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Abstract:

Over the last couple of decades, theatre and dance by performers with learning disabilities has progressively moved from the domains of the therapeutic or community orientated to that of art. The movement is marked by a shift in venues (from private facilities or community halls to 'mainstream' theatres), a shift in funders, and – perhaps most fundamentally of all – a shift in audiences.

In this chapter, I examine the relationship between the concept of spectatorship and theatres of learning disability, before applying this concept to the messier practice of audiencing. I draw upon interview material with learning disabled performers and other practitioners working in the field, alongside research with audiences to learning disabled theatre. These discourses are used to explore questions of quality, judgement, acts of looking and interpreting as the chapter considers the thorny issue of whether there is a distinct form of aesthetic looking that is invited by learning disabled theatre. While this possibility has the appeal of disrupting normative forms of performance, it also risks recapitulating problematic forms of looking at Otherness. In response to this risk, I propose a nuanced typology of the aesthetic positions – or ways of watching – that audiences adopt in relation to learning disability theatre.

Ways of Watching: Five Aesthetics of Learning Disability Theatre

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Over the last two decades, following in the footsteps of pioneering companies such as Mind the Gap (UK) and Back to Back Theatre (Australia), theatre by performers with learning disabilities has progressively moved from the domains of the therapeutic or community orientated to that of art. While the boundaries between these categories are far from absolute, this movement is marked by a shift in venues (from private facilities or community halls to 'mainstream' theatres), in funders (from health or community provision to arts funders), and audiences (from friend and family to a wider public). All these factors combine to entail a transformation in the ways that audiences are invited to watch. From a history in which people with learning disabilities have attracted a predominately medicalised or fearful gaze, learning disability theatre now invites a different kind of aesthetic attention. This chapter examines the particular ways of watching that this constructs.

For theatre academic Dave Calvert, performance has a particular potency for its ability to "establish a communicative space where people with learning disabilities and non-disabled people can meet on something approaching equal terms" (2010, 513). Indeed, learning disability theatre represents one of the few spaces, even within contemporary society, where individuals with learning disabilities are actively regarded at all, let alone given respect (literally given an 'audience') within the public sphere. This presence of learning disabled voices in public discourse is one of the significant political propositions of the form. Yet at the same time there is concern about the nature of this regard, whether it is voyeuristic, or offered with either prejudice or condescending favour.

My thinking for this chapter has developed through three entwined processes. First, I conducted empirical research with audiences in collaboration with Mind the Gap, along with interviews with learning disabled performers from Mind the Gap, Dark Horse and Hijinx Theatre (all UK). Secondly, I reviewed existing literature and discussion on learning disability theatre and conducted personal interviews with practitioners working in the field. Finally, and just as importantly, I draw on self-reflective engagement with my own experience of watching theatre by actors with learning disabilities and awareness of my position as a non-disabled spectator. Not all this material appears directly in this discussion, but from this mix of sources the objective of this chapter is to propose an embryonic typology of the aesthetic positions – or ways of watching – that audiences adopt in relation to learning disability theatre.

Aesthetics of Watching Learning Disabled Theatre

My starting point, based not least on my own experiences as an audience member, is that there is *something* about the intersection of audiences / aesthetics / learning disabilities / theatres that does *something* or asks *something* about the nature of spectatorship and our experiences of art. The plurals are deliberate: there is no single or homogenous audience; no single, essential, or uniform manifestation of learning disability; no singular manifestation of theatre that results. Most particularly for this chapter, there is no singular aesthetic of learning disabled theatre. Yet there is *something* here that produces aesthetic questions. The implications of looking are of course recurring motif in discussions of disability arts and culture, eloquently explored by Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009), who writes of the

histories and practices of looking in relation to disability. Elsewhere, this is a key observation of Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall book on Back to Back Theatre, where they suggest that the company's work "disturbs the very idea of theatre [and] also disturbs the act of spectatorship" (2013, 17).

In exploring the "disturbed" act of watching that learning disability theatre provokes, this chapter will propose a series of typologies or aesthetics of watching. For the purposes of this chapter "aesthetics" is taken to mean nothing more or less than the impossibly complex question of how we critically and experientially engage with art. Aesthetics describes the nature of our relationship with the frame that art puts around the world, and how experiencing something as art invites us to experience in particular ways. This proposal that there is an aesthetic "way of knowing" is present in Raymond Williams' entry for aesthetic in *Keywords*, where he describes its potential "to express a human dimension which the dominant version of society appears to exclude" (1983, 32). Elsewhere, John Dewey argues that artistic experiences prompt a particular relationship with the world, one of "heightened vitality" and of being in "active and alert commerce with the world" (1934, 19).

