

Challenging What We "Know" about Disability: Phamaly Theatre and the DisAbility Project

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ABSTRACT: Phamaly and the DisAbility Project are theater companies comprising disabled performers with different missions and purposes. Phamaly produces standard Broadway fare (or previously-existing material) with an all disabled cast. The DisAbility Project writes and produces new material based upon the experience of its actors, creating and touring original material in order to educate others about the culture of disability. Phamaly and the DisAbility Project take different approaches to performance and inclusion. Phamaly conforms to a Brechtian model of performance, while the DisAbility Project enacts Augusto Boal's theories of the theater of the oppressed. Both companies enact audience alienation to compel reconsideration of the capabilities of the disabled body.

KEYWORDS: Disability, theater, Phamaly, DisAbility Project, Brecht, Boal, alienation, theater of the oppressed

Disability and Staring

Phamaly Theatre Co. (Denver) and the DisAbility Project (St. Louis) were founded in order to provide performance opportunities for people with disabilities. Each company has a different mission and purpose. Phamaly produces standard Broadway fare and uses an all disabled cast. Phamaly was founded when five disabled actors had trouble getting auditions with other theater companies. In response, they banded together to found their own company and produce traditional theater in nontraditional ways. The DisAbility Project writes and produces new material based upon the experience of actors in the company. This company comprises people with and without disabilities to model inclusion, and creates and tours original material as an educational tool about the culture of disability. By performing onstage, disabled actors move beyond outsider status and fully participate in and drive the cultural scene around them. I will explore the work of Phamaly and the DisAbility Project in terms provided by two different theoretical frameworks familiar to theatre scholars with a focus on the ideas of Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal.

As theater is inherently voyeuristic, companies of disabled actors necessarily foreground physical difference and invite and encourage staring at bodies that we would typically think

it impolite to stare at. These two companies take command of that stare under different dramatic frameworks. Performances by disabled actors use different approaches to take command to subvert expectations and direct the staring process. Phamaly and the DisAbility Project demonstrate how Brechtian and Boalian approaches to theater can both work to reclaim disabled agency.

Both approaches are needed, and this study compares them. Ultimately, this paper will argue that Phamaly conforms to a Brechtian model of drama; in contrast, the DisAbility Project is based upon Augusto Boal's theories of the theater of the oppressed and the notion that theatrical audience alienation refocuses audience attention on the capabilities rather than the limits of the disabled body. Using the perspectives of these two models, we can see disability depicted in different ways and different approaches to the audience's expectations of disabled actors. Depictions of physical disability on stage are relatively rare, and when people with physical disabilities are portrayed it is often by able-bodied actors. These two theatre companies deliberately put physically disabled characters and actors on stage for all performances, and the companies' use of the ideas of Brecht and Boal allow the disabled performers to retain control of that relationship.

Phamaly and the DisAbility Project have both developed methods for disabled people to deal with the stares that they inevitably receive from others. Staring is essential for humans to process information. When a person is visually different from the norm, as in the case of visible disability, the observer of such a person may not have the prior experience necessary to deal with this new information. Disability can cause an appearance "that violates appearance standards targeting one as a spectacle, [and] the loss of self-possession and often inadvertent breach of social etiquette inherent in the stare mark the startled viewer as vulnerable and inappropriate" (Garland-Thomson 179). The starrer may feel ashamed for an act of staring, but nonetheless needs to stare in order to process a novel visual experience. Staring at physical difference may often feel inappropriate, but disabled performers onstage invite this attention. It is central to the act of performance, as the shared space created by the looking/being looked at dialectic is particularly salient when a visual relationship is established between disabled performers and presumably able-bodied audience.

The person being stared at often has the most power to manage the stare. This idea is central to how theater works. “Staring is the snagging of the eye by the novel. We are drawn by the unanticipated and the inexplicable in an effort to make sense of the experience” (Garland-Thomson 173). In theater, the audience response can range from a gaze to an outright stare, depending on the novelty of what is onstage. Disability (like other novel experiences) onstage can be unanticipated and inexplicable, prompting a stare from the audience. Persons with a visible disability develop a sense of being scrutinized, yet this is common to all actors, disabled or not. Where the physically disabled person may differ is in also being scrutinized while offstage and in developing an awareness that stares engaged on stage may reclaim agency for disabled people not in the performative setting. As all actors must do, disabled actors have decided to oversee the dynamics of these stares by voluntarily presenting themselves onstage. The performances of DisAbility Project and Phamaly play with these dynamics to highlight and emphasize the problematic aspects of the stare in the (vexed) context of disability and to promote a conversation between actors and audience. In both cases—in terms of the school-based and corporate audiences that usually attend DisAbility Project performances, and normative, mostly white and middle-class ticket-buying evening theatre patrons—audiences are primarily able-bodied. A major difference between the DisAbility Project and Phamaly is which theatrical techniques they use to engage with audiences’ stares. The DisAbility Project manipulates their spectators through techniques Boal describes in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Alternately, Phamaly manipulates their starers by presenting traditional theater in a manner that alienates the audience in a Brechtian manner.

