

The Impact of Interdisciplinary Approaches to Disability Studies and Theatre: Learning the Notes and the Tune

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Abstract

Interdisciplinary perspectives are crucial in navigating recent shifts in diversity agenda in the theatre industry and ensuring continued moves towards the accurate onstage representation of disabled people. Knowledge that is commonplace for disability scholars is still unfamiliar to many involved in day-to-day theatre work. Understanding of lived experience perspectives of disability is also lacking, yet this is crucial for making sense of attitudes, structures, and environments experienced in theatre settings. This paper considers: what aspects of disability studies knowledge are most necessary to share in building disability consciousness in the theatre sector and training; how interdisciplinary perspectives might support individual's process of exploring new territory, building familiarity across disabled and non-disabled communities, and sharing responsibility for industry-wide change; and who is best positioned to influence interdisciplinary perspectives in theatre inside and outside the disabled community.

1. Introduction

As professionals in theatre experience shifting diversity agenda and new engagement with disability and theatre practice, interdisciplinary perspectives have fast become crucial in gaining an informed understanding of today's theatre industry from the inside out, and in ensuring continued moves towards the accurate representation of disabled people on and off stage. In the theatre industry there is an ongoing mandate to increase engagement with disability in a measurable way; in the case of publicly funded venues including major theatre organisations like the National Theatre, The Royal Shakespeare Company, and regional theatres like Manchester Royal Exchange or Birmingham Rep, future funding depends on it. Recognising that responsibility for diversity was not shared equally across arts organisations, for the past 8 years Arts Council England has chosen to make its annual workforce data public. Most recent data shows, across the total workforce of its funded organisations, only 7% of people identified as disabled against a working age population of 23% (ACE, 2023). Progress in the arts, including theatre, is evident and still needed.

Long before the Arts Council's attention on disability agenda, the field of disability studies provided critical insight into theatrical portrayals of disabled people, casting, and accessible practice. Historically, studies have been consigned to the development of two central discussions: the scrutiny and recognition of common portrayals of disability in the arts, and disability aesthetics, the signification of impairment in performance. Both bodies of knowledge raise important questions about responses to disability in theatre today.

As people that may feel familiar with disability studies literature, it is possible to take for granted knowledge from classic works such as Barnes' (1992) *Disabling Imagery and the Media*, Garland-Thomson's (1997) analysis of the normates' response to *'Extraordinary Bodies'*, Mitchell and Snyder's (2000) recognition of *'Narrative Prosthesis'*, or others such as Quayson's (2007) writing on *'Aesthetic Nervousness'*, and David Bolt's work on *'critical avoidance'* (2012) and *'Metanarratives of Disability'* (2021). This is important work that continues to resonate with everyday decisions made in theatre. It's as easy to assume a distinction between social and medical models, or the terms impairment and disability, are widely understood across disciplines or even irrelevant as more nuanced theories evolve. Yet, in theatre practice, as disabled and non-disabled people navigate new territory, working together for the first time in rehearsal rooms, knowledge that is considered the bedrock to contemporary disability studies is often unknown.

As I consider the impact of interdisciplinary approaches to disability studies and theatre, I'll share a section of findings from my study of lived experiences of theatre practice and disability among professional actors and directors (Worthington, 2021). This work not only demonstrates how new detailed understandings of disability and theatre are made possible by crossing boundaries of disability studies, theatre practice, and phenomenology; it evidences continued value in sharing fundamental disability knowledge with individuals outside the disability studies classroom. Findings I'm sharing from this interpretative phenomenological analysis study will help us consider:

