

THE 19 PERCENT:  
DISABILITY AND ACTOR TRAINING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by

Deric McNish

B.A., Binghamton University, 2001

M.F.A., Case Western Reserve University, 2008

A thesis submitted to the  
Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Theatre and Dance

2013

This thesis entitled:  
The 19 Percent: Disability and Actor Training in Higher Education  
written by Deric McNish  
has been approved for the Department of Theatre and Dance

---

Oliver Gerland, Ph.D.

---

Beth Osnes, Ph.D.

Date\_\_\_\_\_

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we  
find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards  
of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

IRB protocol # 12-0407

McNish, Deric (Ph.D., Theatre and Dance)

The 19 Percent: Disability and Actor Training in Higher Education

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Oliver Gerland

Abstract:

The purpose of this dissertation is to study training methods for students with disabilities in college acting courses. Although more than 19% of Americans live with some form of documented disability, this is a minority that is virtually non-existent on stage and screen. Able-bodied actors play nearly all of the available roles, a practice that some consider a modern form of minstrelsy. As written, the few characters seen often reflect outdated disability models, perpetuating stereotypes that can be reductive and harmful. There is a troublesome lack of authenticity in writing and casting. One of the many reasons for this lack of visibility may be related to a disproportionately low number of trained actors with disabilities in the professional market. This research addresses the barriers that students with disabilities face when they seek actor training in higher education.

An extensive survey of existing literature addresses primary and secondary questions. A series of interviews reveals many positive practices that can contribute to a more welcoming and inclusive actor training program. Well-known instructors of acting, voice, and movement share wisdom earned from decades of experience. Actors with disabilities that have worked professionally and completed an actor training program provide valuable insight by sharing class experiences and personal challenges, information which may prove useful for future instructors and students. These interviews gather some valuable perspectives on a largely unexplored topic.

Some strategies that have been uncovered include ways to adapt popular acting, voice, speech, and movement pedagogies for the greatest variety of students, ways to effectively communicate with college students with disabilities, and responsible strategies for portraying disability identity during in class scene work. Some of these findings reflect the principles of Universal Design for Learning, which can be useful in practice-based theatre courses.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the generosity demonstrated by every individual that I interviewed. They each have my sincere gratitude.

Thanks to my parents, Richard and Cassandra McNish, for their unwavering support.

I am grateful for my tireless and insightful committee: Oliver Gerland, Beth McGee, Beth Osnes, Tamara Meneghini, and Cecilia Pang.

## CONTENTS

### CHAPTER

1.	INTRODUCTION .....	1
	1.1 Statement of Purpose .....	1
	1.2 Need for Study .....	2
	1.3 Research Questions .....	5
	1.4 Methodology .....	7
	1.4.1 Interview Procedures .....	9
	1.4.2 Language .....	13
	1.5 Study Outline .....	15
	1.6 Limitations and Conclusions .....	17
2.	BACKGROUND .....	20
	2.1 Introduction .....	20
	2.2 Disability Definitions and Models .....	21
	2.3 Representations, Visibility, Aesthetics, and Authenticity .....	28
	2.3.1 Consequences of Invisibility .....	29
	2.3.2 Authenticity .....	31
	2.3.3 Extraordinary Bodies .....	36
	2.4 Actors with Disabilities in the Professional Market .....	38
	2.5 College Students with Disabilities .....	41
	2.6 Universal Design for Learning .....	44
	2.7 Accessibility, Architecture, and the Politics of Space .....	48

2.8 Factors Affecting Career Choice .....	51
2.9 Talent, Skill, Training, and the Gatekeepers .....	54
2.10 Conclusions .....	61
3. ACTING, VOICE, and MOVEMENT .....	63
3.1 Introduction .....	63
3.2 “Crip” the Body of Knowledge .....	69
3.3 Communication .....	76
3.4 Blindsided .....	81
3.4.1 Amanda Giguere .....	87
3.4.2 Ike Schambelan .....	92
3.4.3 Onward .....	97
3.5 Bella Merlin .....	98
3.6 Nick O’Brien .....	101
3.7 Robert Cohen, Robert Barton, and Rob Roznowski .....	103
3.8 Lyndsay Marie Giral-di-Palmer .....	108
3.9 Jill Summerville .....	113
3.10 Other Elements of Actor Training: Voice and Movement .....	120
3.11 Movement Training .....	121
3.12 Michael Luger-ing .....	129
3.13 Voice Training .....	134
3.14 Rocco Dal Vera .....	139
3.15 Jason Dorwart .....	145

