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Conference paper

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disability matters in theatre practice**
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Why Inherited Distance and Responses to Inexperience of Disability Matters in Theatre Practice

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Abstract

This paper considers how lived experience of disability in the theatre industry raises issues of inclusion, access, and participation that cross disciplinary boundaries. Drawing on an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study with professional actors and directors in Arts Council England's most highly funded theatres, it adds detail to what is happening on the ground in theatre. It queries how learning from disability in the theatre industry might be translated by practitioners in tackling exclusion and enhancing inclusion in applied and social theatre contexts. Sharing responsibility for accessibility in practice goes beyond logistical adjustments, instead, the paper explores the significance of personal understandings of disability and how its history and politics are interpreted in practice. Although referring to race, Sara Ahmed offers helpful parallels when considering personal positioning in a process of engagement with disability in theatre, noting how 'we inherit proximities' to people who are different to ourselves (2007, p.155). Ahmed clarifies, 'this is an inheritance that can be refused, and which does not fully determine a course of action' (2007, p.155). Actors and directors in the theatre industry recognise inherited distance from disability as relevant, a gap needing to be bridged. Their implicit stories shared in this paper reveal how individuals working in theatre respond to inexperience of disability and weigh responsibility for learning from disability and about accessibility, representation, language, and effective collaboration. This paper, therefore, aims to draw attention to lived experiences of disability and theatre practice as a route to understanding complex issues of power and participation in theatre across disabled and non-disabled communities. As academics, researchers, and practitioners, we are encouraged to refuse an inheritance of distance and move towards disability experience in some way.

1. Introduction

Sara Ahmed notes how the expectation of research on equality 'involves a desire to hear "happy stories of diversity"' (2007, p.165). Instead, Ahmed values how phenomenology, that is the study of lived experience, 'brings what is behind, what does not get seen as the background to social action, to the surface'; noting, 'it is by showing how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual and routine [...] that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes' (2007, p.165). I'm going to share a few examples of findings from my Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis study exploring lived experiences of theatre practice and disability among 7 professional actors, all self-defining as disabled people, and 12 directors, all identifying as non-disabled, all employed in Arts Council England's most highly funded theatres

(Worthington, 2021). Their stories offer some insight into the current theatre climate that can be overlooked in pursuit of 'happy stories of diversity' (Ahmed, 2007, p.165). They will not give definitive solutions to what is needed in our practice. But I hope they will help us consider the possibility of change.

- I'll suggest that identifying inherited distance from disability is a starting point in moving towards shared responsibility for change
- That understanding lived experience of disability in theatre is a route to preserving wellbeing, good practice, and creative outcomes for disabled people.
- And that increasing engagement with disability is a reflexive, nuanced and entirely personal process that is relevant across communities, disciplines, and theatre settings.

Although referring to race rather than disability, Ahmed offers parallels with actors and directors' lived experiences of theatre, noting how 'we inherit proximities' to people who are different to ourselves (2007, p.155). Here, I'm suggesting personal journeying with impairment or illness, family backgrounds, and inherited theatre or workplace environments, the cultures and settings where we create theatre work, could be viewed as dictating our inherited distance from disability.

2. Why Inherited Distance from Disability Matters in Theatre

In terms of the theatre industry, even in organisations that have been given a clear mandate from Arts Council England to increase disability representation, encountering disabled people in day-to-day workplace settings is still a rare phenomenon. Arts Council's baseline figures from 2015 revealed the disabled workforce across its National Portfolio Organisations stood at 4%, against a working age population of 19%, rising to only 6% in 2021 (ACE, 2016; 2023; Annual Population Survey, 2016). There are some signs of progress, with actors with a range of impairments cast in recent seasons at the National Theatre, the RSC, and regional theatres, and recent, major theatre productions written, directed, and performed by professionals who self-define as disabled people. This is Amy Trigg's *Reason's You Shouldn't Love Me*, one of the first shows to open in the West End after closures during the pandemic, now touring nationally (Trigg, no date). *Marvelous*, at New Vic Theatre, Stoke, a production with a cast of neurodivergent actors, now chosen to be the inaugural production at new West End theatre @sohplace. And, Arthur Hughes, currently playing Richard III with the RSC (Saunders, 2022). Arts Council's statistics, however, make clear that there remain specific, complex, ongoing issues around disabled people in theatre (ACE, 2015; 2023).