In a Phamaly production, there can be moments where the performers’ disabilities (whether intentionally or incidentally) cause us to reexamine what Bertolt Brecht called the “alienation effect.” Audience members question their assumptions of disability, as the disabled body is presented in new ways. The DisAbility Project approaches the actors’ disabilities differently; they directly address the audience and their experience is meant to be dialogic overtly drawing attention to their agenda of disability advocacy through Boal’s theater of the oppressed, which is itself an extension of Brecht theories. According to disability and performance theorist Petra Kuppers, “The Brechtian tradition relies on alienation techniques to distance audiences from identificatory or ‘knowledgeable’ relation

with the performers, from the established modes of seeing and knowing that developed in the safe zone of naturalist theatre” (69). Phamaly works within the naturalist tradition, but its performers’ disabilities seem to be alienating even in a naturalist framework. The DisAbility Project rejects naturalist performance. Yet even with their divergent performance styles, the two companies break free from established modes of knowing. In this paper, I will first discuss the alienation effect and examine how watching disabled performers can help us to understand it, then examine the aspects of the DisAbility Project that are rooted in Boal’s theories, and finally relate how both companies confront the perceptions of disabled actors onstage that are rooted in assumptions about disability.

On Alienation and Empathy

Phamaly, of which I have been an acting company member since 2005, mainly focuses on performing canonical works with casts of disabled performers. The company was founded by actors who were fond of traditional theater and who also happened to have disabilities; they had grown frustrated with the lack of theatrical opportunities for disabled people, and decided to create a theatre company of their own. The founders’ intent in forming the company was to provide a creative outlet in traditional theater roles for those who would typically be excluded from other companies because of their disability. The Phamaly mission is “to provide professional theater opportunities and artistic development for performers with disabilities, and to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities in the performing arts community” (“About Phamaly”). They were aiming to do the same as all other theater artists—create great theater—despite the fact that others thought their disabilities should preclude even the attempt to achieve that goal. They were not explicitly aiming to communicate a social message; they were aiming to perform theater. While the company acknowledges an element of social change is inherent to what it does, this is not their main focus. Any social change that is achieved comes from the act of having disabled actors embody roles apparently written for able-bodied actors, rather than from the scripts themselves. The other core values listed under the mission statement on the company’s website recognize the fact that inherent in any representation of disability will be elements of a social message. Phamaly’s stated mission is not explicitly social change, but includes recognition that in performing theatrical pieces that are frequently denied to disabled

people, the company changes audience perceptions. Due in part to the novel nature of physical disability, disabled bodies are perceived as theatrically alienating even if the actors themselves are performing in a Realist style.

As described by Brecht, the alienation effect works in opposition to traditional notions of empathy with and immersion within a theatricalized story. Brecht wished to distance his audience from his characters so that his audience could intellectualize the reasons for their activities instead of uncritically accepting them. To achieve such distancing, Brecht called for what he described as the alienation effect, “which prevents the audience from losing itself passively and completely in the character created by the actor, and which consequently leads the audience to be a consciously critical observer” (Brecht 91). To produce this effect, the actor must “discard whatever means he has learnt of getting the audience to identify itself with the characters which he plays” (Brecht 193). Brecht identifies certain techniques that can assist the actor in this endeavor, such as breaking the fourth wall, direct address to the audience, or an actor commenting on the action of the play. This was a response to prior ideas about theater and empathy such as nineteenth century literary critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s description of how an audience allows itself to become immersed in a fictional world in his book *Biographia Literaria* contends that “the pleasure we derive from theatrical performances is based on their unreal and fictitious nature” (Ferris 67). In order to empathize with a story, an audience must accept that the unreal has become real, a phenomenon which Coleridge referred to as the willing suspension of disbelief. He describes the willing suspension of disbelief as necessary for an audience to justify and accept fantastic or non-realistic elements in literature. To facilitate the audience’s suspension of disbelief, Western naturalistic acting is predicated upon actors immersing themselves fully in the reality of the characters they portray. Actors use all of their energy to transform themselves into the character they are portraying. This creates a reality onstage that audience members passively observe and imaginatively enter, with which they empathize.