3.15.1 Reacclimatizing: Voice and Breath .....	146
3.15.2 Reinventing Movement Pedagogy .....	149
3.15.3 Communication .....	151
3.15.4 Being Seen .....	155
3.15.5 Inclusion .....	156
3.16 Regan Linton .....	158
3.16.1 Adapting Vocal Pedagogy .....	159
3.16.2 Little Things .....	163
3.17 Jenna Bainbridge .....	164
3.18 Conclusion .....	168
4. CONCLUSION .....	172
4.1 Introduction .....	172
4.2 Context .....	175
4.3 Main Points .....	177
4.3.1 Overall Philosophies .....	178
4.3.2 Flexibility .....	179
4.3.3 Communication .....	179
4.3.4 Disability Identity .....	181
4.3.5 Embrace UDL .....	182
4.3.6 Practical Matters .....	183
4.4 Limitations .....	185
4.5 Areas for Future Study .....	189
4.6 Conclusion .....	191
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	193

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

### **1.1 Statement of Purpose**

The purpose of this dissertation is to study strategies for accessibility and training methods for students with disabilities in college acting courses. My research aims to identify common obstacles to students with disabilities in practice based theatre classes and rehearsals, as well as to document strategies that attempt to mitigate these barriers. Efforts to credibly represent the diversity of American society on stage and screen have met with difficulties, not the least of which is a lack of trained actors with disabilities. The implementation of the Rehabilitation Act (section 504) in 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 has led to more students with disabilities enrolling in colleges and universities than ever before. If a greater number of these students choose to participate in the performing arts and successfully complete actor training programs, the end result well might be an improvement in the way people with disabilities are represented on stage and screen through authenticity in casting and more truthful stories, greater visibility in media, and a more ingenuous representation of the demographics of our diverse society.

In the fall of 2010, I taught an Introduction to Acting course at the University of Colorado Boulder in which one of my students was blind. I didn't have foreknowledge that any of my students required accommodation and, upon examining the curriculum I had so carefully prepared, I realized that a large percentage of the activities I had planned would in some way exclude this student. I also had very little background in ways to responsibly



represent contemporary disability identity on stage. Determined to give everyone in the class a valuable experience, I began a research project to gather information about training actors with disabilities in an integrated classroom. I spoke with Ike Schambelan, Artistic Director of a New York City based off-Broadway company called Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (formerly Theatre by the Blind). He described some useful and pragmatic accommodations that could be made for actors with visual impairments. A colleague at the University of Colorado Boulder, Dr. Amanda Giguere, described an acting class experience and related how one student's blindness united the class and helped to create a stronger ensemble. These initial experiences reaffirmed my belief that the goal of a truly diverse theatre can be furthered by making the actor training experience more accessible to people with disabilities.

## **1.2 Need For Study**

People with disabilities are underrepresented in popular media – film, television, theatre, and advertisements. Although the 2010 United States Census reveals that more than 19% of Americans live with some form of documented disability (the largest minority in America), a recent study shows that less than 1% of characters in scripted television series are depicted with disabilities (“New Study Reveals...”). Able-bodied actors play most of those roles (“Where We Are on TV”). In the theatre world, actors with disabilities can often find performance opportunities in companies specifically devoted to presenting the work of people with disabilities, such as Theatre Breaking Through Barriers or Denver’s PHAMALY Theatre Company. These segregated companies provide training and

performance opportunities, but employment in mainstream theatre is a more rare occurrence.

While disability has been a theme in drama since its inception, roles that are explicitly written for characters with disabilities usually fall into several reductive and cliché categories. They reflect outdated disability models that are counterproductive to today's disability rights movement. There is a long tradition of using the disabled figure as a metaphor in drama, perpetuating stereotypes that can be harmful. In reality, disability is one trait among many, not a defining characteristic – a person with a disability, rather than a disabled person.

Many theatre, film, and television producers and writers have verbally expressed a commitment to diversity, authentic casting, and characters with truthful stories (Lewis 396). Carrie Sandahl extols the potential of artists with disabilities to open what she calls “doors of perception,” a somatic experience unique to artists with lived experience (18). This is at the heart of every argument for diversity in entertainment. It's not simply an argument for equal opportunities, but a belief that creativity springs from difference. Disability has been used as a dramatic device for so long that it can be difficult to separate the fiction from the fact. As a society we are instructed by what we see in media, but most stories about people with disabilities are not based on lived experience; they are largely based on imagined or romanticized perceptions about a marginalized group. There is an alarming disparity when a group that numbers 56.7 million people is almost invisible in film, theatre, and television.