Only 3 of the 12 directors in my study mention a disabled colleague in their workplaces, and only 2 refer to disabled people as friends. What is more common are acknowledgements like Jack's, 'in all those 30 years I've been working, I've never worked with a disabled actor' (p.2), or Mark's situation, 'I've not been surrounded by many disabled people in the workplace um and that is still the case [...] my relationship with um disabled people is still at one remove' (p.5). Despite this, all 19 participants locate theatre workplaces as key in their exposure to new disability views; where exclusionary attitudes, structures and environments are first talked about, witnessed and experienced. Directors describe this as revelatory, with expressions like 'opened my eyes', 'blew my mind' and 'the big change' common in descriptions of practice. Actors also locate theatre workplaces as key in learning from disability, like Sophie who notes conversations that, 'opened my eyes up to the kind of... the politics of disability and actually I'm very much disabled' (p.3).

Inherited distance from disability, or, in the case of my participants, inexperience of disability, is raised as a significant issue. This is expressed as making auditions or rehearsals uneasy, error or offense more likely, and guidance necessary. There is shared urgency among actors and directors to address

gaps in knowledge and experience, involving uncomfortable conversations, or challenge around disability language, logistical access, and representation. Speaking about his experiences with directors, actor Pete explains, 'if they have a disabled child or a family member that's disabled [...] it's like a shorthand, it becomes easier (pp.10-11). Along with other actor-participants, it seems important to Pete that people he works with understand wider disability issues. Pete expresses a need to offer guidance to directors lacking experience of disability, to explain disability in some way. He describes working with non-disabled directors saying, 'they know all the notes, but sometimes haven't quite learnt the tune [...] I think that's something that you find, you know, now more directors are sort of saying, "Okay, I'm interested in casting disabled people"' (p.9). Pete's metaphor sets apart those who know 'the notes', perhaps disability facts, policy, or appropriate language, and those who have learnt 'the tune' (p.9); perhaps referring to embedding this knowledge in their practice.

Recalling rehearsals, actor James speaks of directors' responses to his impairment saying, 'You can tell very quickly how comfortable someone is with you [...] I'm very aware that it's constantly on their mind' (p.14). James encounters directors he feels cannot move past his impairment; this is what disability scholar Rosemary Garland Thomson considers 'perhaps most destructive to the potential for continuing relations [...] the normate's (that is the non-disabled person's) frequent assumption that a disability cancels out other qualities, reducing the complex person to a single attribute' (1997, p.12). James juxtaposes this scenario with a frank discussion with a non-disabled director about the relevance of his impairment to his role. He refers to this director as exemplary in his approach to rehearsal saying, 'I always feel comfortable in the room with him, I always feel brave in the room with him, I feel uninhibited' (p.3). He implies other people's ease in discussing disability issues directly impacts his personal comfort, confidence, and creativity.

3. Responses to Inexperience of Disability in Practice

Actors describe how they respond to a lack of disability knowledge and lack of skill making work accessible or to judge appropriate decisions. For them, navigating inexperience of disability in theatre requires careful negotiation with factors of confidence, risk, empathy, compromise, value, and contribution. They are keen to clarify that inexperience of disability does not necessarily hinder positive experiences in practice. However, non-disabled directors' learning processes are significant. Actor, Moira describes her response to this explaining, 'I always go in [...] with a couple hats on I think in terms of like I understand that I'm an actor [...] but I'm also there as a teacher (p.12). A battlefield mentality carries through her descriptions of practice, taking a head-on approach to declaring disability, to assess whether her access needs will be met, and, perhaps more importantly, whether those she works with are willing to listen and learn. Although appearing confident in this approach, this seems adopted out of necessity not choice, as she later clarifies:

You get people asking you stuff all the time. You get people who don't understand who want to understand [...] If you want to be in a space where you're working and you're seen [...] you have to contend with it, you don't have a choice' (Moira, p.18).