In developing any typology one question is how many categories are needed to imperfectly contain the indefinite complexity of a real world phenomenon? Too few and it is meaningless; too many and it is useless. Here I am not, for example, going to explore two common relationships with learning disability – one of "caring", the other of "disregard". The first is marked by an uncritical stance, often exhibited by friends, family and others motivated by a desire to support, but in the context of disability arts easily shades into attitudes of uncritical condensation. The second is underpinned by prejudice, a lack of desire to engage, a lack of understanding and sometimes fear. Neither are ways of watching informed or influenced by the aesthetic frame.

The following discussion suggests five ways of watching: 1) Aesthetics of No Difference; 2) Aesthetics of Radical Difference; 3) Aesthetics of Identification; 4) Aesthetics of Authenticity and Presence; and 5) Postdramatic Aesthetics. These are proposed to group together the kinds of aesthetic framings that are constructed around learning disability theatre in the desire to make these ways of watching more visible and knowable.
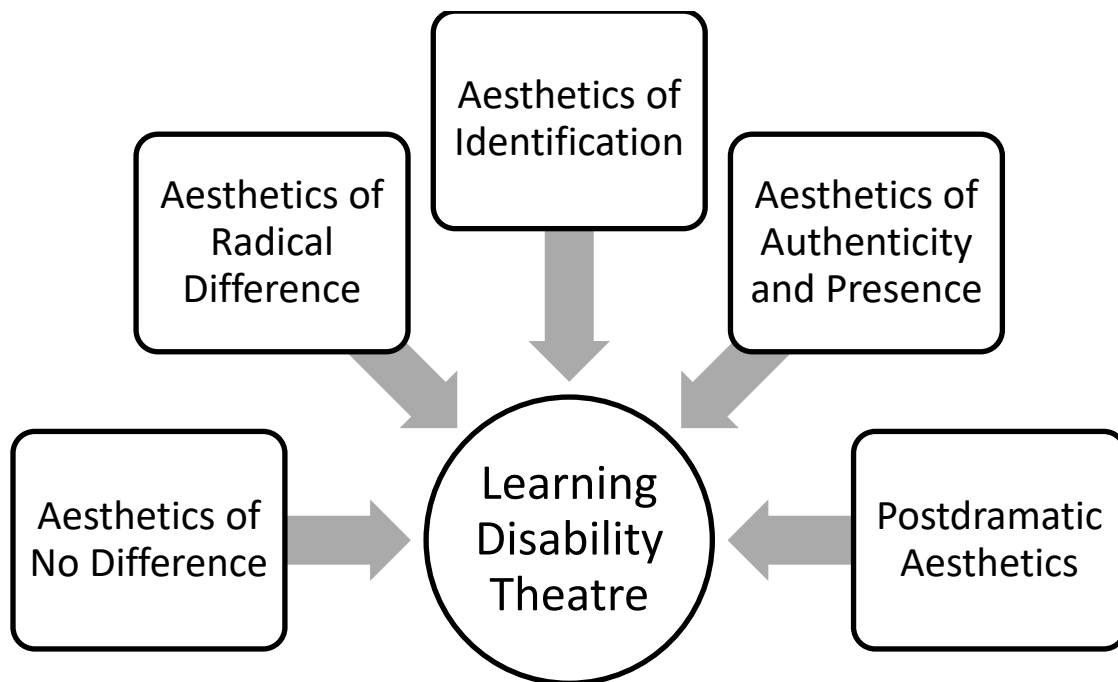
Figure 1. Typology of Five Aesthetics of Learning Disability Theatre

Aesthetics of No Difference (or aesthetics of universal humanity)

If aesthetics describes our ways of knowing art, then this first aesthetic approach to learning disability theatre is directed by the *a priori* adoption of a moral, politicalised standpoint. That is the belief that what people share through our common humanity over-rides any other differences, and that learning disability theatre offers an opportunity to engage with and across this universal humanity. Vanessa Brooks, former artistic director of Dark Horse, talks about how as a theatre director she seeks to work with what she terms the human "givens": "We all eat, we all hate people, we all love people, and we all try and solve problems" (personal interview 27/11/17). Maria Oller, artistic director of Lung Ha, articulates something similar when she talks of her process of working with learning disabled actors, declaring, "The thing is I don't think about my actors as disabled. I don't see the disabilities anymore. I see the actors behind the disability" (personal interview 4/4/17). Both these directors are interested in theatre's ability to tell personal stories within a fundamentally shared experience.

