

“Come and see Our Art of Being Real”: Disabling Inspirational Porn and Rearticulating Affective Productivities

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Recently in the field of disability and performance, the term “inspiration porn” has emerged. The term itself relates to the ways in which disabled bodies are often represented as being objects of inspiration for the benefit of the nondisabled. Such emotional containments limit disability from being perceived as a complex and valuable presence in performance. Choosing moments from her fieldwork with Theatre Terrific in Vancouver, British Columbia, and viewing of Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater* in Montreal, Quebec, McAskill explores how disabled artists are challenging such limits and common perceptions of disability through their artistic choices. In the case of Theatre Terrific, McAskill discusses a company conversation around the politics of cheering for disabled people onstage. In comparison, she critiques her own reaction to *Disabled Theater* performed by Theater HORA, a Zurich-based company, during their Canadian tour in Toronto, Ontario and Montreal, Quebec. At the core of this article, McAskill emphasizes ways in which understandings of disability and theatre making are shifting in Canada through these specific performances and dialogues.

Récemment, le terme « porno inspirant » (“inspiration porn”) a émergé dans le domaine du théâtre pour personnes handicapées. Ce terme renvoie à la façon dont les corps handicapés sont souvent représentés en tant qu'objets d'inspiration au profit des personnes non handicapées. De telles limites d'ordre affectif nous empêchent de voir l'invalidité comme une présence complexe et valable au sein d'une performance. S'inspirant de son travail avec Theatre Terrific de Vancouver et du spectacle *Disabled Theater* de la compagnie Theater HORA, auquel elle a assisté à Montréal, McAskill fait voir comment des artistes handicapés remettent en question des perceptions courantes de l'invalidité à travers leurs choix artistiques. Elle commente une discussion qui a eu lieu au sein de la compagnie Theatre Terrific sur la politique d'acclamer les personnes handicapées sur scène. En comparaison, McAskill analyse sa propre réaction à *Disabled Theater* de la compagnie zurichoise Theatre HORA, présenté en tournée canadienne à Toronto et à Montréal. L'article fait voir principalement comment ces performances et ces discussions ont modifié notre compréhension du handicap et du théâtre.



Disability is often represented as an object of inspiration, or as comedian and journalist Stella Young declared in her 2014 TED Talk, “inspiration porn.” Drawing on her life experiences as a disabled woman, Young recalls how at the age of 15 she won a community achievement award for no apparent reason, and how, during her early 30s, she was asked by a student to deliver a “motivational speech” while teaching at a Melbourne high school. Young emphasizes

how her body and disability more generally are often “objects of inspiration [...] for the benefit of the non-disabled.” She shows images on a screen behind her of athletes with prosthetic limbs, a little girl with no arms painting by holding a brush in her mouth, and the expression “The only disability in life is a bad attitude.” Young explains to her audience, “There are lots of them out there; they are what we call inspiration porn.” Such images are meant to “inspire you, to motivate you, so you can look at them and think, ‘Well, however bad my life is, it could be worse. I could be that person’” (Young). Coupling inspiration with porn prompts the sticky questions of prurience and pleasure involved in holding disabled people up as objects of inspiration. The distancing-for-comfort at play in her final phrase above, “I could be that person,” asserts how this particular kind of porn is in service of normative fantasies. Exploring the history of “extraordinary bodies,” Rosemarie Garland-Thomson coined the valuable term “normate” to designate an imaginary identity position associated with and assumed by those whose bodies are not marked by stigmatized understandings of difference (ability, race, gender).¹ What emerges from this “constructed identity” built on non-disabled “bodily configurations and cultural capital” is a “narrowly defined profile that describes only a minority of actual people” (Garland-Thomson 8). Inspiration porn marks disability in problematic ways, and as a result, disenfranchises disabled bodies in ways that demand ongoing critical attention.