In order to mitigate the numbing effect of these empathetic feelings, Brecht wishes to “alienate” the audience from the characters and the action of the play, thus forcing them to observe without empathizing or psychologically identifying with the characters. Instead, he hopes for the audience to understand intellectually the characters’ dilemmas. To achieve

such distancing, Brecht calls for the alienation effect, a goal supported by other Brechtian techniques such as breaking the fourth wall, direct address to the audience, or an actor's commentary on the action of the play. The alienation effect dictates that the "artist never acts as if there were a fourth wall besides the three surrounding him [...]. At no moment must he go so far as to be wholly transformed into the character played" (Brecht 193). Ironically, a disabled actor can have the opposite problem. The more fully Phamaly's actors immerse themselves in their characters, the more alienating it is for the audience. The actor's disability creates an alienating distance no matter how naturalistically he or she plays the role. This happens in part because Phamaly productions deliberately point out disability in the course of performance, e.g. casting a seeing-eye dog as Toto in *The Wiz*.

In a recent Phamaly production of *Man of La Mancha*, the actress playing the role of Aldonza was a paraplegic who used a wheelchair for mobility. The script of *Man of La Mancha* calls for Aldonza to be raped onstage. In Phamaly's production, the rapists lift Aldonza out of her wheelchair, carry her around the stage, and place her on a table. At the end of the scene, some of the assailants push the actress' wheelchair out one vomitorium, while the other assailants carry the paralyzed actor out through an opposite vomitorium.

For Aldonza's next scene, she reenters and confronts the hero of the play, singing, "A lady has modest and maidenly airs, and a virtue I somehow suspect that I lack; it's hard to remember these maidenly airs in a stable laid flat on your back!" and from another verse, "You have shown me the sky, but what good is the sky to a creature who'll never do better than crawl?" (Wasserman). In Phamaly's production of *Man of La Mancha*, the actress playing Aldonza does not return to her wheelchair before performing this scene. Instead she drags herself onstage, trailing her paralyzed legs behind her. Aldonza's lines about lying "flat on [her] back" and never doing "better than crawl" are given another level of literal meaning and an added emotional weight as the actress is prostrate and crawling in a very real sense.

For a woman who uses a wheelchair, theatrical Realism and Naturalism would seem to indicate that after having her wheelchair stolen she would have to crawl on the ground. For the audience, the representation of the aftereffects of the rape of a wheelchair user (e.g. separation of wheelchair and occupant) is an unexpected act that takes them out of their realm of comfort and forces them, in a Brechtian manner, to reconsider their relationship to

what occurs onstage. The act itself is rooted in Realism, but the view of a wheelchair user without wheelchair is alienating. So, even as the actress performs in a Realist manner, the viewer experiences Brechtian alienation. The Brechtian alienation effect requires the audience to rethink their own stereotypes and assumptions: “a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize the subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar” (Brecht 192). Watching the paralyzed person crawl on the floor outside of a wheelchair casts a familiar subject (a wheelchair user) in an unfamiliar light (how they might move when their wheelchair is missing). While gendered violence should always be discomfiting/discomforting, Phamaly’s staging further defamiliarizes the representation of gendered violence, by making the audience acutely aware of how wheelchair users move when no wheelchair is available.

Non-disabled audience members may believe that they can understand or empathize with the situation of a wheelchair user. But vernacular expressions around wheelchair use (problematic terms such as “confined to a wheelchair” and “wheelchair-bound”) demonstrate a failure of language to express the separation between wheelchair and user and a lack of empathy in social speech patterns. Such wordings fail to recognize that wheelchair users live a significant portion of their lives apart from their wheelchairs (e.g. sleeping, flying in airplanes, swimming, bathing, having sex, exercising). However, it seems likely that most audience members would not have contemplated what life is like for a paraplegic without a wheelchair. In this way, the audience is able to recognize the actress/character, but she is cast in an unfamiliar light. Brecht calls for acting techniques that highlight actress and character are different entities, but certain impairments of the disabled actress can never be divorced from the impairments of the disabled character as she plays it. Even as the actress employs Realist acting to fully embody a character, the impairment itself points at a difference between the body of the actress and the representation of the character, because “disability obscures the blurry lines that separate fiction and art from real life” (Ferris 56). The alienation effect blurs the lines between art and reality and so does disability itself. Only with great difficulty can a character not have the same physical traits as the performer playing that role, and disability’s novelty makes this link even more readily apparent. Those who attend Phamaly shows often state that once the play is underway it is easy to forget that everyone in the cast has a disability. But once one of the characters is