Speaking out about disability issues is not just about actors ensuring their own access needs are met, approaches in this reflect a political responsibility to accurately represent the disabled community. Sophie describes her experience challenging decisions around representation, saying:

there was an incident [...] that I took issue with [...] one of the actors, to help his character to be seen more sympathetically, he wanted to put his arm in a sling, and I was like, 'hang on a minute [...] you're asking an able-bodied actor to essentially crip up, like why are you doing that?' (p.13).

Sophie implies a weight of responsibility and a trailblazing response in this. Media articles have long argued that 'cripping up' is unacceptable, that is a non-disabled actor playing a disabled character; however, for an actor to present this argument face to face with a director perhaps requires more boldness, and carries personal cost, as Sophie adds:

I think I'm less scared of you know, I think most actors are like you have to toe the line to (laughs) get the next show, you know you're so frightened of upsetting a director or producer in case you don't work again (p.16).

Lydia distinguishes between speaking up about logistics, or representation and challenging personal disability views. She describes a rehearsal where the director referred to her by her impairment rather than by her name, and recalls, 'the cast members came up to me later and they were like, "are you ok with that being said?", and I was like, "no, not really [...] I should have just said"' (Lydia, p.11). Interpreting this, she explains, 'as soon as it's about someone's vocabulary and it's about someone's actual point of view [...] that's so much more personal and you don't want to offend someone' (Lydia, p.12). In announcing its new diversity strategy the chair of Arts Council England recognised, 'it's all about changing minds', what these actors seem to perceive as the greater challenge in practice (Bazalgette, 2015).

In response to inexperience of disability actors in this study are compromising their own comfort, safety, and creative satisfaction to preserve the wellbeing of non-disabled people they work with. Lydia recognises, 'I spend so long trying to make a new director feel comfortable about working with me that actually I haven't raised issues that are making me feel uncomfortable' (p.35). Paul confesses, 'you've got to be supremely confident in this game [...] and sometimes I'm not' (p.26). He believes accessibility is 'my problem [...] I don't want it to be anyone else's (p.10). Yet, silence seems detrimental to his wellbeing and those he works with; he describes rehearsals where safety felt compromised, referring to the theatre workplace as, 'a very dangerous environment' (Paul, p.16). The idea that disabled people working in theatre must 'contend' with questions and need for advice around disability also seems a far from ideal, as Moira explains, 'they're going in with no knowledge and expecting the disabled cast to give them all that knowledge, that's really unfair'; a situation she regards as 'really frustrating politically and artistically' (Moira, p.25).

4. Learning for Applied and Social Theatre Contexts

As people engaged in applied and social theatre contexts, it is perhaps easy to look on experiences of disability in the theatre industry at a distance. We might assume collaborative working, accessibility, and sensitivity towards diverse needs of communities are more deeply entwined in our motivations, research, and practice. They may well be. Yet, Pete explains, 'even in a situation [...] geared up to working with Deaf and disabled performers, you know you still feel sometimes you're [...] a second-class citizen. It really depends on who you are working with' (p.4). His interpretation of power dynamics in theatre extends beyond job title and status, it is relational and theoretical. Pete recognises this as determined by how individuals perceive disabled people ranking in society. He points to this affecting his creative contribution and value it is given, saying:

it's being treated like you've got some sort of contribution [...] if the power balance is affected by the fact that the director has a passive view of disabled people, that they are generally passive consumers, useless eaters as Hitler so pleasantly put it, then that's gonna affect how they work with you (p.34).