As cultural and affect theorist Sara Ahmed has explained, different bodies often become stuck with different emotional framings. Such framings, like inspiration, form a *stickiness* that shapes the “surfaces and boundaries” of different human communities (10). As a growing and rich scholarly literature attests, disabled bodies, in particular, have long been objectified as sites of medical surveillance, freakery and inspiration.² Two recent productions in Canada involving disabled actors complicate this trend in striking ways. The first, *Stuffed*, was produced in September 2014 by Western Canada’s oldest theatre involving disabled actors, Theatre Terrific. The second was the 2015 Montreal production of the international touring production *Disabled Theater*, a provocative and well-known piece created by French choreographer Jérôme Bel and Zurich-based Theater HORA, a company founded in 1993 for disabled actors. Both productions involved disabled actors engaging in direct address to audiences and complicated the emotional dynamics of “inspiration porn.” While the former has received little scholarly and journalistic attention, the latter has generated a great deal, including the recent edited collection of critical analyses and responses to the production entitled *Disabled Theater*.³ I take the opportunity here, however, to consider the productions alongside one another in a more balanced way as a means to address two critical questions: first, what are emotional framings like inspiration porn *doing* to disabled actors and the reception of their creative work? Second, how are these framings being challenged and/or rearticulated by theatre companies working with disabled actors?

Theatre Terrific

Theatre Terrific (TT), based in Vancouver, British Columbia, has deep dialogues around disability and representations. Founded in 1985 by Connie Hargrave, the company is known as an artistic pioneer in Western Canada for being the oldest theatre company to work with mixed-ability casts (Theatre Terrific). “Mixed-ability” is a contemporary term that refers to

a group comprised of people with varying physical, sensory, and cognitive abilities. Although in its earlier years the company produced more explicitly disability-themed shows, it has endeavoured to move beyond “the narrow special interest label associated with ‘disability theatre’” since Susanna Uchatius became its current artistic director in 2005 (Theatre Terrific). Uchatius emphasizes, “we’re interested in doing universal stories, in dealing with artists of all abilities” (qtd. in Johnston 82). TT’s original Fringe productions often focus on one issue and are developed through deep cast dialogues and improvisational workshops (Johnston 81; McAskill 18).⁴ From mid-August to early September 2014, I had the opportunity to participate in one of these productions, *Stuffed*, which explored humanity’s complex relationship with material items. Entering mid-way during the creative process of the piece, I engaged in the workshop development of *Stuffed*, witnessing how TT’s collaborative process functions and artistic decisions are made. However, I should note that my actual participation during the workshop process oscillated between direct participation within the process and observation from the side. In what follows, I will focus on one conversation I observed involving the cast and co-directors about the blocking of a final scene and the topic of inspiration porn. The conversation is part of TT’s efforts to engender richer representations of disability onstage in the hopes of encouraging more complex aesthetics and responses from its diverse audiences.

Group shot from *Stuffed* rehearsal (2014) ©
Ashley McAskill.



Theatre HORA

Theater HORA (TH) is a company located in Switzerland that provides professional artistic training to people with developmental disabilities (Theater HORA). Founded in 1993 by theatre-pedagogue Michael Elber, HORA’s artists are described on the company’s website as having “unfiltered perceptions” that reveal “the hidden worlds which the observer can understand intuitively” (Theater HORA). At the core of their *Disabled Theater* co-production with Jérôme Bel are the cast’s self-reflexive revelations about being disabled. Audience members, including myself, often find the style of these disclosures challenging. As disability performance theorist Scott Wallin has explained, “the show achieves its force and audience interest by tacitly targeting the uncomfortable feelings many of us have about disability and then offering a sense of emancipation from these *disabling* perceptions and emotions” (64, emphasis mine). In what follows I focus on my viewing of *Disabled Theater* in Montreal, Quebec, and my participation in promoting the event hosted by Concordia University’s Critical Disability Studies Working Group

(CDSWG). In particular, I discuss ways in which the performance challenged both my and many other Montreal community members' emotional responses to representations of disability onstage. Further, I consider how these challenges prompted generative, local conversations around critical disability studies.

Purpose of Comparative Approach

The core concern of this article is how the creative work of these companies is challenging their respective audience members' emotional responses to disabled artists and disability more generally. I discuss these reactions using Ahmed's theory of emotions that "involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness' to different bodies" (*Cultural Politics* 8). According to Ahmed, emotions do not mobilize from the inside, but rather are culturally framed from the outside in, which shapes particular orientations towards objects. Ahmed associates these orientations with a *stickiness* generated by the effects of "histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs" (90). To change our orientations to other bodies, she argues, we must challenge "social norms" by "having a different affective relation to those norms" (196). Emotions are not fixed; "emotions also open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations" (202). Comparing the respective dramaturgical choices of *Stuffed* and *Disabled Theater*, I consider how each presses for affective re-evaluations and (dis)orientations.