An initiative to tell these untold stories will benefit from the involvement of creative artists with lived experience in disability. People with disabilities need greater visibility in

media, and actors with disabilities can help bring authenticity to these roles. Victoria Lewis points out in “Disability and Access” that “although many more disabled young people in America are attending university, by the time they leave high school most of them have already gotten the message – the performing arts are not welcoming” (qtd. in Margolis 192). While acting is certainly a difficult career for anyone, there are significant additional barriers for people with disabilities. These barriers begin in the classroom and contribute to disproportionately low numbers of actors with disabilities in the professional world.

It is important to understand these barriers and develop strategies to mitigate them. Theatre buildings, often the oldest buildings on campus, can be very difficult to access by students with disabilities, despite improvements mandated by the Americans With Disabilities Act (Sarno “Re: U.” 6 June 2012). The attitudes of the “gatekeepers” of actor training, professors and administrators who determine which students enter a BFA or MFA in acting program, can also be obstacles to actors with disabilities. The dominant perception that actors must be versatile and “marketable,” that their bodies and voices must be “neutral” and therefore capable of playing a variety of roles, works against actors with disabilities when there is such a strong psychosocial meaning tied to the disabled body on stage.

Actor training in higher education relies heavily on techniques and exercises developed by Constantine Stanislavski in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. His techniques, along with those of his successors such as Michael Chekhov, Sanford Meisner, Stella Adler, and Lee Strasberg, are rooted in a tradition that privileges the able-bodied student. It might be possible to maintain the essence of the desired outcomes of Stanislavski-style exercises while adapting those exercises to meet the needs of a greater variety of students. This goal

might be achieved, in part, by using the principles set forth in Universal Design for Learning (UDL): instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone – not a single, one-size-fits-all solution but rather a flexible approach that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. UDL is an educational philosophy that is gaining support among educators in all fields, and may provide a guiding principle in adapting arts curriculum as well. Through a greater understanding of the barriers facing college students with disabilities in acting courses, and by discovering or developing methods that adhere to the principles of UDL, my hope is to facilitate the education of students with disabilities that choose to pursue acting as a career.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

My primary research question seeks to address the need for greater inclusion and accessibility for acting students with disabilities in higher education. I seek to study training methods that help to make acting classes more welcoming and positive to students with diverse disabilities, and I seek strategies that can make actor training a viable and successful choice for students with disabilities. My research aims to identify obstacles common to students with disabilities in practice based theatre classes and rehearsals, as well as to document strategies that attempt to mitigate these barriers. I intend to look at various elements of actor training including movement, acting, voice, and speech. Some part of this discussion will use a broad definition of disability, but for the purposes of this exploratory study I will focus on students with disabilities that are likely to appear in

college classrooms. While that may preclude certain cognitive disabilities, I believe that the accrued wisdom will be broadly applicable.

It is not my intention to seek “best practices,” since anyone that has experienced an acting class can attest that it is a subjective and experiential process; there are many equally valid routes towards similar goals. There is great diversity within the disability community so there will be few universal rules applicable to every unique individual. Any argument in support of “best practices” would be easily dismissed as immeasurable and therefore I seek “positive practices.” I acknowledge that there may not be an indisputable “right way” to conduct an acting class, but there are certainly more inclusive and accessible processes that I hope to document. In so doing, I may be able to increase options for acting teachers, to the benefit of a more diverse variety of students.

Many of my secondary research questions can be answered by a thorough review of existing literature. Others may be addressed during the interview process and revisited at the conclusion of this thesis. Some of these secondary research questions include:

- Are actors with disabilities underrepresented in media (film, television, theatre, advertisements)?
- Do roles depicting disability typically go to actors with disabilities? Why or why not?  
Are trained actors with disabilities in short supply?
- Do actors with disabilities attempt to enroll in acting courses in their colleges and universities? Why or why not?
- What are the factors that keep students with disabilities from enrolling in acting courses? Their own perceptions? Academic advising? Disability service specialists? Accessibility? A dominant culture of exclusion? Lack of role models?

- Once actors with disabilities enroll in acting courses, what are the factors that contribute to their success or failure?
- How can an instructor, director, or student responsibly represent disability identity during scene and monologue work?
- Are students with disabilities successful in training programs but unsuccessful in the industry?
- How can we encourage young actors with disabilities to pursue training?
- What are the ethical implications of encouraging students with disabilities to pursue actor training?
- What are the challenges to providing actor training to students with disabilities?
- What are the advantages to training actors with disabilities?
- What are the barriers to training actors with disabilities?
- How can positive practices be made available to acting teachers in higher education?