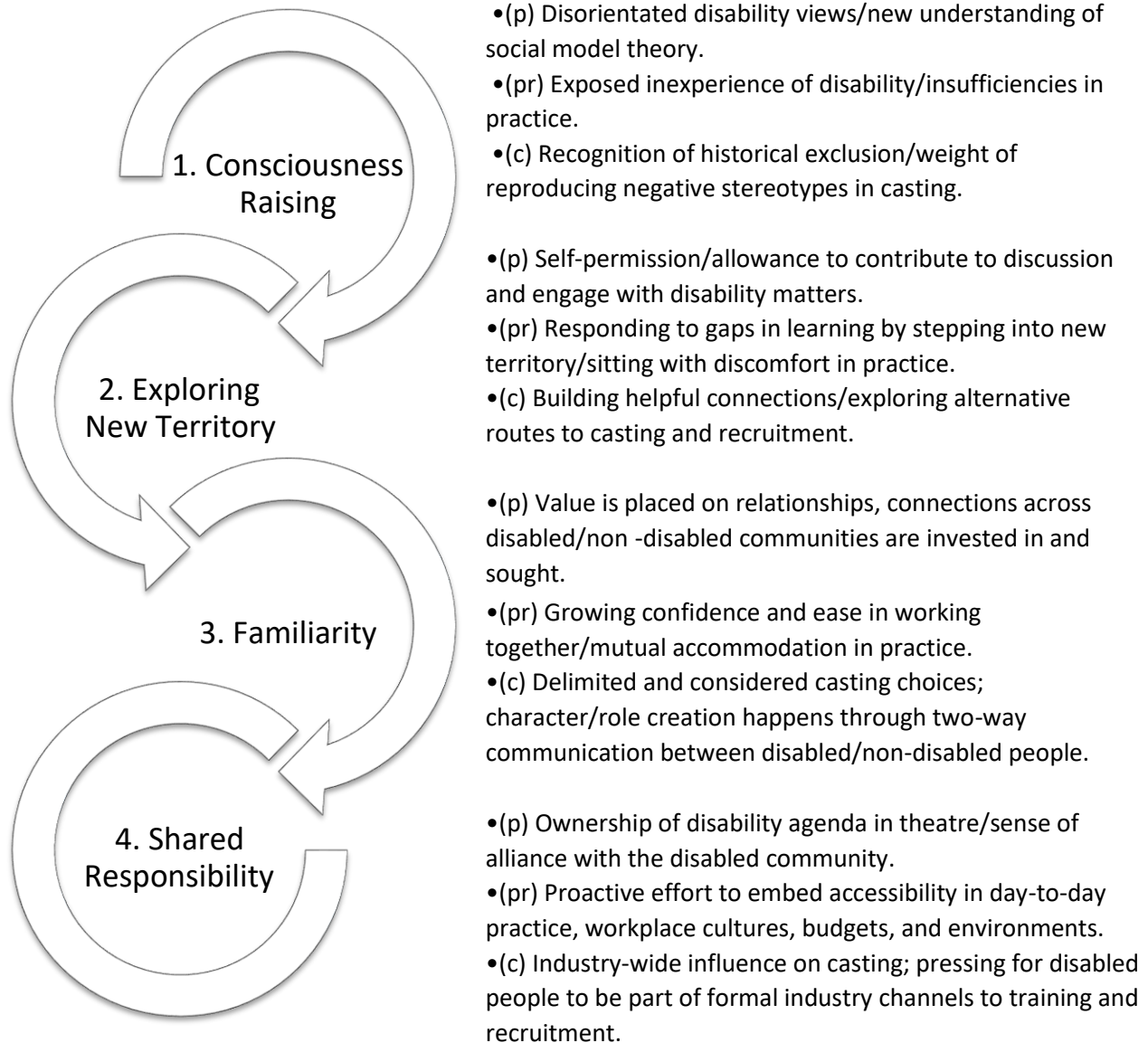
- What aspects of disability studies knowledge are most necessary to share in building disability consciousness in theatre?
- How interdisciplinary perspectives support individual's process of exploring new territory, building familiarity across communities, and sharing responsibility for industry-wide change?
- and who is best positioned to influence interdisciplinary perspectives in theatre going forwards?

2. Engagement with Disability in Theatre

This diagram sets out stages in a process of engagement with theatre practice and disability for actors and directors. This concept emerged from the synthesis of findings from my study (Worthington, 2021). The diagram is text based, it shows 4 circles that set out distinct stages in this process labelled as consciousness raising, exploring new territory, familiarity, and shared responsibility. The four stages can be understood as cumulative. Stage one, *Consciousness Raising*, begins the process in intrapersonal engagement with new encountering, awareness, and knowledge of disability in theatre. This is where shared fundamental disability studies, theory, and history becomes a powerful starting point to change, as this paper will explain. Stage two, *Exploring New Territory*, moves to interpersonal engagement, openness to nurturing new learning, practice, and approaches to casting. Stage three, *Familiarity*, builds on relational engagement, working across disabled/non-disabled communities becoming an expectation not an exception, with effective practice made possible through open communication and collaboration. Finally, at Stage four, *Shared Responsibility*, there is ownership of disability agenda in theatre, active engagement in driving tangible and meaningful change in personal practice, individual workplaces, and the wider industry. Characteristics of each of these stages reflect changes in perceptions, practice, and casting. In the diagram (*p*) describes perceptions, changes in cognitive reasoning, imagining, problem solving, and judgments about theatre, disability, and identity that take place at each stage in the process. (*pr*) describes practice, changes in theatre workplaces, in experiences of audition, rehearsal, and performance settings. (*c*) describes casting, specific changes in belief and

approach to onstage opportunities for disabled people, characters and roles, and recruitment processes.