Sticky Affectivities: Disability as Metaphor

Disability activists and artists have raised concern about the kinds of affective treatments and representations of disability in the media and performing arts, particularly the topic of "inspiration porn." The affective relationship driving inspiration porn is entirely focused on the feelings of the non-disabled. In 2014, disabled actress Amelia Cavallo describes inspiration porn as seeing disabled people overcome "what seem like broken and substandard bodies, sensory and cognitive make ups" to make "(the non-disabled public, because let's face it, that's who these images are for) feel good about their unbroken, able bodies, senses, and cognition." Inspirational stories perpetuate the notion that each disabled person "should each individually overcome their tragic and inferior embodiment in order to become productive members of normative society" (Peers 331-32).

Rarely do theatre audiences "encounter disability as a valued and multidimensional human condition" (Abbas et al. 15). Instead, as disability performance scholars Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander note, audiences in the West have long been met with such standard characterizations as the "sweet innocent" (e.g., Tiny Tim); the "comic misadventurer" whose impairments provide comedic relief; the "inspirational overcomer" who miraculously overcomes or is cured of his/her disability; and the "freak" who is the social outsider (3). Disabled playwright Christopher Shinn argues that even more recent offerings of disabled characters in television, film, and theatre do not confront audiences with "disability's deepest implications for human life" (Shinn).

One of the main reasons for this absence of confrontation is the lack of disabled actors playing disabled characters. Instead, able-bodied actors often are selected for these parts, and often receive critical praise for their performances. Such casting practices put out the

message that “the more disabled the character, the greater the ability of the actor” (Siebers, “Disability Theory” 16). For example, Kuppers contextualizes Dustin Hoffman’s 1988 performance as an autistic savant man in *Rain Man*: “In his role, the non-disabled Hoffman is still visible—his presence is the palimpsest that allows the audience to engage in the movements of make-believe. The “presence” of autism is held at arm’s distance. To ‘be’ autistic would mean not to be able to be ‘a performer’” (54). Likewise, Shinn compellingly calls out the shortcomings of this common pattern of casting non-disabled actors as disabled characters:

The actor walking on stage to receive an award for playing a man who can’t walk, the physically robust PR photo-ops of the actor portraying a disabled character, the curtain call where the actor sheds her disability for our applause—they enable the lie of representation. The real freaks are somewhere else, still waiting for their own show.

The effect of these practices shape disability as being easier to accept when it is less visible and/or non-existent and, further, as something “to be gawked at or feared” (Abbas et al. 12).

Returning to the concept of “inspiration porn,” it is important to note that through these representations of disability the disabled body has become associated with certain emotional values, one of which is inspiration. Ahmed contextualizes in what ways “everyday language” gives certain subjects or objects particular emotional qualities, challenging the notion that emotions reside internally within them (“Affective Economies” 119). In the case of disability, the circulation of such inspirational phrases and images as Young shares in her talk shape disability as being *valuable* only when meeting the emotional needs and conditions of other communities. When disabled people’s value is repeatedly associated with inspiration for the non-disabled, over time, it accumulates as an affective stickiness. Companies like TT and TH intervene in these repetitions. Such companies focus on the diverse ways disabled artists energize an array of emotional responses. However, finding aesthetic appreciation and legitimating disabled artists has been a slow and difficult task for companies like TT.

Theatre Terrific: Disabled Artists Finding a Place in Canada

Founder Connie Hargrave originated the idea for TT after contemplating the benefits of a theatre for creatively inclined people with disabilities (Johnston 67). Pursuing her interests, she founded TT in 1985 on the premise that it would provide artistic training and performance opportunities for people with disabilities in Vancouver (Theatre Terrific). After listing the company as a not-for-profit and forming a board, Hargrave recruited Susan Lister from England as its main artistic instructor due to her professional background in theatre and social work (Johnston 68). In a 1988 interview Lister said: “We want to let the disabled community know that this facility is here if they want to get into the industry, and we also want to sensitize other people to the abilities of the physically challenged” (Boyd).

By the late 1980s, the company was locally understood as “moving far beyond providing feel-good therapy for the disadvantaged” to being an important site of professional training for disabled artists (Boyd). By the 1990s, TT had validated its professional status with the Vancouver Professional Theatre Alliance and gained recognition for its inclusive approach (Johnston 73). New artistic director James Norris (1994–1998), alongside instructors Elaine

Avila and Trevor Found, expressed a desire to move TT from being a site of artistic training (class-based) to “a more streamlined professional troupe” (75). Much of this momentum reflected the significant growth and support for new disability arts organizations in Vancouver.