## **1.4 Methodology**

There are two parts to this study. First, the literature review will attempt to answer many of the primary and secondary questions using existing research. Second, I will conduct a series of interviews with individuals who might have relevant experience and I will document and organize their responses. Interviewees may include professors of acting, movement, voice, and speech who have taught actors with disabilities, as well as actors with disabilities who have worked professionally or completed an actor training program. For practical reasons, this study will focus primarily on subjects in the Denver

metro area, but may also reach out to other organizations or individuals that have experience relative to the primary research question.

This qualitative methodology seems most appropriate when considering a broad question that will likely yield contradicting answers. As stated previously, it may be too contentious, or simply too early to assert best practices in a field with so many variables. A more appropriate contribution at this stage of the field's development may be an open-ended, exploratory model. Interviews may offer solutions, but equally useful would be conversations that help to direct the course of research in the future. Interviews may also reveal inherent biases in the work that challenge the validity of my primary research question, which carries assumptions based on my own experiences and values.

This dissertation will be an emergent study. Many of the secondary research questions can be answered by a thorough review of existing literature. Some literature exists that offers suggestions that may, in part, contribute to the body of knowledge referenced by the primary research question. In addition, my own experience teaching an integrated class in 2010 that included a student who was blind gives me some insight into positive and useful accommodations for one type of disability.

The primary research question will be addressed through a series of interviews that, rather than attempting to prove or disprove a hypothesis, may evolve in response to the data collected. Similar to a "grounded theory" approach, I will extract data from interviews, organized them into concepts and categories, and subsequently compile a list of "positive practices." This respects the interviewee's subjectivity and allows the research to follow trails that emerge from the data. It will also prevent me from simply bolstering my own preconceived notions. Interviews with subjects may reveal additional potential subjects

and unanticipated avenues of research. This approach may reduce the influence of biases and preconceived notions and allow for new discoveries.

This dissertation is exploratory in that it is open-ended, addresses layered issues, and uses multiple avenues of research. Although the primary research question deals with pragmatic issues and strategies for accessibility, in order to approach that question I must first delve into disability studies, performance studies, reflections on the professional industry, and look at the current state of actor education. This may also be a descriptive dissertation as I relate the efforts of other educators to improve accessibility.

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is likewise varied. It is likely that there will be a strong presence of critical theory, since I seek to provide training and support to a disenfranchised population. Subjects may occasionally refer to power relations and identify biases – the line between objective actor training techniques and the politics of identity may become blurred. I seek not only creative solutions but also to identify barriers, and in so doing this research may occasionally drift into the realm of applied activism. Finally, my acceptance that “best practices” may not truly exist places this dissertation in the realm of post-positivism. There may not be a “right way” to conduct an acting class, but with objectivity there is certainly a more effective and appropriate way.

#### **1.4.1 Interview Procedures**

- The University of Colorado Boulder’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this procedure on July 13, 2012. The protocol number is 12-0407. The IRB reviewed the



protocol and determined it to be of exempt status in accordance with Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46.101(b).

- Data collection will occur through personal interviews with a number of theatre practitioners including actors, teachers, students, and directors. Interviews may be conducted in person, by phone, by Skype, or by e-mail.
- Approximately 20 subjects have been IRB approved.
- These interviews will be completed no later than July 2013.
- Third party/secondary subject population(s):
  - Primary subjects will not be asked to provide any private or recognizable information about third parties. The knowledge I seek is general and my questions will seek out public experiences, such as classroom and rehearsal practices. For example, I may ask a Director how he or she conducts a first “read-through” of the script when working with visually impaired actors, but I will not seek or relate identifiable information about specific performers.
- Inclusion criteria:
  - The subject population will be aged 21-80 years. They may be able-bodied or may have some form of physical disability. The central element for inclusion in the study is that the subjects must be actors with disabilities or have some experience teaching, directing, acting, or facilitating the performance or performance education of people with disabilities.
- No vulnerable populations will be considered for this study. I will interview people with physical impairments, not cognitive impairments.