placed onstage in a way that seems unfamiliar, the fact of disability is turned back upon the audience for the audience to reconsider. The situation reminds of the reality/lived embodiment of the disability, instead of using disability as a theatrical stage device. This unfamiliar situation points to the fact that not only is the character a paraplegic but so is the actress. Assumptions and stereotypes about what disabled people can accomplish onstage and offstage become questioned. It is the theatrical Realism itself and the explicit/absolute/complete commitment to a fully integrated character choice that also distances the audience from the onstage proceedings. In this instance, the more fully the disabled actress gets into character the more alienating it is for the audience, as the separation between wheelchair and user becomes foregrounded. The suspension of disbelief and alienation both occur in the same stage action. Brecht theories are often thought of as in opposition to Realism, but Phamaly demonstrates the two coexist on the same stage.

Another occurrence of Brecht's alienation effect may be discerned in Phamaly's 2011 production of *The Diviners*. In this production, a blind actor played a sighted character. The audience seemed willing to accept this, except (judging from the audience's gasps) for one specific instance where the actor rode a bike into the wings of the stage. The needs of the play require that the character himself is able to see. The character in the play makes several references to watching the clouds in the distance and to witnessing the actions of other characters. Even though the actor himself cannot view these things, the character can and the lack of audience reaction seems to indicate a willingness to accept this fictionality. However, the script calls for the character to test out his newly repaired bicycle by riding it offstage. Phamaly's staging accomplishes this by having a stagehand in the wings tap the floor with a piece of wood so that the actor can follow the sound. The rest of the actors onstage could feel the tension in the audience as the actor mounted the bicycle. Each night, the rest of us actors would have to ignore the gasps from the audience as he mounted a bicycle and the applause of approval as he safely reached his destination. The naturalistic style of the production also requires us to treat the situation as if it were absolutely normal and expected for us within the world of the play. The audience accepts a blind actor "watching the storm clouds roll in" but the (perceived) danger of watching him ride a bicycle takes the audience out of the moment, even though both of these made perfect sense for

the character. Because of this extraordinary situation, the actor's disability is revealed in a new way.

The actor playing this role did everything in his power to fully become the character he was playing as mandated by Realist acting, but the audience perceives the moment as alienating. For the actor himself, riding a bicycle in a designated pattern was just another carefully rehearsed function to be performed onstage. He had rehearsed the bicycle scene as diligently as he had rehearsed any of his lines or any of his other stage business. Everything that he did onstage was chosen so as to fully transform himself into his character:

The western actor does all he can to bring his spectator into the closest proximity to the events and the character he has to portray. To this end he persuades him to identify himself with him (the actor) and uses every energy to convert himself as completely as possible into a different type, that of the character in question. (Brecht 93)

By performing tasks normally reserved for a person with full vision, the blind actor had fully become a different type, he had been "wholly transformed into the character played" (Brecht 193). The actor performed actions onstage that were actions that his character would perform. The conceit of Realism mandated how the character should act onstage, but the audience became alienated by the Realism itself. Again, in this one moment, the more fully the disabled actor got into character the more alienating it became for the audience. There is an element of disability that is so inherently "alienating" that it becomes difficult for the disabled actor to overcome it, even through Realism in acting style.

Foregrounding disability in this way functions to separate actor from character in the audience's imagination. Phamaly productions differ from typical productions not only because they create a dialogue between actor and character but also because they create a dialogue between actor/character and spectator which serves to underscore the theme of the actors' and the audience's vulnerability to accident, disease, and death. Phamaly challenges the audience to engage in the play and consider the lives of the actors in a way that a typical theatre company does not. By consequence of this engagement, Phamaly creates a Brechtian alienation which forces the audience to reconsider "what everybody knows" about people with disabilities and the perceived dangers that accompany disability.

The alienation caused by these examples is rooted in how disability is viewed and the discomfort that disability causes nondisabled people who lack insight or experience to feel. Disability studies theorist Harlan Hahn describes two kinds of discomfort that nondisabled people may feel around people with disabilities: existential anxiety and aesthetic anxiety. “Existential anxiety refers to the perceived threat that a disability could interfere with functional capacities thought necessary for a satisfactory life” (Hahn 43). “Aesthetic anxiety refers to fears of bodily difference, reflected in a propensity to shun those with unattractive bodily attributes” (Hahn 42). The discomfort that audiences viewing a Phamaly production feel seems rooted in Hahn’s notion of “existential anxiety.” The audience perceives that the actors’ disabilities could interfere with the capacities of the actors to satisfactorily perform the scene they are engaged in. The tears that the audience shed for the paraplegic removed from her wheelchair, and the concern about the safety of the blind actor riding a bicycle were rooted in the anxiety that the audience feels about the functional capacities of the actors, thereby creating an alienating effect in spite of the naturalistic style of performance.