During the late 1990s and early 2000s, an “emerging disability culture movement” was “gaining momentum” (Milner). The Society for Disability Arts and Culture (S4DAC), incorporated in November 1998, focused on presenting and promoting disability art from an array of disciplines in Vancouver and also began hosting the KicksART! festival to help in this endeavour. In addition, TT’s new artistic directors, Avila and Found (1998–2000), were also beginning to change the company’s focus. Found said, “If the art is strong, the disability is not the focus, but the fuel” (qtd. in Milner 11). Avila emphasized, “There’s a whole new view taking shape around the world... and that is that these are the artists who happen to have disabilities, not people with disabilities who happen to be doing art” (qtd. in Milner 11).

However, by the end of 1999, the company went into dormancy for a year and a half due to financial distress and by 2000 both Avila and Found had left. In later years, TT endured other financial challenges such as in October 2013 when the company suspended its planned season and classes for 5 months citing administrative and financial distress. Even Liesl Lafferty (2001–2005) expressed how she learned more about accounting in her tenure as artistic director than people’s diagnosed disabilities (Johnston 66). However, Johnston has emphasized how “such crises are a common feature of enterprises in which resources are few and many have a stake in the outcome” (77). Yet, in the landscape of disability and theatre, TT has remained dedicated to its members, always returning with “clarified and reinvigorated purpose” (77). During my participation with *Stuffed*, I witnessed one of these “reinvigoration” after TT’s five-month hiatus.

Stuffed: To Cheer or Not to Cheer

Stuffed, TT’s 2014 Fringe Festival production, was created during my second round of fieldwork with the company. The previous summer, I had worked as a creative associate on their 2013 Fringe production *Portraits*, a production that explored self-identity and vulnerability. Returning, I was very familiar with most of the cast and had formed meaningful relationships with them. Prior to returning, I had been unsure if the company was going to be active that summer due to their October 2013 announcement that they would be going on hiatus.⁵ When I came back to TT, it felt like a positive homecoming, seeing familiar faces and returning to regular routines. A critical difference, however, was that for the first time, Uchatius co-directed with Adam Grant Warren, a Vancouver-based actor and filmmaker. Unlike past directors with whom many of the cast members had worked, Warren was a visibly disabled artist working in Vancouver. For many of the cast, Warren was the first disabled director with whom they had worked. The team also included Naomi Brand, a choreographer who had just moved to Vancouver from Alberta, where she had worked with MoMo Mixed Ability Dance Theatre.⁶

In this original, devised work, each cast member chose a specific item and centred their individual monologues on why it held meaning for them. They then performed these monologues to an audience seated in theatre of the round style. Some of these performances included: cast member Erica Kemp drinking from a can of Mike’s Hard Lemonade in

memory of her first drink with her now deceased father; Candace Larshied holding a precious necklace that was given to her from a past lover; Michelle Korelus showing her medium fish tank filled with toy fish that she uses in her apartment in lieu of living in a no pets building; and Ian Brown recalling all the places he had visited and people he had met through his bus pass. After each monologue, cast members moved to the centre of the performance space, creating an abstract human mound with their fellow ensemble members.⁷

Although *Stuffed*, a devised work about personal identity and materialism, was not an explicitly disability-themed production, TT still gave attention to representing disability as a socially valuable way of being. Hammering out blocking details for a key scene, Uchatius, Warren, and Brand expressed concern over their direction of cast member Katrina Costello. Costello, who had been chosen to perform the final monologue, was directed to wheel herself around the cast without the guidance of her caregiver and fellow cast member Edna Randaje. Moving slowly with small wrist movements, the young actress circled her wheelchair around her fellow cast members while each of them cheered her on simultaneously with phrases like “You can do it Katrina” and “Push, you’re almost there.” As she wheeled around, Costello held her precious item, a stuffed Winnie-the-Pooh bear, something that represented home and family to her. Uchatius, Warren, and Brand began to question this ending, in particular the cast’s cheering for Costello. Recalling some of my own questions — “What was the intention behind the cheering? What kind of relationship was being projected between Costello and the other cast members? What was this cheering *doing* to perceptions of disability?” — Warren outlined his concerns about the cheering to the cast:

There is a term, a phrase in the disability community now, and that phrase is *inspiration porn*. It is often something where you have situations in which a person who is more so disabled and you have a bunch of people who are less severely disabled [...] cheering that person on to do something, to accomplish something, or saying “Hooray Katrina, yeah you can do it.” We at Theatre Terrific, or well me being new to Theatre Terrific, I believe [...] that this is 25 years behind [...].