Neither Oller nor Brooks make this step, but the slippage from such focus on shared experience to the erasure of all difference haunts this standpoint. Time and again during interviews practitioners would report audience members saying to them that they had entirely forgotten that the performers had disabilities at all. Moreover spectators often said this *as if it were a marker of the purest or greatest form of praise*. Whether genuine or wilfully adopted, this describes the aesthetics of no difference.

The political ideology behind this position is the assertion of difference blindness – I don't see race, I don't see disability, I don't see sexuality – often motivated by the belief that it is the act of seeing difference that itself produces prejudice. bell hooks describes this as a "myth of sameness" constructed through a "liberal conviction that it is the assertion of university subjectivity" will make all prejudice disappear (1997, 167). In the context of learning disability theatre, the attitude of not seeing difference asserts the ethical credentials of the spectator (I'm so enlightened I forgot about the disability) and has an additional motivation

relating to the perceived quality and value of the work (it was so good I forgot about the disability).

Within disability arts "quality" is a touchstone issue, with the desire to be recognised for creating work of quality, to be judged by the same standards as any other artist, to not be patronised all much repeated and well-appreciable values (for an extend discussion of this see Hargraves 2015, 79-111). In discussions with audiences, actors, and practitioners, even attempting to broach the question as to whether we watch or judge learning disability performance by the same or different criteria as any other performance can produce vitriolic responses. The very asking of the question is seen as a denial of the aspirational erasure of difference. It produces a tangible awkwardness and an almost instinctive desire to assert "no!" – because to say otherwise would "sound like you're making allowances sort of thing" (audience focus group 21/7/17). Theatre director Lucy Campbell articulates this desire as part of a simultaneous push and pull that produces an anxiety of spectating. During an interview Campbell commented, "I wanted the audience to forget almost, whether they had a learning disability or not, because the fact was it was an actor up there who just made them laugh, end of story." Before revising this almost immediately to state that "I don't want people to forget they're learning disabled [… my] drive was to avoid any type of aaaah factor. I didn't want anyone coming in and laughing because they felt they should" (personal interview 6/11/17).

This simultaneous push and pull is also present when talking to actors with learning disabilities, who strongly assert their desire to be seen and treated as any other actor. In part this is to avoid the kind of aaaah factor Campbell describes – "I really get annoyed because people will come up to you and say, oh wow for a disabled person you've got a lot of lines to learn" (Jez Colborne. Actors focus group 18/7/17) – or because they do not want to be narrowly defined: "I don't want to be seen as the disabled actor. I don't want to be seen as that. Because it pigeon-holes you" (Paul Wilshaw. Actors focus group 18/7/17). Yet at the same time they recognise that their status as learning disabled actors does have an impact on the work, talking about its "uniqueness" and acknowledging that the experience of watching learning disabled performers is part of what spectators are looking for: "if you take the disability side away from it," asked one actor "who's going to care?" (Jez Colborne. Actors focus group 18/7/2017).

More broadly it is vital to stress that there are both political and aesthetic limitations to an aesthetics of no difference. Ignoring difference depoliticises difference, allowing the real inequalities and injustices that *do* exist to become hidden beneath a feel-good veneer of universality. Social injustices consequently become depowered and perceived as problems concerning individuals, rather than society as a whole. It is for this reason, as Jim Ferris notes, that the disability arts often refuses to allow audiences to overlook disability, because this can allow non-disabled people the ways that society oppresses people with disabilities (2005, 66).

Ignoring difference also disavows the particular experiences that result from difference, which in an unequal society become flattened, universalised, and largely ignored in favour of the normative. It is only by recognising that difference exists, and that it is important, that it becomes possible to agitate for space to tell stories and allow voices to be heard from the margins. This is eloquently articulated by disability activist Simi Linton, who writes "I'm not willing or interested in erasing the line between disabled and nondisabled people, as long as disabled people are devalued and discriminated against, and as long as naming the category serves to call attention to that treatment" (cited in Carlson 2009, 193).

Finally, difference exists. Whatever well-meaning spectators might assert, whatever aspiring learning disabled actors might desire, we certainly do see and notice difference. As Garland-Thomson writes:

> When we do see the usually conceal sight of disability writ bodily on others, we stare in fascinated disbelief and uneasy identification. Why, we ask with our eyes, does that person with dwarfism, that amputee, that drooler, look so much like and yet so different from me? Such confusing sights both affirm our shared humanity and challenge our complacent understandings. (2009, 20)

Shared humanity doesn't disallow recognition of difference. Indeed, perhaps shared humanity is *defined* by human variation. Moreover, difference is amongst the elements that stimulate, affect and move us in performance. Disentangled from prejudice, difference itself becomes an aesthetic.