Even though the disabled actors felt (and indeed were) perfectly safe in the roles they were performing, the audience felt this anxiety because of their assumptions about disability that are mainly based on stereotypes. The rigorous rehearsal process that any theatre company goes through had turned these scenes into mundane experiences for the actors but not for the audience. “Despite the fact that disability is a ubiquitous, even mundane, human experience, people with visible impairments almost always seem to ‘cause a commotion’ in public spaces [...]. The curious fight the urge to stare, to gather visual information that will help make sense of such startling physical difference” (Sandahl 2). In these Phamaly productions, the actors “caused a commotion” and created in the audience a curious “urge to stare” though they were simply following the script. It seems that most people fight the urge to stare at disabled people out of concern for “not wanting to be rude.” However, the disabled person onstage is ready, willing, and able to be stared at – indeed they are welcoming of it. The very nature of theatre is dependent upon causing a commotion in order to invite an audience to stare.

Feeling alienated, “the audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place” (Brecht 91). When the audience realizes

that these disabled actors are acting in unfamiliar ways, the audience becomes aware that the actor – and not necessarily the character – has a disability and that the actor and character are in fact separate figures. The audience is reminded that they are not unseen spectators and that this event is a staged reality.

Managing Disability and the Theater of the Oppressed

The DisAbility Project is part of That Uppity Theatre of St Louis, Missouri. According to co-founder Joan Lipkin, “The DisAbility Project is about the culture of disability. So we make pieces that specifically speak to experiences of disability, accessibility, barriers—whether it be architectural, educational, or attitudinal, employment, transportation, relationships” (Lipkin). Unlike Phamaly, which focuses on staging Broadway plays, the DisAbility Project creates all of their own original material, typically performing an hour’s worth of individual scenes to various community groups, business organizations, schools, etc.

Since 1996, the DisAbility Project has “focused on developing projects that bring together amateur performers with professional artists to create innovative material based on lived experience” (“DisAbility Project”). Co-founded by Joan Lipkin and Fran Cohen, the DisAbility Project’s goal is to create performance that “empowers individuals, honors their stories, sparks imaginations, fosters community, encourages civic dialogue, and enhances public awareness about disability through innovative theatre of the highest quality” (“DisAbility Project”). Unique among many of the disabled theatre companies in the United States, it fosters opportunities for performers with and without disabilities to do educational outreach.

Rather than performing previously written works of theater, the DisAbility Project focuses on developing all of its own original material, giving voice to those who are typically underrepresented in theater, educating the public about how disabled people see themselves, and serving as a positive model for the inclusion of both people with and without disabilities. According to the group’s website, “the DisAbility Project brings awareness and sensitivity to issues in the disability community through a combination of art and advocacy that tours to a variety of audiences” (“That Uppity Theatre Company”). As part of this mission, the group regularly includes question and answer sessions after their performances so that the audience may ask questions about the original works.

As the Disability Project is primarily concerned with spreading its message to the largest population possible, recordings of several of its performances have been uploaded to the Internet. In his book *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Augusto Boal remarks that theater of the oppressed must be able to reach beyond the performance space. “When does a session of The Theater of the Oppressed end? Never—since the objective is not to close a cycle, to generate a catharsis, or to end the development. On the contrary, its objective is to set a process in motion, to stimulate transformative creativity” (Boal, *Games* 245). Augusto Boal explores the activist and emancipative roles of culture for individuals and communities in societies where power is in the hands of the few, where people are excluded from being seen and heard, where they have no position from which to effect social change. Boal also argues that cultural practices could be used as a tool to pacify and numb the masses and wished to use it instead to awaken and energize audiences. For Lipkin, the artistic quality exhibited in her productions goes a long way toward achieving this goal. She wishes to use theater, a tool of the dominant culture, in a new way to spread the message of a population oppressed by dominant culture. Skill at using this tool is necessary for it to be effective. Asked in an interview if she was concerned about acting ability in the productions, Lipkin vehemently responded, “Yes, of course, because the purpose and the value of the DisAbility Project is for the performers but also for the audience. We have to put together actors, and put on a performance that stimulates and engages the audience.” The initial step of quality entertainment is needed in order to fully engage an audience and to create a connection between actor and audience.