Warren, who has an extensive background working in film and theatre, had never worked with a mixed-ability theatre company, and as was previously mentioned, he was the first disabled director for many of the cast. The dialogue opened our rehearsal space to many different perspectives. Echoing Warren, Uchatius explained “[...] what we are doing here is pioneering art [...] you guys are all incredible artists with incredible stories.” She emphasized that TT’s creative work moved beyond legitimizing disabled artists to showing how all artists had something to share. Warren shared that he did not want the audience to applaud for their disabilities, but rather the cast’s “good work” and artistry.

Redirecting the scene, Warren told the cast to ensure their comments to Costello reflected an expectation of her working hard. Tyson Aubin asked, “What does that mean?” Warren replied that they should tell Costello to push “harder” and “better” if moving too slow. Although this was not Warren’s final artistic vision of the scene, he wanted the cast to move away from the original direction. Noticing the cast members shaking their heads, Uchatius asked them to interject their concerns. Korelus said, “No, it doesn’t make sense at all.” Patti Palm, a seasoned Vancouver performer, commented:



Katrina Costello in between scenes reading lines (2014) © Ashley McAskill.

I have worked long in the theatrical community. I had a friend that was a Wheelie and claimed himself as a Gimp and a Wheelie... he has passed away now. Am I to cheer on my fellow teammate and not cheer him on? Why, for fear that he would think I am cheering him on solely because he was in a chair? I would cheer him on because he is a human being like me. So for me, in a way, this goes contrary to my work in a number of different communities. It goes against what I believe as an actor. And we are actors! We are not anything else. We are actors. Why would I not put someone in this company at the same level as any other company? That's the question I have. I'm a little confused. It feels a little PC.

In response, Warren informed Palm that he felt they both had the same artistic expectation for Costello. Palm agreed that it was important to expect a lot from all the ensemble members.

Uchatius, Warren, and Palm reflected on the intentions behind encouraging Costello to wheel. Uchatius considered the varying emotional responses audience members would have to different voice levels used by the ensemble when encouraging Costello: a high pitched tone would project the ensemble members as being condescending, whereas a more serious and calmer voice had the potential of demonstrating the cast's respect for Costello as an actor and simultaneously cue her to finish her task of circling them.⁸ Explaining her perspective on this complex dialogue, Larsheid said:

We are all awesome people. We are a family of one. No one is separate. We're no different. When we are performing, we're creating a world out there that isn't in the physical reality. In the world out there. I'm not saying all people, but when people see people that are different, they have a challenge of relating. So we're the educated and our work is about breaking down the barriers, and our role is breaking down the barriers and saying, "Hey, come and see our *art of being real*." (emphasis mine)

The room went silent. Larsheid's words, *the art of being real*, seemed to have resonated with the entire cast and creative team. Larsheid continued:

It is not always pretty. It's not always happy go lucky. But it's real. When a lot of people see us ... people expect "Oh, people are sweet" or whatever. But it's time to wake up the world. Wake up the nation and show that we are not separate. We are one. Show that the art is what gets out there and by our work, *we're educating the limitations of a locked mindset*. (emphasis mine)

Larsheid's comments acknowledged the *sticky* framings that have left audiences in many ways *locked* into certain emotional responses. Ahmed has described how "emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign of capital, but is produced only as effect of its circulation [...] emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as a psychic

field” (“Affective Economies” 120). The more a certain sign or object is circulated in a certain manner, the larger is its potential to “appear to ‘contain’ affect” (120). However, as Larsheid bluntly said, some emotional responses need a “wake-up call.” She calls this “the art of being real” whereby deeper realities of the disabled body offer different perspectives to challenge certain emotional responses to difference.

For the final scene of *Stuffed*, Warren, Uchatius, and the cast chose to counter the image of a disabled actor being merely a metaphorical tool. During the final scene, each cast member silently stood as Costello slowly navigated her wheelchair around them, veering off occasionally into the audience. During her smooth and peaceful movement, Costello paced her lines out, creating a performance tempo that caused the entire space to become quiet. This quiet was not just focused on listening to Costello finishing her lines, nor was it just centered on watching her manually push her wheelchair. Instead, Costello’s small, delicate movements energized an affectivity that stretched the performance space in a way that was not focused on her trying to prove herself against assumed incapacities. Her slow movement opened up the participation of different modes of performance, those not usually acknowledged and valued in our contemporary, capitalist, fast-paced society. Her performance became a site of new affective productivity.