- Recruitment methods: E-mails will be sent to potential subjects in which I describe the goals of this research project, ask whether they feel they may have some wisdom to contribute, and ask whether they are willing to be interviewed for the project. I will inform them that participation is voluntary, that there are no consequences for refusal and no compensation for acceptance.
- My research will be based primarily in the Denver metro area, while also reaching out to other known organizations that have worked to train actors with disabilities in higher education. Although this is an open-ended project and I hope to discover potential subjects as the research progresses, I will begin by contacting the following individuals and organizations:
  - The Artistic Director of Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (formerly Theatre by the Blind), a theatre company in New York City that produces live theatre with actors with disabilities.
  - Instructors in my professional network that have experience teaching actors with disabilities in higher education.
  - Artistic staff and actors at PHAMALY, a Denver based theatre company that produces shows using actors with disabilities.
  - Other local actors with disabilities that have taken acting, voice, speech, or movement classes in higher education.
  - Instructors that have published widely used texts on the subjects of acting, voice, movement, and speech.
  - Instructors that have a reputation as international authorities on popular methods of training actors.

- Local instructors that have expertise in particular movement, voice, speech, or acting pedagogies.
- If the subject prefers, interviews may be conducted in person, by phone, e-mail, Skype, Facetime, or Google Meetup.
- With the permission of the subject, the interview will be recorded using a digital recorder. If the subject objects to being digital recorded, then I will take notes by hand.
- Data collected for each individual will include their name, age, position, nature of their disability (if applicable), and information about relevant training and experience.
- A series of questions tailored to the individual's strengths and experiences will follow.

For example:

- Interviews with teachers that have taught actors with disabilities will be asked questions about particular methods they may have tried, and whether or not those methods were successful in their opinion. I will also ask these individuals to define their criteria for success. For example: What kind of ensemble-building exercises are possible in a group with mixed mobility? If you teach "sense memory" in an acting class, how have you conducted that exercise in a way that includes students that are blind?
- Actors with disabilities may be asked about positive or negative class experiences. They may be asked which movement, voice, acting, or speech pedagogies have been most successful for them. They may be asked to relate strategies for incorporating their disability into scene work.

- Interviews with directors may be asked questions about how they conduct rehearsals with actors who have disabilities. For example: How do you teach blocking to an actor with a visual impairment?

### 1.4.2 Language

This project brings together many diverse voices. I interview people with disabilities and those without, I cite a wide range of publications from scholars and practitioners with varied backgrounds, and I attempt to synthesize this information with consistency, objectivity, and sensitivity. The language that appears in this study is fairly diverse and it is therefore beneficial to take a moment to discuss how the reader might negotiate these linguistic conventions.

Disability rights advocate Simi Linton contributed a chapter to *The Disability Studies Reader* called “Assigning Meaning” in which she discusses the ways that particular words and the attendant meanings of those words change over time and help to shape the way people respond to disability. While I may offer suggestions about terminology considered to be appropriate at this point in time, there will invariably be differing views. “People First Language,” the strategy for communicating with people with disabilities that is discussed in Chapter Three, may be a generally accepted convention at this point, but it is certainly not a rule. The meanings of terms such as disability, crippled, impairment, and handicapped change with the ideology of the people who use them. A person with mobility impairments who uses the word “crip” means it in a different, material sense than a person without the lived experience of disability. Terms applied to people with disabilities are

used to classify a group of people in ways that, according to Simi Linton, are governed more by economics and politics than by the individuals that are forced to bear them (224).

Some of the people I interview re-appropriate terms that have generally been considered derogatory. For example, Jill Summerville, a scholar and performer with a mobility impairment, refers to herself as a “gimp.” Her use of the word “gimp” is not an invitation for others to use it. Simi Linton explains, “Cripple, gimp and freak as used by the disability community have transgressive potential. They are personally and politically useful as a means to comment on oppression because they assert our right to name the experience” (228). This is an example of the disability community attempting to “wrest control of the language from previous owners, and reassign meaning to the terminology used to describe disability and disabled people” (223).

Generally speaking, I will use “People First Language” in this dissertation. That is, I most often refer to a person who uses a wheelchair as “a person with a disability” or, more specifically, as “a person with a mobility impairment.” This approach acknowledges that people with disabilities are a group linked not by physiological similarities, but by a shared political and social experience. People with disabilities are not defined by their impairments. As there are no absolute rules in this matter, I may in some instances use “disabled person” but I will never use constructions of the following kind: “the blind,” “the deaf,” “the disabled.” Such labels suggest that there is nothing beyond the referent than blindness or deafness or disability. I reject this view and this linguistic usage.

## 1.5 Study Outline

This study is divided into four chapters. The first chapter explains my personal and professional motivations for undertaking this project, the need for study, the primary and secondary research questions, and justifies the methodology and theoretical framework while acknowledging certain inherent limitations. Chapter One also explains the delimitations used in this research, which will begin with an exploration that uses a broad definition of disability but focuses, eventually, on disabilities that are likely to appear in college classes.