Unlike a traditional theater company which reenacts the stories of fictional characters, the DisAbility Project tells stories derived from the lives of the actors themselves. It consists of stories about disability, written and performed by those with disabilities. Lipkin states, “We’re about the people in the culture and the experience of their lives, which is a story that also needs to be told, and so that is what the DisAbility Project does” (Lipkin).

A recent performance was given to a group of students at the St. Louis Art Museum. Lipkin devised a special piece to connect the students with the museum environment and with the actors from the company. Since the piece was at the art museum, the performance encouraged the audience and performers to think of their own lives and bodies as pieces of

art. The piece became a living sculpture performance piece that the company called "I Am a Work of Art, Because..." The first line of the scene was, "Because I climb mountains in my wheelchair." After the performance, Lipkin asked the students which pieces they responded to. She reports:

Most of the students really loved this piece because they felt that they were also a piece of art. I told them, "I would love to hear about some of these pieces of art. Would somebody like to stand up and tell us why they think they are a piece of art?" And these kids they are saying, "I'm a piece of art because I listen to my mother. I'm a piece of art because I got my homework done. I'm a piece of art because I'm nice to my brother." I mean, they were all saying things that are usual human qualities that are usually overlooked. But it was gorgeous. So I can speak to what our intent is. Our intent is social justice. Our intent is social transformation, our intent is to create a more civil society where people are more loving, and compassionate, and accommodating to each other all around. We all need some level of accommodation, so we want to create performances that help the audience get to those places. (Lipkin)

In this instance, the company truly accomplished their goal of using theater to elicit an audience response and increase interaction. Augusto Boal writes that "[t]heater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theater can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it" (Boal, *Games* xxxi). Through this integrative performance, the DisAbility Project transformed a future generation's appreciation of art, theater, and disabled people.

Because the company performs original works with the intention of transforming the audience's attitudes, participation through talkback, or question and answer sessions, is essential to their mission. "I have always been interested in the conversation with the audience," says Lipkin, "I think that is really important." The company likes to provoke a change in attitude in their audience and relies upon these talkbacks to allow the audience to express what they have experienced. "Lipkin prefers to write and stage activist theater, that is, theater that presents itself as politically and socially engaged in its community. As a result, Lipkin's forays into the theater are always performative and provocative" (Smith 96). The company members become further engaged in their community by asking the audience members to join in the performative experience through asking questions; the scenes that they perform serve as provocation for post-show discussion moderated by Lipkin.

In a sense, the company thinks of performance as an invitation to the audience. Through the performance an invitation has been offered, and through the willingness of the actors to display their disabled bodies onstage, the audience then feels that they have been empowered to speak up. The performers are willing to share themselves and discuss taboo subjects, thus indicating to the audience that this is a safe place to speak about such things. Thus, the post-show conversations with the audience become a vital part of the overall performance experience. Lipkin explains this important tie between performer, material, and audience response:

I feel that the performance is a kind of prompt to the audience. Having shared, having seen the audience, and the audience having seen the actors really give and give their lives—show their humor, show their vulnerability—I feel that the audience is now in a different position to speak. They feel that they can share who they are, because the actors have been so present and so vulnerable with them. That kind of aesthetic and that kind of rich dialogue comes out of community-based work. It doesn't come out of canonical stuff quite so much. We're not going understand as much about these lives, these actors' lives, through pre-manufactured scripts. (Lipkin)

There is something Brechtian about the work of the DisAbility Project. They certainly invite the audience to become aware that they are watching a performance, not real life. In the piece in which the actors play as if they are audience members “they have an argument about disability and what constitutes it. It's very, very funny and it's almost shocking in its humor and if it works it should completely disarm the audience. It's very Brechtian” (Lipkin). Brechtian alienation is important to Lipkin, but then the company expects the audience to be willing to engage in the performance in a manner that encourages them to critically discuss what they are viewing and to take this new knowledge with them when they leave the theater. In this sense, they have taken their work beyond the theories of Brecht and have incorporated the techniques of Boal.

Central to Boal's ideals is that theater must take on new forms, so that the audience is not entirely at the mercy of the performance and its practitioners' opinions and agendas. This is one aspect of the oppression that his theater seeks to combat. Boal attempts to free spectators from the oppression of performers; instead of having an audience passively watch and accept what was occurring before them, he invites them to participate in shaping the outcome. Boal argues that we must tear down the wall between audience and actor.

