line will always be a priority. As long as producers, managers, and theatre owners still perceive avoidable dollar signs and unwanted spending on accessibility when he rolls up for an interview, Marco Naranjo will not see dollar signs rolling into his bank account.

Even though he lacks a steady and consistent stream of theater jobs, he takes great pride in the work he has done as a stage manager. He has a great portfolio of show-related paperwork and documentation including schedules, reports, line notes, tracking sheets, and contact lists. He described the first performance that he ever stage managed, a one-day-only, one-man show dramatizing the actor’s experience transitioning from female childhood into a trans adulthood. He wanted this event “to go off without a hitch” and spoke about the process with a sense of confidence, ownership, and accomplishment. Even the uneasiness Naranjo felt when he was offered his first show at Nicu’s Spoon as a full-fledged stage manager demonstrates a phase of development that many of us encounter throughout our careers in striving to achieve higher and higher standards for ourselves.

Naranjo hopes that by amplifying his voice and sharing his personal journey he can help initiate an opening of the figurative flood gates for disabled stage managers to enter the theatre scene after him. He reminds us that we are all the gatekeepers of our own stage management teams and that we can be more inclusive by continually widening our own perspectives, being more socially aware, and conscientiously learning about others around us. Naranjo has valuable talents which will only strengthen with more experience in a well-rounded team where skill sets are balanced. He does not know if there are any other working, wheelchair-using stage managers, so he does not have a role model in that regard, but he recognizes that this does not mean that he should not aspire to be a stage manager at all, or that he cannot eventually be a role model for someone else. His dream is to tour nationally living out his work days doing what he loves, but for the time being, his stage management career is stymied primarily by unspoken social attitudes and a lack of ramps being built over the top of pre-existing stairs. Both are fixable.

### **Recommendations**

In summary, the interviews with David Sugarman, Marybeth Abel, Stephanie Barton-Farcas, and Marco Naranjo present practical and current perspectives on disability and theatre in New York City. Although building a ramp leading into the box office at the front of the house will not address the architectural lack of having an elevator backstage, increased sensitivity and awareness training, more diversely and creatively cast productions supported by disability-conscious stage management teams, and programs like the TDF Autism Theatre Initiative will all have an effect on how Broadway theatre members greet and interact with disabled people. Renovating backstage areas to accommodate wheelchairs may only happen on a “per show” or “as needed” basis for the near future, but physical barriers aside, creating a culture of inclusion where artists are welcomed to share their stories, voices, and experiences, does not necessarily

cost producers or stage managers an additional budget line, and has the potential to feed the artistic environment which will eventually perform and affect a public audience “for the better” as the leads of *Wicked* might say.

## CONCLUSION

An increased emphasis on diversity and inclusion in the theatre industry means that disabled artists have greater visibility onstage, and in the public sphere, and thus the stage managers working with them should consider additional research into disability studies (history, models, and artistic representations) as part of their pre-production and ongoing rehearsal process. The disability rights movement made ground-breaking progress in terms of identifying issues common to an oppressed minority group, and passing legislation to address necessary changes. The ADA mandates accessibility in certain areas of public life which has helped to gradually elevate the social standing of disabled people since it was signed into law by President George H.W. Bush on July 26, 1990 (Timeline of the Americans with Disabilities Act). Several academic models serve to illustrate how disability has been understood over time: the moral model which emphasizes disability as a punishment from a higher power, the medical model which locates disability and impairment within the body as a condition requiring treatment or rehabilitation, and the social and identity models which locate disability as an experience within ableist societies. Social attitudes inform artistic depictions of disability and vice versa. Performance as an art form is not immune to this relationship or to ableist biases, so a stage manager familiar with the dichotomized tropes of victims and villains will have a clearer sense of how the production's writing and casting fits within a broader context of dramatic literature and contemporary American theatre. This kind of artistic consideration is critical for understanding and facilitating the numerous conversations that occur between creatives, the cast, management, and other company members prior to opening night. Furthermore, meeting and conversing with disabled artists and disability-conscious theatre-makers highlights the ways in which issues manifest in real-world practical experiences. Stephanie Barton-Farcas shows us that

inclusion is an active chosen leadership style founded upon the values of equity and social progress, David Sugarman recounts cross-cultural interactions with Deaf West and with Autism-friendly performances, Marybeth Abel demonstrates how we are all only one theoretical injury away from being disabled ourselves, and Marco Naranjo paints the picture of being an early-career disabled stage manager in New York City and what we must do to continue making further progress.

Educating ourselves so that we may better educate those around us will inspire meaningful changes in the rate at which disabled artists are employed and how they are shown onstage. Disability representation on Broadway currently includes Ali Stroker who uses a wheelchair in *Oklahoma!* and Russell Harvard who performs in ASL as the Duke of Cornwall in *King Lear*. Michael Arden, the director of Deaf West's *Spring Awakening*, plays the Aide to Cornwall serving as his personal interpreter within the world of Sam Gold's Britain until each of them are killed in the second act. John McGinty who played Orin Dennis in the recent *Children of a Lesser God* revival understudies Russell Harvard's Duke as a member of the ensemble, ensuring that at all times there are at least two Deaf performers fluent in ASL available to fill the role. Alexandria Wailes serves as the production's Director of Artistic Sign Language (she also performed in *Spring Awakening* and served as the Director of Artistic Sign Language on the *Children of a Lesser God* revival). As more directors and producers embrace disabled talent, the more we will see doors opening for the careers of disabled artists in mainstream commercial endeavors.

As stage managers we can both seek out projects in which diversity and inclusion is reflected in the cast, and offer opportunities to disabled colleagues to join our teams. The union for actors and stage managers was founded upon the values of equity and equal employment

opportunity. Figurative paths leading to successful careers are often described in terms of opportunities to pass through doorways. Paddy Masefield illustrates three:

As arts workers, you're all used to proceeding through rather special doors: stage doors, recording studio doors, dressing room doors, front-of-house doors, even office doors. Whereas over my life I've become aware of three historic doors that seem to dominate all others. The first door had 'Men Only' written in bold lettering... The second door said 'Whites Only'... Interestingly the third door had no need of a sign. It merely had huge steps in front of it, high handles, impossibly heavy hinges, no raised lettering, narrow lifts inside, more stairs, sudden drops, and cluttered corridors that lead to inaccessible inner sanctums of power (32-33).

True equity means that access belongs to everyone. In an industry reliant upon personal networks and professional recommendations, theatre practitioners, including stage managers, must acknowledge that they have a responsibility to reflect upon how they act as a gatekeeper and how they can unlock or grant access through doors. By starting with our own doors, we can then begin the process of showing others how they too can unlock theirs. By supporting disabled artists in mainstream roles and advancing them into positions of leadership, we dismantle disparity and affirm the value that diversity and inclusion adds to our shared culture.

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