In his review of *Stuffed*, Jim MacDonald of *Plank* magazine stated, “I felt like a welcome guest at an intimate and eclectic discovered space and appreciated the diversity and vulnerability present.” As Tobin Siebers has argued, disability aesthetics “asks us to see our fellow human being differently and introduces a critical distance in the perception of society and cultural values [...] there is a great diversity in ways that humans belong and contribute to the world” (qtd. in Levin). Companies like TT and TH offer opportunities for such affective re-evaluations and introductions to human diversity. However, their audience members do not always take up these processes easily.

Theater HORA: A Canadian Meeting

In late March 2015, TH came to Canada to perform *Disabled Theater* in Toronto, Ontario and at Concordia University in Montreal, Quebec. The production is a re-staging of Jérôme Bel’s “first meeting with the performers, where his questions and their presence reveal dynamics of exclusion and the limits of political correctness” (“Disabled Theater”). Actors present themselves and disclose personal parts of their lives, particularly in relation to what it means to live with a disability. The cast also showcase their own talents and provide reflections on working with Bel and TH. In a *Toronto Star* article on the piece the company’s general manager, Giancarlo Marinucci, explained further:

The idea [behind *Disabled Theater*] was to say: ‘These are people.’ You don’t see them often, but to have the opportunity to show them is to open the door wide to say ‘Hello! I exist!’ and you can come and see them onstage. (qtd. in Chown Oved)

The Montreal performances were hosted by Concordia’s Critical Disability Studies Working Group (CDSWG), founded in 2014 as “an interdisciplinary team of scholars and



Working group members Lindsay Eales (left) and Danielle Peers (right) participating in the #iamchair intervention at La Sala Rossa in Montreal, Quebec (2014). © Ashley McAskill

creators that engage in an ongoing transformation of disability studies paradigm” (CDSWG). CDSWG is primarily rooted in *critical* disability studies, a model that moves away from reducing disability to an “impairment” by opening up “the complex interconnection between medicine, society and bodies” (CDSWG). The need for such a group became particularly apparent after the 2014 Encuentro, a bi-annual conference/performance festival hosted by the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics, held that year at Concordia University. Many of the CDSWG’s current and founding members, including myself, participated in the Encuentro disability and performance working group. Convened by Kim Sawchuk of Concordia’s Department of Communication Studies and Arseli Dokumaci, a postdoctoral fellow at McGill at the time, our group engaged in a series of artistic actions in response to the inaccessibility of some of the Encuentro events. Our actions included group members dragging pieces of their wheelchairs up the Sala Rossa stairs (the venue chosen for the nightly cabarets), creating a working group statement on accessibility, distributing cue cards to Encuentro participants asking for responses to our actions, and convening a long table discussion on accessibility and inclusivity. Although prior to this event the CDSWG was already in the process of forming, Encuentro provided a platform to attract Montreal-based disability researchers, artists, and activists to the group.

By the fall of 2014, TH had contacted the CDSWG in large part thanks to Yvonne Schmidt, a faculty member at the Zurich University of the Arts and co-founder of the Disability and Performance Working Group at the International Federation for Theatre Research. Schmidt had presented her fieldwork with TH at the 2014 Encuentro. The CDSWG was quick to find internal and external funding to support the group, and also a venue for the performances. Owen Chapman, Communication Studies faculty member and

chair of the CDSWG, emphasized ways the event would mobilize different perspectives on disability: “We tend to deal with disability by thinking about it as a diminishment from some form of normal. HORA explores what we call disability *as a capacity, as potential*” (“Theater Challenges”). Dokumaci expressed how TH’s performers would prompt Montrealers to ask “who gets to perform and represent others, or who gets to be represented?” (“Theater Challenges”). She also stated, “I believe that one of the major achievements of Theater HORA lies in their extremely skillful and innovative way of making us think about these questions” (“Theater Challenges”). TH’s work aligned well with the CDSWG’s intent to give recognition to critical disability studies in Montreal and in Canada more broadly.

Disabled Theater: Confronting Emotional Territories

As one of the main researchers of disability and theatre in the group, I was asked to promote the event in an interview with CBC Montreal. I recall being concerned about how Morgan Dunlop, my interviewer, would frame her questions and in what ways my responses would be edited. Remembering TT’s dialogue on inspiration porn the previous summer, I did not want to misrepresent TH to the Canadian press.