Aesthetics of Radical Difference

The counterpoint of attempts to elide difference – we are all just people – is the observation of the multiple ways by which, as Licia Carlson writes, people with learning disabilities "have been portrayed as profoundly other" (2009, 189). Constructions of Otherness describe not just a passing or superficial kind of difference that might be ignored by claims to universality, but a more radical difference that implies an unknowability in which the Other is striped of fundamental rights, powers and shared humanity.

Constructions of Otherness have fundamentally discriminatory histories of exclusion and oppression and it is impossible to rule out that, for some contemporary spectators, the experience of watching learning disability theatre produces associations of superiority and disgust. The conflation of different with prejudice, however, is not the focus of this section. Partly this is because I have not come across such responses within my research – this is perhaps inevitable, as those who might hold such perspectives would not engage in the research or indeed attend learning disability theatre in the first place – but also because it represents a moral and intellectual dead end. Instead I am interested in how perceptions of learning disability as a profound Otherness have been articulated as a politically *progressive* and aesthetically *generative* position. Difference not as lesser than or lacking or wrong, and equally not difference reduced to the same through some universal humanity; but difference as an active, positive and radical way of being and seeing.

There are interweaving strands to an aesthetics of radical difference, starting with Tobin Siebers' observation in *Disability Aesthetics* that modern art has long embraced "disability as a distinct version of the beautiful" (2010, 9). This is also the focus of Anita Silvers' article "The Crooked Timber of Humanity", which pointedly asks why disability, which is often hidden or reviled in everyday society, is such a prominently recurring feature of artistic representations: "the history of art shows again and again that aesthetic representations of people with disabilities make for beautiful art […] what accounts for the eagerness and enjoyment elicited by aesthetic imitations of people whose actual appearance is commonly impugned" (2002, 230). Silvers examines a variety of possible answers to her question, including that the role of disability in art as quasi-therapeutic for non-disabled audiences, enabling them to assuage social guilt and congratulate themselves on their own empathy. Crucially, however, she argues that while society works rigorously to police and maintain

standards of the norm in everyday life, where the anomalous is rejected as deviant, in art the reverse is often the case: in art, "normalcy is seldom prized" (238). Aestheticizing disability, Silvers suggests, elevates Otherness to originality in a manner that potentially advances our understanding of humanity. Again there is a similarity with Siebers' articulation of an active disability aesthetic that asserts how "disability enlarges our vision of human variation" (2010, 3).

The framing of diversity as a state of radical and generative potential is a defining feature of contemporary identity politics. In the context of learning disability, this assigning of positive value to difference is the ideological underpinning for celebrations of alternative, non-normative or neuro-divergent ways of being. Rather than being marked by lack or inferiority, difference becomes a site for radical creative and social diversity.

Indicative of this, both Silvers and Siebers suggest that disability aesthetics describes an engagement with Otherness, with "human variation" (a phrased used by both writers), with the potential to open (even to break) normalised acts of perception. Within the arts, the construction of the valuable, creative and impactful potential of the outsider has exactly this currency in the form of Outsider Art. This is present in how Back to Back Theatre frames their work, as "uniquely placed to comment on the social, cultural, ethical and value-based structures that define the institution known as 'the majority.'" It is the status of the performers as learning disabled outsiders – possessing a radical difference – that enables this act of perception. Helena Grehan writes, "Members of the ensemble exist on the fringes of society. They are often objectified and at times rendered invisible. They mobilize this experience as a sort of camouflage that allows them to watch, or eavesdrop on, and reflect back the workings of mainstream society" (2013, 105). For Bryoni Trezise and Caroline Wake, the consequence is that audience "startle themselves into a moment of self-conscious insight" (2013, 120).

Tim Wheeler, co-founder and former artistic director of Mind the Gap, draws upon similar ideas when describing what for him is the impact of watching a performer with learning disabilities:

> There's a sense of Otherness and there's a sense of wanting to see into and understand the world of others, and yourself through others. And your difference, your sense of difference: that I identify that as me or that resembles me but it's not me, that's definitely not me. There's a sense of reflection and reflexivity in terms of who we are. (personal interview 20/3/17)

Carlson describes this sense of reflection and reflexivity as "the face of the mirror"; that is how "the intellectual disabled function as a mirror for the non-disabled" (2009, 190). In his discussion of theatres of learning disability, Matt Hargraves elaborates on this notion to describe the existence of a persistent notion "that cognitive impairment […] has something to teach 'us' about who 'we' are" (2015, 120). The aesthetic impact of the learning disabled performer, therefore, is as an outsider to "mainstream" society whose radical difference invites the non-disabled spectator to a point of reflective self-consciousness.