Figure 1 - Stages in a Process of Engagement with Theatre Practice and Disability for Actors and Directors (Worthington, 2021, p.257)



3. What Aspects of Disability Studies Knowledge are Most Necessary to Share in Theatre?

Actor, Pete 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).

His metaphor draws attention to differing levels of engagement with disability among individuals he works with, setting apart directors who know ‘the notes’, perhaps disability facts or awareness of diversity strategy, and those who have learnt ‘the tune’ (Pete, p.9); perhaps referring to embedding learning from disability in their everyday practice.

All 19 participants in my study locate theatre workplaces as key in their exposure to new disability viewpoints; where exclusionary attitudes, structures and environments are first talked about, witnessed and experienced. The 12 directors, who all identify as non-disabled, describe this as revelatory, with expressions like ‘opened my eyes’, ‘blew my mind’, ‘the big change’, and ‘something shifted’ common in descriptions of practice. Describing her first experience working with an actor who is a wheelchair user director Sara explains: ‘just seeing somebody... it literally take their whole break to get to the toilet and back really was quite eye-opening for me’ (p.14). The 7 actors, all self-defining as disabled people with physical impairments, also locate theatre workplaces as key in their 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). James notes how his learning in work with the disabled-led theatre company Graeae, ‘sort of, made me rethink all of my um [...] moral code about all of that [...] thinking about it more, but kind of also come to terms with who I am and um being okay with that’ (p.6).

The social model is still being explained for the first time in theatre training or rehearsals. This bedrock of disability studies is not necessarily more familiar to one group or the other. Actor Lydia explains, ‘I only recently learnt about the medical and social model of disability, I still don’t think I fully understand it well enough but [...] that really changed what disabled meant for me’ (p. 8). Director John is more familiar with this as a theory worth sharing across his organisation, saying ‘we’ve done a lot of work around the social model of disability [...] it’s society that effectively disables people rather than their own impairment [...] I fully believe that’ (p.4). Increased discussion around disability adds a new dynamic to theatre’s role challenging disability perspectives. In separate presentations here at Liverpool Hope, Ryan Parrey (2018) and Leah Burch (2017) have noted how initial consideration of disability can create personal moments of disruption and disorientation; resistance, anxiety and blurring of professional identity can occur when pre-existing assumptions of disability are opened-up to alternative ways of thinking. They referred to students starting out in disability studies. However, what is learnt in theatre settings is also disorientating personal perceptions of disability and self-identity among actors and directors. New understanding of the most elementary disability theories appears impactful in shifting a weight of responsibility for participation among disabled and non-disabled people working in theatre. Despite the positive connotations of this, it should also not be assumed that personal interpretations of disability knowledge are always straightforward. The lasting impact and resilience required in reconciling first-hand experiences of disability and impairment with self-identity, and recognition of the inherent exclusion of others, particularly for those starting out in the theatre industry, should be neither presumed nor underestimated.

4. How do Interdisciplinary Perspectives Support a Process of Engagement with Disability in Theatre?

For some, new disability understanding is moving from just head knowledge; it has opened communication, eased relationships, and shifted practice. Activist responses to learning from disability in theatre are backed by descriptions of practical and emotional labour to influence change. Director Sara later states she is now 'driving' change 'in a political way' (pp.9-10). She details ownership of disability agenda that impacts decisions in her practice, and growing confidence in addressing disability issues openly and appropriately in rehearsals, saying 'conversations get easier [...] the more you're doing it' (p.18). John expresses similar saying he was 'happily able to organise the bolts of the jigsaw' to ensure a disabled person could take the lead in his flagship production (p.25). He notes new resonance with the phrase 'nothing about us without us', a common rhetoric in disability studies that John says 'really became strong for me' (p.12); he credits this learning as powerful in shifting recruitment and casting processes in his theatre. New disability understanding, 'learning the notes', and proactively embedding this in practice, having 'learnt the tune', is, of course, only part of participants' shared story (Pete, p.9).

For actors and directors, inexperience of disability or lack of knowledge is raised as a significant issue. This is expressed as making auditions or rehearsals uneasy, error or offense more likely, and guidance necessary. Interdisciplinary approaches revealed how this plays out in real-life. There is shared urgency to address gaps in knowledge and experience, involving uncomfortable conversations, or challenge around disability language, access logistics, and representation. There is complex questioning about casting traditions and authenticity. It's not possible to detail this here, but, for example, actor James describes dealing with directors discomfort as they are 'edging towards you to ask you a question [...] kind of dancing around the point' (p. 14); and Moira describes her approach to directors' inexperience saying 'I'm an actor [...] but I'm also there as a teacher' (p.12), which causes conflict and frustrations for her 'politically and artistically' (p.25).