When this is done, spectators become engaged in the theatrical outcome and practice taking the risks involved in political action outside the theater. Boal describes this as rehearsing for the revolution. The DisAbility Project rehearses for the revolution by performing a theater of full access, free of barriers. It imagines an America in which disabling institutions and practices are questioned and the need for access can be interpreted through the lens of those needing access, rather than through the lens of those currently in power who are seen as “providing” access. It does not attempt to intimidate the spectator into changing what they are doing “wrong.” The goal of the project is not to tell the audience how the world should be, but rather to ask the members of the audience if they would be happy with lack of access, lack of employment, and unfriendly stares. The company avoids using theater in an Aristotelian form in which the acting company or playwright present an unquestioned vision of “truth” to a passive audience watching from an auditorium. When the company unites the physical space, the theme of the show, and the audience itself (such as in the example from the art museum), they invite the spectators to interact with their environment and with disabled people in a manner they may have never done before.

According to Boal, theater began as a practice of the people when they came together to chant and dance. Thespis changed this populist structure when he stepped out of the chorus and aristocratized the institution of theater by separating himself from the people. This setup created the conditions for an Aristotelian manipulation of the spectators. By being separate from the onstage action and experiencing catharsis, the spectator is forced to empathize with the character and accept the moral judgments of the play. Thus, Boal claims, theatre oppresses the audience by telling them the proper way to think and when to think it.

To counteract this oppression, Boal sought new theatrical forms. The Aristotelian model has changed little over the past three millennia, and Boal believed that this restricted the potential of theater for social upheaval. “Aristotle constructs the first, extremely powerful poetic-political system for intimidation of the spectator, for elimination of the ‘bad’ or illegal tendencies of the audience. This system is, to this day, fully utilized in conventional theater. But, obviously, the Aristotelian theater is not the only form of theater” (Boal *Oppressed* xiv).

The DisAbility Project’s Boalian techniques encourage the audience to think of the actors as “disabled *people*” instead of just as “disabled.” Lipkin says that the company wants

the audience to be aware of the disabilities. Particularly because the pieces are layered on these disabled bodies. But what we want to do is expand the vision of how they see us. So that the audience thinks, “They are disabled, AND...” For example, Anna has a spinal cord injury, AND she is married, AND lives in her own home, AND has a Masters degree, AND drives. So it is the “and” that we are after; it is not the erasure of disability, it is adding something. (Lipkin)

The audience is compelled to humanize the performers, to see people with relatively non-normative bodies as normal and to lose their anxiety about interaction with such people. While Phamaly engages an audience’s existential anxiety, the DisAbility Project’s desired change in audience perspective acts upon the other form of anxiety described by Harlan Hahn: “aesthetic anxiety,” fears of bodily difference, and a propensity to shun those with unattractive bodily attributes (42). The audience members at a DisAbility Project show are encouraged to talk to, ask questions of, and sometimes even make a physical connection with the bodies of disabled people. One downside of the project in terms of its efficacy and ability to engender change is its tendency to be used primarily in school and corporate settings, which somewhat hinders its ability to reach a wider audience. However, overall, the DisAbility Project aims its work at allaying audience fear of bodily difference and counteracting their propensity to shun.

Outside Perceptions of Disability Brought into the Theater

Certainly, an audience’s experiences from outside the theatre inform its perceptions of what occurs within the world of the play. This is equally true when disability is part of the performance. “When audiences enter the theatre, we cannot expect them to leave behind their own experiences of disability in the world” (Ferris 59). The existential anxiety that nondisabled people feel for disabled people outside the theatre is brought into the theatre along with everything else. Thus, specific “heightened moments” like those described above prevent the audience from becoming fully immersed in the fiction of the play they are watching. But, “awareness of fictionality is an essential component of aesthetic distance, a concept that provides some explanation for how we know the difference between what happens on the stage, for example, and real life” (Ferris 56). On the other hand, the aesthetic anxiety that audiences feel when observing the DisAbility Project is also brought into the theater, and audiences must directly confront bodily difference of the actors because the group seeks to minimize the aesthetic distance of the spectators. The DisAbility

Project is not as concerned with creating a fiction for the audience to immerse themselves in. The performers overtly address issues and ask the audience to discuss why aspects of the performance event might have made them feel uncomfortable. For both companies, when audiences are made aware of the actors' disabilities, the fictionality of what occurs onstage is broken along with the accompanying aesthetic distance. What is happening onstage in the play becomes blurred with what is happening in the real life of the disabled actor.