Chapter Two provides foundational background information as it attempts to answer many of the secondary research questions. In so doing, it uncovers some existing thoughts that may be applicable to the primary research question. It identifies trends in disability studies, including standard definitions as well as the four major models of disability: moral, medical, social, and minority. Reasons for authenticity in casting such as diversity, equity, and the concept of disability aesthetics are explored. This chapter examines existing literature and statistics about actors with disabilities in the professional world, addressing issues such as dominant perceptions and employability. It identifies the challenges that college students with disabilities face as they navigate their educations, considering the effect of existing national laws. It defines and explores the role of Universal Design for Learning in higher education. It addresses the role of architecture, not only in reference to accessibility but also the social ramifications of space. It explores factors affecting career choices and choice of majors for college students with disabilities, taking into account factors such as recruitment, enrollment, and strategies for advising students

with disabilities. It attempts to address the slippery question of, “What makes a good actor?” by examining concepts such as talent, skill, and training. It explores perceptions of biases by people who decide which students have access to actor training (referred to here as the “gatekeepers” of training), such as professors or directors of BFA and MFA programs. It also attempts to broadly characterize the pedagogy of a “typical” acting class.

Chapter Three focuses on various approaches to training actors with disabilities. It identifies an overall philosophy that may be useful for adapting traditional approaches to actor training. It discusses strategies for effectively communicating with all students, including those with disabilities. I relate the specifics of my experience training a student who was blind and reveal the ways in which wisdom from Amanda Giguere, a colleague that had had a similar experience, and Ike Schambelan, Artistic Director of Theatre Breaking Through Barriers, contributed to a successful class. I consult with experienced educators Bella Merlin, Nick O’Brien, Robert Cohen, Robert Barton, and Rob Roznowski to glean some positive practices when teaching acting to students with disabilities. Lyndsay Marie Giraldi-Palmer provides the perspective of a student actor with a hearing impairment. Jill Summerville, an experienced performer, teacher, and theatre scholar with a mobility impairment, bridges the gap between theory and practice. Chapter Three continues by focusing broadly on issues related to voice and movement training. It defines the aims of voice and movement training and identifies several major pedagogies that are present in many actor training programs. Carrie Sandahl’s essay “The Tyranny of the Neutral” explores a common theme in actor training, “neutrality,” which is an impossible aesthetic for many disabled bodies. Sandahl provides a standard against which we can measure individual pedagogies. I collect other perspectives on the concept of “neutrality”

in actor training and identify strategies that may salvage it for continued use. Other major metaphors that appear in actor training, such as “the body as instrument,” are examined in both a positive and negative light throughout the chapter. Experienced educators Michael Lugering and Rocco Dal Vera share some excellent points about conducting inclusive classes. Actor and theatre scholar Jason Dorwart discusses the many different challenges he encountered while successfully completing an actor training program after a spinal injury. Regan Linton is the first wheelchair user to enroll in the MFA acting program at the University of California San Diego. Her successes reveal strategies that can be useful for instructors and students alike. Finally, prolific Denver actor Jenna Bainbridge shares how her mobility impairment has affected her work in classes and on stage.

The fourth and final chapter in this dissertation study restates the problem in more informed terms. It identifies how the research conducted fits into the larger context of disability studies, performance studies, actor training, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. It offers a list of “positive practices” which have been extracted from the entirety of the research. These practices fall into six categories: overall philosophies, flexibility, communication, disability identity, Universal Design for Learning, and practical matters. It then identifies several limitations inherent to the study and areas for future study.

## **1.6 Limitations and Conclusions**

This project is not designed to discover best practices, but rather to capture individual perspectives on a complex problem. My literature review reveals that this is a relatively new field, with many different and often contradictory voices. My aim is not to



determine which are right and wrong, but simply to add voices with practical experience to the discussion. Disability is a broad term and acting is a craft with myriad approaches. There are no laws, only theories. Contradictions arise even in the best of circumstances. Best practices may not exist, but a thoughtful teacher or a student with disabilities that has navigated an actor training program will surely have wisdom to at least interrogate and improve a flawed system. If this study can lay bare more options for students and teachers, then it will have been a worthwhile endeavor.