The televised segment appeared on the six o’clock news as “Theatre HORA Shines Spotlight on People with Disabilities.” The CDSWG was contextualized as hosting the performance in the hopes “of changing the way people perceive people with disabilities.” Dunlop described *Disabled Theater* as having “a lot of high energy dance” and “touching personal stories” (“Shine the Spotlight”). The segment included clips from *Disabled Theater*: first of cast member Remo Beuggert head banging to heavy contemporary drum music, and then of Julia Häusermann coming to a microphone centre stage and stating, “I have Down Syndrome, and I am sorry.” During these clips, Dunlop described the production as both “entertaining” and “heartbreaking.” Presented as a CDSWG member, I explained to Dunlop how disabled people “are often seen as being less than human because perhaps their understanding of things is different than ours or their processes are different than ours.” More clips of *Disabled Theater* were shown while Dunlop introduced cast member Matthias Brücker. First, a shirtless Brücker was shown pelvic thrusting to hard rock music, and following this clip, he shared with the audience his sister’s initial reaction to the production, stating that she felt that he and the cast were presented “like animals in the circus.” Afterward, TH’s general manager, Giancarlo Marinucci, emphasized TH’s creative work as “something not to hide.” The segment continued with Brücker noting that dancing was his favourite part of the production and expressing his hopes that audiences would leave “watching, thinking” and being “astonished.” He concluded by calling out to his girlfriend, Tiziana Pagliaro (another cast member), declaring “I love you Tiziana.” The televised segment then concluded with a clip of me asserting the importance of seeing disabled artists as *legitimate artists*, rather than clientele of drama therapy.

The televised segment left me with mixed feelings. On the one hand, TH’s work was represented as inspirational, and yet on the other, TH had offered a valuably different perspective on disability. Much of this tension emerged from the editing and juxtaposition of the different clips shown, particularly of Häusermann and Brücker. Whereas Häusermann apologized for her Down Syndrome, Brücker was presented as celebrating his developmental disability. Down Syndrome, a more visible developmental disability, often is framed with



Screen shot from CBC interview with Theater HORA members Matthias Brücker (far left), Roland Strobel (center), and Remo Zarentonello (2015). Used with permission from the CBC.

likeability, lovability, honesty, and humour. Within these contexts, people with Down Syndrome are highlighted as affectively powerful subjects. These affectionate emotions “do things” and “align individuals with communities [...] through the very intensity of their attachments” (Ahmed, “Affective Economies” 119). However, when comparing this framing to Häusermann’s apology and Brücker’s sister’s response to *Disabled Theater*, a direct tension arises against these easy feelings of love. The production intervenes in the traditional emotional circuits that frame Down Syndrome.

Indeed, *Disabled Theater* consistently creates affective tensions by challenging audiences’ emotional responses to watching disabled artists onstage. The production was divided into four sections, each consisting of cast members giving individual performances. Without sets or elaborate costumes, the production eschews overt *theatricality* and plays at the borders of the real and the represented. The production begins with each cast member, one by one, silently standing in front of the audience. There is a discomfort in this repetitive action. I recall feeling awkward during the Montreal performance. As an audience, we sat in the dark, silently surveying the body of each actor. At the same time, each cast member also was staring back, but could they really see us in the sea of darkness in front of them? My discomfort was intensified when the ensemble members introduced themselves and divulged information about their disability—some in detail, some more generally. A translator, positioned stage right facing the audience, translated the ensemble’s Swiss-German words as well as Bel’s original questions to the actors. When speaking of the actors’ effect on audiences, Marinucci told the *Toronto Star*, “When you see the show, it’s really new—the radical way people are presented on stage. Some people are uncomfortable, others are sad or happy, shouting out, even crying. We’ve seen everything. It’s very emotional.” Bel wrote the *Star* via email: “The subject [disability] is extremely complicated—socially and politically. Political correctness prevents people from correctly understanding their own situations.” Their arguments suggest that the production offers a site of important affective revaluations and reflections.

During *Disabled Theater*, each cast member performs a self-choreographed dance solo. Häusermann places a white glove on her hand and dances to a Michael Jackson song. During

the Montreal performance, Häusermann fell to the ground and did not immediately get up. I can recall worrying, alongside a colleague sitting with me, whether she had injured herself. After a brief pause and check-in from the interpreter, the young actress continued her dance piece. Pagliaro then takes the stage, gracefully twirling like a ballerina to beautiful soft music. Beuggert amps up rock music and does original choreography with the use of a prop chair. Brücker, in contrast, moves to dance club music, fist pumping his way into the audience. Although each has performed *Disabled Theater* many times, some of these solos are choreographed in the moment. During the Montreal performances, the audience clapped along, cheering as the actors increased their energy. However, recalling my own reaction, I was unsure whether people were clapping for the live artistry or because of a tradition of “inspiration porn.” Once more, I felt uncomfortable with my emotional response, and I began to question my own sensitivity to representations of disability onstage.