Once this blurring occurs, the audience is unsure how they should emotionally engage with the work. Should they engage emotionally with the actor or with the character? "Once audience members accept the fictionality of the work, they feel 'emotionally cushioned and safe,' which is thought to give them freedom to engage emotionally with the work" (Ferris 58). The audience is invited to stare at actors in both companies in order to better comprehend the nature of disability. At a Phamaly show, the audience members no longer feel "cushioned and safe" and they begin to empathize with the actor as much as they do with the character. At a DisAbility Project performance, the audience is asked to engage directly with the performers, blurring the lines between what happens inside the theatrical space and what happens offstage. Agency is crucial to its work: not only is the cast reclaiming agency as actors but the form of the performance also seeks to turn the spectators into active participants. In watching a Phamaly production, audience members experience a dialogue between actor and character that is absent from typical productions of a play; watching the DisAbility Project the spectators engage in actual conversation with the performers and learn that the problems that disabled people face are more than mere dramatic interpretations. The lines between actor/character, between empathy/alienation, and between theater/reality become blurred as the audience loses the emotional cushioning of their anxieties regarding disability.

This concern for the actors themselves results from how disability is viewed offstage. According to Carrie Sandahl, "The social-construction model [of disability] locates disability within a society built for nondisabled people...It is the stairway in front of the wheelchair user, or making text in front of the blind person, that handicaps an individual, not the physical impairment itself" (8). While the outside world may impair the functionality of a disabled person, the stage upon which the disabled actor works in the theatre is necessarily

designed to allow that actor to function fully. Onstage, the disjunctures between the body and the environment are minimized through rehearsal repetitions in a specially designed space. Applying the social-construction model of disability to the stage suggests that the audience's alienation is not caused by the physical impairment itself but rather by the audience's expectations concerning that impairment. The audience expects that there *should* be a disjuncture between the actor's body and the actor's environment. Although the actor is fully integrated into the environment, the audience is anxious about his or her physical well-being, which creates an alienation effect no matter the actor's skill at naturalistically portraying the character.

As the audience considers what is practical and what is real onstage, what is art and what is real life, they are forced to reconsider their expectations about disabled people's abilities. "The distances between the practical and the aesthetic, between art and reality, between the work and the performer, [are] all jumbled by the clash between cultural expectations for disabled people in the world outside the theatre and those established inside" (Ferris 59). In Phamaly shows, the cultural expectations which have previously been established outside the theatre for disabled people are not always carried over into the theatre. In DisAbility Project performances, audiences must abandon their cultural expectation that it is wrong to stare at disabled people and interact with them as equals. Clear separations between art and reality, between actor and character, between disability caused by environment and disability caused by physical impairment become jumbled.

These two theater companies challenge their audience to reconsider assumptions about disability. The audience is removed from the fictionality of the work by the assumptions they bring into the theater from outside, and by the assumptions and classical conventions of theatre as well. Even though Phamaly's plays are presented with a commitment to naturalistic characterization, the audience is nonetheless alienated. The DisAbility Project deliberately tries to alienate the audience through non-Aristotelian forms, so that they are compelled into interacting according to terms outlined by Boal. In the examples provided above, audience members were no longer able to clearly identify what they knew about the performers. The conventions of naturalism are at odds with Brechtian alienation. The DisAbility Project takes the added Boalian step of receiving input from the audience in real-

time. The audience is forced to see disability no longer as a traditional stage metaphor. Rather, the actors' disabilities are placed into the realm of reality – both the limited reality presented onstage and the reality of the real world.

When these companies of disabled actors present themselves onstage, the structures of the theater become exposed so that the audience can participate in formenting social change. To this end, Koppers writes, "In Brecht's theatre, alienation techniques are used in order to allow structures to become visible, to undermine the 'common sense', the 'natural', or 'what everybody knows'. Instead of presenting certainties onstage, the audience is challenged, questioned, seduced into engaging in a play of difference" (Koppers 50). In presenting traditional theatre in a nontraditional way and in rescripting modes of theatricality, Phamaly and the DisAbility Project challenge the audience to engage in the play and to reconsider "what everybody knows" about people with disabilities. The assumptions of the audience are manipulated so that they must engage with the uncertainties presented to them. Both companies have effectively learned to manage audience alienation so that the entire process can become an engaged act between actor and spectator, rather than an act of detached and passive reception. These companies' productions differ from traditional productions, not only because they create a dialogue between actor and character but also because they create a dialogue between actor/character and spectator that challenges assumptions about the vulnerabilities of disability.

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