As stated earlier, disability is one trait among many, a single characteristic among others such as ethnicity, gender, and class. A particular approach to acting may work for one actor may not work for another; likewise what works for an actor with a disability may not work for another, even if he or she has the same disability. It would be a mistake to make general claims about all disabilities based on the experiences of a few people. Essentialism – the attempt to make universal or essential claims based on the experiences of a few – is therefore a very real danger in this dissertation. It is for that reason that I have included research on Universal Design for Learning in this dissertation. The concepts, which will be explained further in Chapter Two, encourage educators to create courses in which the greatest number of students can potentially succeed by anticipating and eliminating barriers. In an ideal situation, students with disabilities shouldn't need individual accommodations; the course should be ready for whoever enrolls. That may be a challenge, but it is certainly a worthwhile goal.

This dissertation also begins with certain assumptions, or biases. As an educator, an actor, and a director, I come to this work with many preconceived notions about the training and employability of actors. I take for granted certain beliefs that others may not

share. I believe that the stories of people with disabilities are worth telling and that people with authentic lived experience are the ones most qualified to tell these stories. I believe that spectators with disabilities benefit from seeing themselves truthfully represented in media. I believe that actors with disabilities have valuable contributions to make on stage and screen. I believe that disability should be more visible in theatre, film, and television, which will in turn help the social goals of the disability rights movement. I believe there's a value in representing the true diversity of the United States and that there's an insidious harm in marginalizing 19 percent of Americans.

## CHAPTER 2 BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I identify eight major areas of research that will provide a strong foundation for this work. First, I present different perspectives on the various definitions of disability and attempt to provide an overview of the community's diverse demographics. I also explore the four dominant models for representing disability in literature and the arts: moral, medical, social construction, and minority. Second, I identify the major arguments in favor of authenticity in casting and greater visibility for people with disabilities throughout media. I explore the potential positive contributions of actualism and disability aesthetics to the landscape of drama. Third, I study the current state of the acting industry, looking at the career opportunities for actors with disabilities in the professional market today. Fourth, I provide a snapshot of the current state of affairs for college students with disabilities today and the unique challenges they face as they navigate coursework towards their degrees. Fifth, I explain Universal Design for Learning, an instructional philosophy that makes learning accessible for the greatest variety of students. Sixth, I look at ways to mitigate the challenge that architecture poses to students with disabilities. Architecture contributes in complex and subtle ways to a segregated and ableist power dynamic in our classrooms and performance spaces. Seventh, I share research that examines how and why students with disabilities make their career choices, what factors are used in those decisions, and why students with disabilities are unlikely to choose to study acting. Eighth, I explore the skills, qualities, and talents associated with

being an actor. I consider what those qualities may be, what is included in a typical actor training program, and how the “gatekeepers” of advanced actor training decide who can and cannot study in restricted enrollment programs.

These eight topics address many of my secondary research questions and lead directly to my primary research: how to train actors with disabilities in higher education. There is a vast amount of background information and many contradictory opinions in this relatively young field. I pose fundamental questions and cast a wide net looking for answers. I include empirical quantitative studies conducted by national organizations as well as abstract theory written by scholars in many different fields; there are indisputable facts and brash presumptions. I put writings from some of the most significant disability and performance studies scholars in communication with each other, uncovering more similarities than differences. Ultimately, my hope is that this background section contains a convincing argument in favor of training and casting actors with disabilities, though I do uncover points of contention. At the conclusion of this chapter, the reader should have enough foundational knowledge to participate in the ongoing conversation about an important and evolving topic.

## **2.2 Disability Definitions and Models**

One of the most well known definitions of disability was established in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A person has a disability if he or she has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, has a record of such an impairment, or is regarded as having such an impairment. In *Beyond*

*Victims and Villains*, Victoria Lewis points out that the ADA definition has been used to include a wide variety of individuals from people who have congenital physical and cognitive disabilities to people who develop impairments related to age, obesity, and alcoholism (xx). The definition is fairly broad and codifies disability as continuously open to interpretation. What constitutes a major life activity and to what extent must it be limited for a person to have a disability? Whether or not a person is “regarded” as having an impairment is largely a matter of opinion, and subsequently the effect of the ADA is to use the widest possible umbrella for a legal definition so as to avoid prejudice based on the nature of the disability.

Lewis reveals more nuanced definitions within the disability community, categories that are more specific to individual opinions and needs. For example, she explains that many deaf and hard-of-hearing theatre artists do not consider themselves disabled and, “based on the fact that they share a common and separate language, that they constitute a ‘linguistic minority’” (xviii). Terry Galloway supports that assertion, “The deaf as a people don’t regard themselves as disabled but simply a culture entire, like the Amish” (78). In *Considering Disability*, Carrie Sandahl points out that, while people with different disabilities may have diverse needs and experiences, “what they do share is a common set of political and social goals” (21). Lewis also questions the aptness of the term “community” to describe a demographic that numbers almost 50 million in the United States, and includes people “characterized by vastly different physical and sensory conditions” (xvi). To essentialize means to attribute essential, natural characteristics to members of a group. I aim to avoid drawing universal conclusions about the diverse

disability community. Engaging in stereotyping, or essentializing, can do more harm than good.