Lack of social model thinking or relationship with disabled people is a cause for what Bolt refers to as 'critical avoidance of disability' (2012) in theatre for some in my study who show minimal understanding of disability as anything other than impairment being a barrier to participation. This is not necessarily due to a lack of learning opportunities. Attending workshops in how you work with disabled artists, even co-directing with a disabled-led company, appears to have little impact on Jack, who maintains, 'I've always had a problem which is about my ignorance as to how you make a work with disability' (p.3). Simon refers to training by 'individuals who were incredibly knowledgeable and quite provocative and challenging about how we are operating as companies, as individuals' (p.9). He speaks of this allowing 'ones whole brain to shift in terms of perspective', and this would 'force your brain to acknowledge or sort of be aware' (p.9). This raises an unsettling dilemma for Simon, how to reconcile new disability consciousness with familiar beliefs and practice and lack of connection with disabled people. Although it seems he wants to appear knowledgeable around disability, like Jack later in his interview he admits 'I'm starting from a position of real ignorance and [...] slowly starting to try and get better' (p.27).

'Normates' working in theatre still evidence Garland-Thomson's view that they are incapable of responding to impairment beyond initial shock or surprise, a barrier to relational engagement (1997; 2000). Without knowledge of helpful benchmarks set out by disability scholars to support appropriate decision-making and casting choices, fear of causing offence, protective compassion, and assumed global vulnerability remain prominent responses to disability in theatre. Using a term Sara Ahmed applies to race studies, there is recognition across all participants that inherited 'proximities from' disability matter (2007, p.155); that is, an individual's starting point in a process of engagement with disability is relevant in theatre, but that routes to effective practice are a process, a live dynamic.

The concept of stages in a process of engagement with theatre practice and disability (Worthington, 2021) is not intended to minimise the individuality of actors or directors, but to draw attention to it. It is not a neat solution to complexity surrounding theatre and disability but highlights it. Descriptions of what characterises each stage are intended to capture lived experiences of participants,

whilst acting as benchmarks for considering where individuals or organisations are positioned in this evolving process. Although this process can be understood as organic and reflective, as already noted - some participants seem stuck at a particular stage, some at the first stage. This concept is not just about reimagining casting or solving accessibility issues, although this is an important part of it. Instead, the emphasis is on an effortful process of mutual accommodations, which is rooted in shared learning, exploration, and relationships; this involves compromise, as well as empathy, forgiveness, valuing one another, and vulnerability. This matters not just because funding bodies require it; but because positioning in this process seems to dictate experiences in theatre as either more or less appropriate, effective, and satisfying for disabled people.

5. Conclusion

Here at the CCDS last year, my paper (Worthington, 2022) about disability, precarity in theatre, and the pandemic suggested a need to ensure continued space for individuals employed in theatre to not only consider the inclusivity of their practice or organisational structures but their own position in a process of engagement with disability. Today I have set out this process in a little more detail. This also developed into a reflective tool with prompt questions to assist individuals working, training, or researching in arts-based practice to identify where they are in this process; I am happy to share this with anyone interested. This process is adaptable across disciplines, so others can consider their process of engagement with disability and steps towards shared responsibility for change in their workplace.

As Ann Fox also acknowledges:

It is important to mark where stereotype and ableism have been promulgated on the stage; it is important to mark where disability culture has reclaimed those images and written new ones. But in between is a wide space in which we can move across the disabled and nondisabled boundaries (2015, p.131).

Fox suggests this offers more nuanced understanding of disability in cultural and literary history; the brief findings I have shared today also point to the importance of occupying this space in theorising current theatre practice and future disability studies. Through this work I have realised more fully, and hopefully expressed briefly today, the value of connections across disciplines; how knowledge take for granted in one field can be drawn on to increase understanding of others. I have realised it is important, as those continuing in disability studies, not to assume responses to disability are predictable or characteristic of a particular community; but, instead to recognise the value, sensitivity, and implicit nature of our lived experiences, which can be overlooked in disability and theatre research. There is ongoing complexity experienced in the theatre industry that I hope may prompt further research and benefit practice, there is a call to action for all those positioned to influence interdisciplinary perspectives in theatre, as audiences, practitioners, teachers, and researchers, to keep open and honest conversation going.

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