Naomi Skwarna of *Toronto Life* describes *Disabled Theater* as “risky entertainment” and “at its core, a disabling of theatre” in a way she has never seen before. Skwarna explains how the live production “can feel starkly, claustrophobically intimate,” how it *forces* audiences to reflect on how they work through difference. She continues, “In the most primal way, a show like this creates anxiety that claws at everyone who sees it.” She emphasizes how the piece capitalizes on its use of a “bare stage, turbulent technique, and spontaneous emotion” to move away from a more decorated and theatrical production (Skwarna). In this spontaneity of emotion, audiences create new affective relations to disability, and theatre serves as a site for important rearticulations.

Conclusion: Affective Rearticulations

Although their scales of performance venue and audience reach are starkly different, both productions intervene in the unethical sticky frames that Ahmed says we attach to certain human communities. Their respective artistic choices concerning disabled theatre prompt critical questioning about why we react the way we do to certain bodies. Attending both *Stuffed* and *Disabled Theater*, it was clear that questions arose around the issue of audience applause and cheering. Who or what were audiences applauding and how did the feeling of inspiration factor into that response? Moreover, why did certain representations of disability produce feelings of discomfort? Both pieces serve as catalysts to reflect on disability as an important site for emotional knowledge production. Such works position disability as a *generative* lens, a framing that Sandahl, Siebers, and many other disability studies scholars support. My hope is that this article similarly prompts contemplation of the many ways disability can



Julia Häusermann in *Disabled Theater* (2012).
Theater HORA/Jérôme Bel. © Hugo Glendinning.

promote an emotional productivity that has the potential to improve intercultural relationships and perceptions of others. In their efforts to intervene in performance traditions that position disability as a metaphor for something else, overcoming inspiration porn or otherwise, companies like TT and TH play with the possibilities of *an art of being real*, echoing Larsheid's words. Further, such *arts of being real* emotionally engage the "limitations of a locked mindset" that is *stuck* in one way of looking at the world and at art.

Notes

- 1 Garland-Thomson argues that the ideological context of the "normate" has been presented as being the ideal body for a "well-regulated nation": "a body that is a stable, neutral instrument of the individual will. It is the fantasy that the disabled figure troubles" (42).
- 2 Refer to Licia Carlson's *Faces of Intellectual Disability*, Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, and Petra Kuppers' *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*.
- 3 Published in 2015 and edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, *Disabled Theater* analyzes the various, often polarized responses the piece has provoked among audience members, and considers whether the piece can be perceived as an empowering work of art for disabled people at large.
- 4 TT's connection with the Vancouver Fringe Festival started in 1986 when then instructor Sue Lister directed *Dancing on the Head of a Pin with a Mouse in My Pocket* (Johnston 68). By 2001, then artistic director, Liesl Lafferty, started a two-month summer training theatre camp at TT, resulting in many campers producing their own Fringe productions (78-79). Since 2005, Uchatius has continued the tradition of original Fringe productions. Beyond *Stuffed* (2014), other selected productions include: *Being Animal* (2015), which promoted "a conversation with the natural world" and being human; *Ugly* (2005), exploring the "origins of what is truly 'ugly' ... namely fear in many forms"; and *Portraits* (2013), which deals with how humans come into their own personal identities and vulnerabilities (Theatre Terrific).
- 5 When I found out about the announcement, I was also delivering a guest lecture on my research with Theatre Terrific for Dr. Dirk Gindt's course at Concordia University on Current Canadian Theatre the same week.
- 6 MoMo Mixed Ability Dance Theatre, based in Calgary, Alberta, "brings together professional artists and prospective artists, with and without disability to explore movement, voice, theatre, dance, and improvisational disciplines" (MoMo).
- 7 Theatre Terrific works out of Vancouver's Japanese United Church gymnasium. *Stuffed* was performed there.
- 8 In past productions, Costello has needed the guidance of cues to help her with delivering lines and certain blocking. Often, this is done by delivering directions through a small microphone linked to Costello's hearing device.

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