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Calvert, Dave

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DIsability Arts is, to appropriate Paddy Ladd's phrase about the documentation of disability politics, engaged in 'the process of freeing ourselves from imposed histories' (Campbell & Oliver 1996). This process is (at least) two-pronged. The need to challenge discriminatory systems that impose fixed narratives on material experience is accompanied by reclaiming authority – the status of the author – in documenting and representing those experiences.

Theatre and learning disability has taken its first steps in this process, and I would like here to consider ways in which it has repositioned perceptions of learning disabled people. By theatre and learning disability, I mean collaborations between non-disabled and learning disabled artists in the construction of professional performance.

Sutherland (2005), on Disability Arts Online's website, suggests the emergence of theatre and learning disability in Britain dates from 1982, with the inception of Strathcona Theatre Company. To chart the developments made in reclaiming histories, another event of 1982 offers an illuminating starting point. The launch night of Channel 4 featured Ian McKellen in the title role of *Walter*, a film about 'a mentally handicapped boy'.

In describing a visit to the set by disabled people, McKellen observes on his website that the fictional Walter '*became their representative and hero', imbued with 'responsibility to tell the truth about the handicapped.' The film accordingly narrates the injustices Walter suffers, drawn from the observations of writer David Cook, who had worked as a hospital nurse.*

Depicting Walter's powerlessness to resist his imposed history, and representing the bleakness of hospital life was sympathetic and timely. Long stay hospitals were virtually obsolete, previously incarcerated people with learning disabilities were returning to their communities and the Care in the Community Act was on the horizon (Ryan 1987). Walter *responded to a need for non-disabled people to rediscover people with learning disabilities (although not vice versa).*

Yet the need for a 'representative and hero' posits other perceived truths about learning disability, embodying a perspective that people with learning disabilities cannot act on their own behalf or initiative. This perspective is echoed by the construction of character within the film. Walter's learning disability locks his character into immutable ways of being that make him perpetually powerless in such a way that his narrative is inevitably authored by non-disabled people. He becomes an unusual protagonist of naturalistic drama, driving the action whilst remaining essentially unchanged by it.

The instigation of theatre and learning disability by Strathcona – followed by many other companies such as Mind the Gap, Heart 'n' Soul, The Lawnmowers, The Lung Has, The Shysters and Full Body and The Voice - addresses more fully the historical need to re-introduce learning disabled and non-disabled people to each other. Unlike *Walter*, it

attempts this literally as people with learning disabilities perform their own representation, enacted through the negotiation between stage and audience. As John Berger writes in *The Guardian* (12 October 2002) 'the talent to make art accompanies the need for that art; they arrive together'.

A requisite talent for theatrical acting is the talent for controlled behaviour, for example in the portrayal of different characters, or their repeated re-enactments in performance. This act of engaging learning disabled actors in itself rewrites their history, therefore: assumptions of fixed and immutable identities are translated into self-determination through the capability of selecting and managing behaviours at will. In doing so, it both argues and evidences their capacity to author their own narratives.

The talent to exploit this capacity is not as natural as Berger suggests, however. While the early performances of theatre and learning disability excite through the originality and necessity of hearing authentic voices on stage, longer term success depends on the same voices being accorded authenticity as professional performers. Non-disabled spectators require histories to be authored in recognisable ways, framed by the conventions and technical mastery of the mainstream actor.

Long term incarceration in hospitals is not, of course, a fertile training ground for aspiring artists. In addition, Arts Council England (2003) notes that a 1980s directory of disabled performers 'did not contain a single example of a disabled performer who had been to drama school after acquiring their impairment.'

In the absence of mainstream training, theatre and learning disability companies established innovative and accessible training opportunities. At Mind the Gap, for example, the Making Theatre Training Programme, continues to offer vocational training in performance skills alongside other components of theatre-making. Similar experiences offered by companies around the country have established a first generation of professional learning disabled performers that can meet mainstream expectations.

One example is Jonathan Lewis, a graduate of Making Theatre, who played Ben in Mark Haddon's radio play *Coming Down The Mountain*. Haddon notes in an *Observer* article (11 April 2004) that BBC executives:
> wondered whether a disabled actor would be reliable enough, whether they could learn their lines and whether they could speak clearly enough…[Jonathan] was utterly reliable and learned his lines perfectly… he didn't have Shakespearian clarity…but what he lacked in elocution he more than made up for in sheer presence

Lewis's balance of technical ability, creative power, vocal authenticity and professional attitude makes the need for non-disabled representation redundant, while publicly demonstrating the ability of learning disabled actors to enact and interpret their own stories.

Yet only partial authorship is achieved through such enactment and non disabled co-

authorship continues to raise questions. Haddon is a responsible and insightful writer, but like Walter before him, Ben's character is essentially unchanged by the predominantly naturalistic drama unfolding around him. How can we move towards forms and aesthetics that allow for fluid, changing or even contradictory identities? Is achieving recognition by non-disabled audiences in itself an acceptance of imposed history? What hegemonic values are masked or promoted by training towards 'Shakespearian clarity'? And do learning disabled artists need to negotiate new ways of reading theatre with non-disabled audiences?

Such questions seem to signpost the next stage: the actors are warmed up and waiting in the wings, so where are the learning disabled writers, directors, designers and choreographers?

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