Pete's quotation of 'useless eaters' seems particularly powerful in expressing the extent to which he feels his contribution can be disregarded even as an actor with long term and ongoing success in professional onstage work (Pete, p.34). His and Moira's views call for interdisciplinary approaches to theatre and performance work, supporting David Bolt's (2012) observations of critical avoidance of Disability Studies in the Academy, and my argument here that the wealth of knowledge and rich history of Disability Studies is entirely relevant and necessary to understand any aspect of today's theatre research, training, and practice.

Existing literature around inclusion in theatre often culminates in guidance, listing what is required of the majority, non-disabled people. Performance and Disability scholars Galloway, Nudd and Sandahl's manifesto for what they refer to as an 'ethic of accommodation' (2007), is valuable in giving attention to shifts in attitudes, behaviour, beliefs, and creativity that are necessary in making performance practice accessible. The expectation being: 'the majority make difficult changes in its practices and environment'; the 'majority does not rule'; that there must be a 'politics of speaking as well as a politics of listening'; and that this involves non-disabled people 'letting go of preconceived notions of perfectibility and negotiating complex sets of needs' (Galloway, Nudd and Sandahl, 2007, p.229). Lived experiences of actors in my study, however, suggest these accommodations require mutual effort, learning, and practical and emotional labour across disabled and non-disabled communities. In current theatre climate it is more often disabled people carrying the weight of this, they are constantly adjusting to accommodate non-disabled people's lack of understanding. Again, a gap that critical engagement with Disability Studies knowledge and phenomenological perspectives might help bridge.