In a powerful reversal of normalisation and the denial of difference, the radical potential of radical difference is to step outside normative forms and patterns of thinking and saying or doing or making. Again, however, there are limitations with this perspective, the most significant being that the metaphor of the mirror is an act of projection – the non-disabled

viewer projecting their own fears and beliefs *onto* an objectified and largely imaginary figure. There is evident danger here, concerning what happens to the learning disabled identity and voice. As Carlson writes,

> When the intellectually disabled simply performs this mirror function, there is the potential for a double distortion to occur. Not only do I see myself in some disturbing, alien form, but I simultaneously run the risk of distorting the reality of the other precisely because she becomes a manifestation of my own fears as I imagine myself in this condition. (2009, 191)

Arguably, companies such as Mind the Gap, Back to Back Theatre and others seek to do something far more radical than this – not least through reading agency back into this relationship. This is one of the strengths of Garland-Thomson's exploration of staring, as she describes how the recipient of the stare need not always be passive, or manipulated, or purely objectified. Particularly with the context of the aesthetic frame, and the particular ways of looking this provokes, Garland-Thomson reads agency back into the object of the look describing how the "accomplished stares" can assert their agency through the active return of the gaze. As Yoni Prior writes, again of the work of Back to Back, "This work glares back, remorselessly demanding an apologia from its audience, asking 'What are you looking at?'" (2013, 217).

Nonetheless perhaps the idea that we aestheticise difference should cause pause. Is this another form of objectification, treating people as material? Does it problematically maintain difference, which is also accompanied by social-political marginalisation and division? Does it entail a narrowing of disability, seeking a singular aesthetic that not only ignores but actively flattens disability and reinforces Otherness? Finally, an aesthetics of radical difference presumes not only that the audience are non-disabled and experience the performance through the lens of difference, but also implies that validity and meaning are found specifically in the non-disabled audience and society. Scott Wallin usefully critiques this in his close reading of Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater*, examining how the work was "created from a normate perspective and resonates with non-disabled spectators who feel an unnatural, painful chasm between themselves and disabled people" (2015, 64). This reflects how the particular "communicative space" that learning disability theatre constructs for the non-disabled spectator is one of cognitive dissonance: an active disruption of engrained forms of watching and experiencing art. While this is part of the political and aesthetic power of learning disability theatre, there is limitation in a relationship that at its worse becomes a form of introspective therapy for the non-disabled spectator. Moreover, it entirely neglects learning disability theatre in its relationship to learning disabled spectatorship, and the possibilities this offers in the form of an aesthetics of identification.

Aesthetics of Identification

Implicit within most discussions of learning disability theatre is the presumption that the audience is non-disabled, a view underpinned by the non-disabled status of the vast majority of academic writers and reviewers. This does two things. First, perceived as an encounter between learning disabled performer and non-disabled audience it is precisely *difference* – whether as radical potential or source of prejudice to be overcome – that is the primary relationship between the work and the audience. Second it implies that the meaning and value of the work is as constituted for and by this audience. What, however, if rather than defined by radical difference the audience experience was defined by radical identification? Radical

because it is an identification largely denied elsewhere in society and is therefore revolutionary in overturning normalised relationships. The illustration of this aesthetics of identification comes from the responses of a group of learning disabled spectators after watching *Mia* by Mind the Gap.

Mia is a devised performance exploring questions of parenthood and disability, incorporating comedy, multimedia and pastiche, with the four learning disabled actors presenting variously characters and elements of themselves. In post-show focus groups, the majority of the spectators, both learning disabled and non-learning disabled, engaged with the work powerfully and emotionally. However, responses from the learning disabled spectators were significantly distinctive, with an immediate and very visceral sense that they had been watching a version of their life being presented on stage. In talking about the production these spectators constructed almost zero experiential or emotional gap between the work and their own memories and experiences. Conversations often took a very direct structure: the production showed this; that also happened to me. The details of this were frequently painful, personal and dramatic: stories of being in care, being physically, sexually or verballed abused, of domestic violence, of being judged, of having their right or ability to be a parent questioned. The specifics of these personal stories are not necessary to include here, but the nature of the relationship to the work can be communicated by phrases such as:

> *Participant 3*. I can relate to that.
>
> *Participant 2*. When I saw it tonight it was, like, you know, brings back memories, you know, of what happened years ago.
>
> *Participant 6*. I've been through it in the past, and it brought back memories.
> (audience focus group 21/7/17)

In contrast to discussions that construct difference as the core audience experience of learning disability theatre, these responses display a profound degree of empathetic identification. Moreover, while the responses did not exhibit pleasure as such – indeed for one participant the level of identification was such that the performance made her "quiet really upset and I just wanted to get out of the show […] I felt like I just wanted to get out. I didn't really want to stay in there" – there was an implicit political and personal satisfaction in seeing lives like their own represented on stage. That is a sense of rightness – of justness and justice – in the representations.

The issues here might seem to be political rather than aesthetic – the right of a minority group to visibility, the right to see representations of oneself on stage, screen and media. Theron Schmidt, however, usefully asserts the "strong connection between political distributions of visibility and aesthetic practices" (2013, 191). Schmidt's essay, however, is focused resolutely on the disruption that learning disability theatre causes to *non-disabled* perceptions of the self, of theatre, of spectatorship, of politics. In other words the focus is once again on the politics and aesthetics of difference, with value, interpretation, and critique again from a non-disabled perspective. The audience perspectives in this section overthrow this presumption, asserting the importance of also acknowledging a learning disabled spectatorship, which represents a radical disruption to an otherwise dominant aesthetics of difference. Indeed, perhaps this is the *most* radical way of watching of all, for it resituates meaning and value and perspective away from the normative non-learning disabled centre and places it with the learning disabled outsider.

Aesthetics of Authenticity and Presence

This section interrogates the familiar and recurring perspective that learning disabled performers possess – or inhabit, or transmit – an innate, natural *authenticity* and an absolute, undiluted *presence*. In contrast to the previous discussion, these ideas emerge very fundamentally from a non-disabled perspective and therefore say more about the desires and prejudices of the non-disabled spectator, than learning disability itself. Either ironically or inevitably, it is precisely because of this that they are recurring tropes within ideas of an aesthetics of learning disability theatre.

Both of these concepts have a considerably and contested analytical history in their own right, even before being interwoven with the history and discourses of learning disability, much of which is far beyond the scope of this discussion. Instead, I will focus exclusively on ideas of authenticity and presence within the context of learning disability theatre, where the nexus of the issue is located in the nature of the learning disabled performer's presence on stage. This can be illustrated through a series of discursive examples. Such as when Matt Hargrave cites dramaturg Bridget Foreman commenting that learning disabled performers "will only ever be themselves on stage" and "there is no affected performance" (2015, 105). Or Theron Schmidt's description of the popular perception (which he goes on to critique) that "animals, children, and intellectually disabled actors might all be useful because (we might think) they apparently can't act, and so when we encounter these beings on stage we encounter them for themselves rather than for whom they appear to be" (2013, 191). Or Yoni Prior describing how Back to Back Theatre's work often involves "playing the reality line" commenting that "We who watch don't know what is fiction and what not" (2013, 216).

The recurring perspective is that performers with learning disabilities are presumed to be not-acting but *being*, exhibiting perhaps an extreme of Michael Kirby's Acting/Not-Acting Continuum. There is a double edged quality to this perception: on one hand often celebrating the authenticity (the realness) of the performance, but also denying any agency, intentionality or craft. To illustrate this Hargrave contrasts the extensive praise given to non-disabled actors portraying disability (Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man* for example) where the "sheer amount of acting […] is evidence of a 'special' talent" (2015, 178) with concern from audiences to autistic actors portraying autistic characters that "the actors were performing themselves" (198). The latter is deeply authentic perhaps, but denied intentionality and respect, limiting learning disabled performers to *merely* presenting themselves.

From the perspective of actors with learning disabilities, the assertion that they have a particular kind of stage presence might assert their eminent watchability, but also discredits their craft, talent, and extensive training. Learning disabled actors themselves frequently talk of presenting characters on stage, stressing their training and their investment in particular roles. For one actor with Hijinx Theatre, this is the very pleasure of performing, declaring "when I go into a role, I imagine myself as a different character in a different story as it were. I feel like I'm no longer Richard Newman I'm this character and this character now has to go through this journey, whatever the story may be, whatever the character may be, and it's just nice: the enjoyment of playing characters" (Richard Newman. Actors focus group 17/3/17). Meanwhile an actor with Mind the Gap demonstrates the clear ambition to engage with the transformative challenge of acting, saying: "I try my best not to put too much of myself in it

[…] I try to erase as much of myself as I can out of it" (Daniel Foulds. Actors focus group 18/7/17).