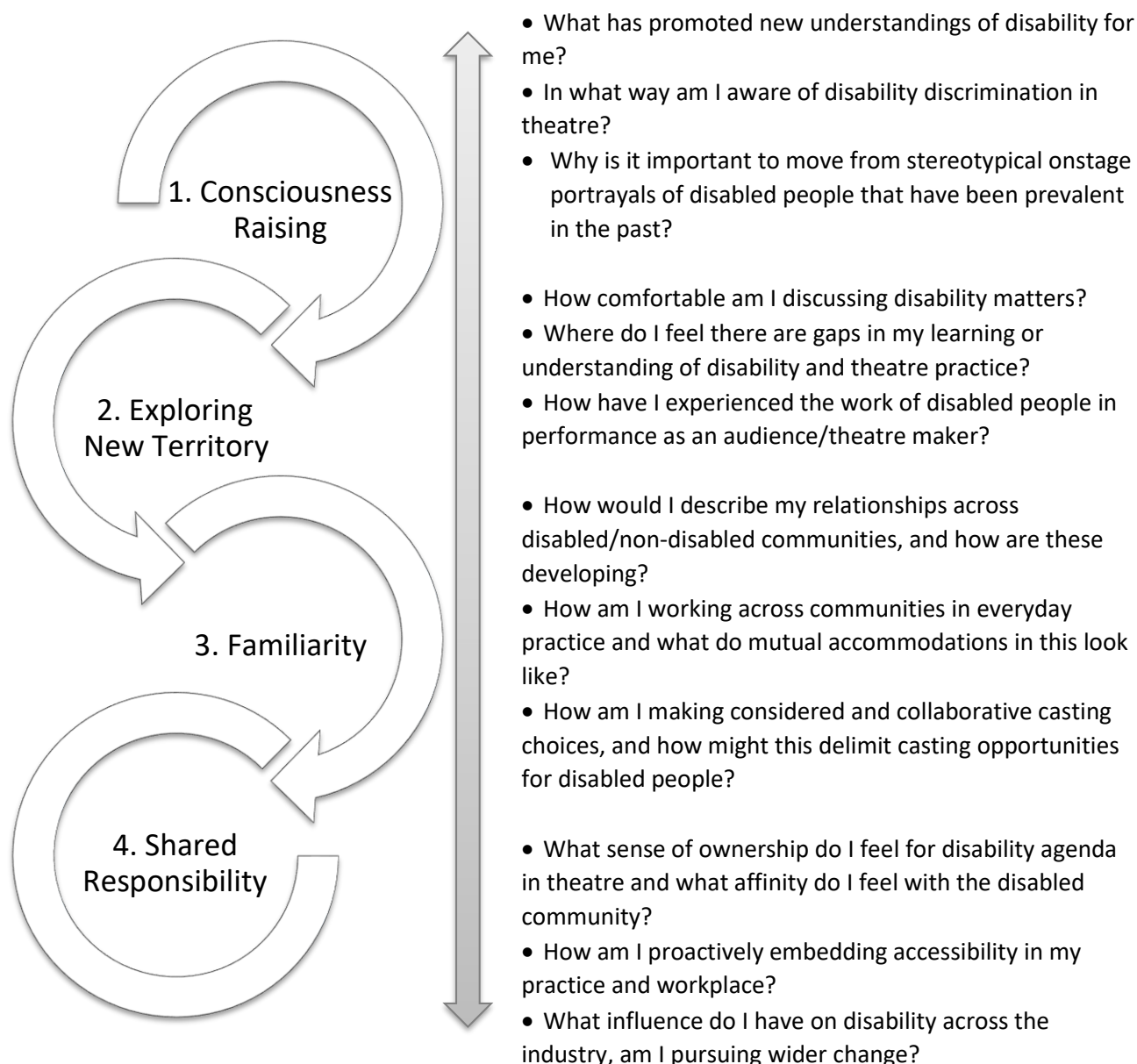
5. Reflexivity and Conclusion

As those developing theatre training, teaching, leading, or researching theatre or performance practice, it is possible we might consider what this might mean for us personally. Can we return to Ahmed's notion that 'we inherit proximities' to people different from ourselves, as she also clarifies, 'this is an inheritance that can be refused, and which does not fully determine a course of action' (2007, p.155); the notion that it is possible to refuse an 'inheritance' of distance and choose to move towards disability experience in some way (Ahmed, 2007, p.155). For those working in the theatre industry there is a mandate to increase engagement with disability in a measurable way; in the case of major theatre venues future Arts Council funding depends on it. It has not been possible to detail directors' stories, but I can say there are non-disabled directors in my study who, like these actors, are pressing for an ethic of accommodation in their practice, who refuse distance from disability (their starting point of a lack of relationship with disabled people) and are moving towards disability in some way. For some like John, this requires logistical effort as he proactively seeks out connection with actors who might play lead roles in his flagship shows, 'believing it's really important that disabled actors get the opportunity to play those kind of shows' (p.25). Or like Sara, who has stepped outside her comfort zone and in doing so explains, 'conversations get easier [...] the more you are doing it' (p.18). Whatever their starting point, increasing engagement with disability in theatre is a live dynamic, a nuanced, shared, and unfolding endeavor for all in my study.

In theatre and performance work it is often not the end-product that requires defining, it is the process. So, to close, I want to share with you a tool that developed from my concept of stages in a process of engagement with theatre practice and disability for actors and directors (Worthington, 2021). The four-stage process moves from conscious raising, to exploring new territory, to familiarly, and finally shared responsibility. It is not possible to detail this, but please ask if you'd like to know more. The reflexive tool (Worthington, 2021) could help professionals across the sector and in academia to identify

their inherited distance from disability, to consider their perceptions, practice, and work together. It may aid communication around how we understand, encounter, explore, relate, and respond to theatre practice and disability. For individuals it may also assist in bringing difficulty to the surface, normalizing the complex process of engagement with theatre practice and disability, and giving it a language. I will leave you with this, unable to offer a neat solution, or satisfy a desire for 'happy stories of diversity' (Ahmed, 2007, p.165); instead, I hope you'll join me in sitting with the complexity and discomfort uncovered by actors and directors and, rather than burying it, I'll continue to grapple with what moving towards shared responsibility for the accurate representation of disabled people in theatre means for me in my personal life, work, and future research.

A Reflective Tool: Personal Positioning in a Process of Engagement with Theatre Practice and Disability (Worthington, 2021, p.267)



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