A second thread locates the authenticity of the learning disabled performer slightly differently, although ultimately no less problematically, not in the lack of acting but in the innate possession of a particular kind of authentic presence. Giles Perring, for example, cites non-disabled artists talking about how they find an exciting and rewarding spontaneity in working with learning disabled people, "there's the different quality they bring to performing that's informed by learning disability that I find really interesting." Or from the point of view of the audience "What I enjoy about watching people with learning disabilities perform – their aesthetic – is the sense of raw energy" (cited in Perring 2005, 184).

Hargrave examines how Jon Palmer and Richard Hayhow, two non-disabled directors with extensive experience working in learning disabled theatre (with The Shysters and Full Body and the Voice respectively), construct the notion of the "authentic performer" who "due to their lack of sophistication in social terms, is more 'naturally authentic' and that they bring this quality into the rehearsal room" (2015, 92). There is of course a set of problematic stereotypes emerging here, which deny people with learning disabilities full agency and intentionality, replacing it with a kind of unreflective creative power or transcendent presence. It can become, as Perring suggests, "new labels of specialness" (2005, 185). The slippage from authenticity and presence to other kinds of motifs (of innate innocence, naivety, spirituality) is all too easy. Hargrave also critiques the "authentic model", partly for how it positions learning disabled performers as *only* able to make certain kinds of work, but also for reconstituting a particular kind of Othering (2015: 227). Here he draws on Zizek's observation that "the power to position the Other as 'authentic' is only made possible by assuming a 'privileged empty point of universality'" (2015, 109).

For the non-disabled spectator, however, there remains an awkward reluctance to entirely surrender these perspectives. For while the labels of authenticity and presence are problematic, they do begin to describe something of the affective experience of watching a learning disabled performer. For a number of informed practitioner-spectators they evoke something of the qualities that actors with learning disabilities seem to bring to a performance. Again some discursive examples are useful. Tim Wheeler, for instance, describes learning disabled performers having a "different sort of sensibility on stage, an interesting way of working" (personal interview 30/3/17). The exact nature of this "different sort" is left floating, and is similarly tangible yet ineffable for Jesper Michelsen who describes both the experience of watching learning disabled performers and the struggle to account for this experience:

> there is a certain aesthetic, if you will, or a certain way of being there, being on stage, and it's tough and I'm pretty sure you can't really generalise about the aesthetic of disability performance, but there is definitely that …. It's definitely there. (personal interview 1/3/17)

Meanwhile Joyce Lee, director of Mind the Gap's *Mia*, talks about still being in the process of searching for an aesthetics or poetics to watching a learning disabled performer with the twin ideas of sincerity and disarmament surfacing in her mind:

It is the intention, how they want to share with other people who are watching. […] they're so disarmed […] it's a form, a way of being which is really, yes, which is just honest and genuine I think. (personal interview 18/7/17)

Each of these practitioners seek to resist generalisations, are acutely cautious of formulating "new labels of specialness", but are aware that they do experience particular and different affective experiences – and want to acknowledge and begin to understand these. The challenge is to do so without essentialising, without reducing the learning disabled performer to what Hargrave and Schmidt both describe as an "iconic function". The final aesthetic way of watching seeks to resolve this by shifting attention away from the figure of the learning disabled performer and instead to the form of learning disability theatre.

Postdramatic Aesthetics

For many of the writers cited in this discussion, one impact of learning disability theatre is to disrupt the very fundamentals of theatre. The disruption rests in two connected features, both of which have been exposed and explored in this chapter. First, is the nature of the learning disabled actor, whose presence blurs the boundaries of acting and being, challenges the relationship between the real and the fictional, and disrupts our sense of intention and authorship. Second, is the relationship with the audience, whose gaze is turned back on themselves, provoking awareness of and reflection on their own act of perception. In both these factors learning disability theatre resonates with a wider contemporary aesthetic impulse that finds strength in the spaces where the real and the representational overlap. If, as Hans-Thies Lehmann articulates it, postdramatic theatre is characterised as a "palette of stylistic traits" such as "parataxis, simultaneity, play with the density of signs, musicalization, visual dramaturgy, irruption of the real, situation/event" (1999, 86) then this resonates strongly with the aesthetics of learning disability theatre.

I can see this in four pieces of otherwise very different examples of learning disabled theatre I saw in 2017 – *You Have Been Watching* (Dark Horse); *Mia* and *Contained* (both Mind the Gap); *Meet Fred* (Hijinx) – which variously engage with metatheatrical devices (such as the play within the play), direct address of the audience, explicit reference of other genres, the inclusion of music/song/dance, and parallel performance texts/screens/media. In *Meet Fred*, for example, the director of the play appears as himself, while the main character is a puppet who has to decide which of his puppeteers to sack as his disability allowance is reduced. In *Mia* one scene involves a faux game show titled "Don't Drop the Baby", while throughout TV monitors, projection screens, and live relay cameras are used to provide different frames within the already explicitly referenced frame of theatre itself. Even the most conventional, narrative-based of these pieces, Dark Horse's *You Have Been Watching*, which was very consciously aimed at a broad, accessible audience, incorporates a looping feature as the leading character addresses the audience about his desire to gain a part within the fictional sitcom that is taking place within the production itself. And layered across all of these is the fundamental "irruption of the real" in which the learning disabled actor performs the learning disabled identity. (And, conversely but perhaps less recognised, the non-disabled spectator is required to become increasingly, critically aware of their non-disabled identity.)

What is interesting, however, is whether the predilection towards postdramatic forms in learning disability theatre is the result of it being a contemporary form operating within contemporary environment and tastes. Or if there is there something aesthetic, something relating to form or content, that propels learning disability theatre in this direction? The value

and potential of reading learning disability theatre through the lens of the postdramatic is articulated most explicitly by Schmidt (2013), in relation to Back to Back Theatre's *Food Court*. For Schmidt the particular value of Lehmann's intervention is the positive value it places on the theatrical, in distinction to the dramatic, proposing that *Food Court* utilises postdramatic motifs through an emphasis on the surface of theatricality and appearances in order to open up the representational space of learning disability. It is, he argues, not about being disabled (which isn't political) but about *appearing* disabled (which is). Bree Hadley also sees a political alignment between disability performance and the postdramatic, particularly in the relationship between the spectator and the work. She notes the use of multiple, sometimes simultaneous, frames within postdramatic theatre and suggests that: "To open an event to dual framing […] draws spectators into a liminal space in which attempts to apply habitual, ready-made responses are deferred, delayed or thwarted" (2014, 69).

For both Schmidt and Hadley, one of the values of the postdramatic in the context of disability performance is how it enables practitioners (and perhaps *requires* audiences) to disrupt and reframe traditional hierarchical relationships and established representational forms. In other words postdramatic forms – intrinsically interested in edges, margins, the texts between the texts – has a particular affinity to the voicing of perspectives from the margins and the edges.

In their introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* Jerome Carroll, Karen Jürs-Munby and Steve Giles suggest that postdramatic theatre's distinct approach to the political is centred on the "reality-status" of the performance in which the audience "encounter 'real' people, who bring aspects of their real world identity into the theatre, unadorned with fiction or character" (2013, 3). This enables performers (and again requires spectators) to construct new, inherently political, relationships between performance and audience. The alignment of this reality-status with the discourses described earlier in this chapter should be apparent, present for example in Bruce Gladwin's description of how a spectator might ask themselves: "There's a guy with Down's syndrome. I wonder if he's playing a person with Down's syndrome?" (cited in Schmidt 2013, 197).

As with all the ways of watching I have been presenting here, there are hesitations and gaps within this discourse. We might wonder, for example, who makes the choice about whether postdramatic devices are employed. It would also be possible to ask whether an emphasis on the "reality-status" of the learning disabled actor presenting the learning disabled identity simply loops discussion back to ideas of authenticity. Alternatively, the learning disabled actor might ask, what about my desire to present a character? Perhaps the lens of the postdramatic represents a narrowing of the form of learning disability theatre to only one particular kind of representation and particular way of watching.

Conclusion

The five aesthetics of watching that I have presented in this chapter are far from exhaustive, but I aim to facilitate conversation and analysis, and bring habits of watching to the surface. Each has a seductive political or aesthetic appeal; each also has flaws and limitations. My conclusion, therefore, is to propose that learning disability theatre should *actively* seek to maintain all these aesthetic frames wilfully, deliberately, and simultaneously in play. Rather than competing ideological lens through which we might read learning disability theatre, in practice audiences might more productively cycle through positions of difference and

identification, of reflecting on ourselves and on others, of engaging with a different kind of sensibility that results from the diversity of human variation.

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