This dissertation focuses broadly on the disabilities that are likely to appear on a college campus (which may preclude certain cognitive impairments). It is not my intention to privilege certain sectors of the disability community over others. Some of this research may be relevant to the broadest definitions of disability, but I do hope to narrowly delineate the scope of this work so as to make it more directly useful to actors and teachers in specific circumstances.

Using the ADA definition, a 2006 U.S. Census Bureau study reported that approximately 13% of workers aged 21 to 64 years and about 19% of the U.S. population aged 5 years and older have some form of disability. Not only are people with disabilities the largest minority in America but, according to a poll conducted by Harris Interactive, a market research organization and member of the Council of American Survey Research Organizations, they are also the least educated, most underemployed minority (Lewis xxx).

Disability studies is concerned not only with definitions, but also with the myriad ways in which disability is represented in society through media. Like critics using frameworks such as feminism or queer theory, disability studies scholars seek to analyze media and culture through a particular lens. If the concept of disability is a construct – an evolving creation of society that is reflected in that society's culture – including literature and the arts, then the ways in which it is represented are ripe for interpretation. Disability studies scholars have identified several models to categorize different narratives and perceptions of disability. These models are useful structures for critically analysis of how disability functions in film, television, and theatre.

Ann Fox explains the moral model, “[It] posits disability as an outer reflection of an inner moral state. Most commonly, that state is one of two extremes: extreme innocence or infamy” (40). Victoria Lewis writes that in theatre, “the disabled person is seen as flawed morally, emotionally and sexually, not just physically” (xxi). She cites a book called *Freaks* that argues such taboos and stigmatizations of the disabled person has appeared in all cultures across time (xxi). The moral model can be found in Ancient Greek plays just as readily as in contemporary film and television. In the moral model, disability is often connected to some supernatural state or ability. Tiresias, the blind wise man in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, is a prime example. He has no eyesight; his blindness seems to correspond to a powerful God-given vision of things past, present, and future. Oedipus, after losing his sight, gains a similar connection to the Gods in *Oedipus at Colonus*. Carrie Sandahl gives us more examples of how the moral model connects outward physicality to inner psychological and emotional states, “Richard III’s hunchback, a beacon of evil, justifying his antisocial behavior; or Laura Wingfield’s limp, a mark of shame, explaining her depression and unrealized cravings for male companionship” (Sandahl and Auslander 255).

The medical model reads disability “not as a marker of personality, but as pathology. In other words, disability is a problem located on the body of the impaired person (not a societal problem or construction)” (Fox 40). Under the medical model, the desire of a person with disability is to be cured and their state of being is a state of lack or a tragedy. As Lewis writes, the “impaired” were “no longer viewed as supernaturally good or evil, but sick” (xxi). They must want to be cured or to pass as cured. Lewis argues that this model contributed two cliché characters to the theatrical canon, “the heroic overcomer and the heroic suicide” (xxi). The characters only need an “attitude adjustment” to escape self pity

and resentment. They are usually “rescued” by a nondisabled character (xxi). There are many examples in film, television and theatre. Hilary Swank’s character in the film *Million Dollar Baby* commits suicide after undergoing an amputation. The medical model is clearly represented when disability is synonymous with tragedy and when the character considers or commits suicide. The play and subsequent film version of *Butterflies Are Free* tells the story of a blind man who needs the intervention of an able-bodied woman before he learns of his own value. Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* is a symbol of dependence and needs medical treatment for his impairment. The film *My Left Foot* tells the story of Christy Brown, in which the key character exists in a tragic state and struggles for normality.

The moral and medical models set ideas of “normal” against ideas of “abnormal,” where characters with disability strive for normalcy. Lewis bemoans this “twisted body, twisted mind” approach, while pointing out that such characters permeate media because they are “dramaturgically useful” – easy fodder for playwrights and screenwriters (xxii). Simi Linton, quoted by Carrie Sandahl in *Considering Disability*, writes, “the fact that impairment has almost always been studied from a deficit model means that we are deficient in language to describe it any other way than as a ‘problem’” (19). The moral and medical models ascribe meaning to disability; the presence of disability on stage and screen signifies something to an audience. A character’s disability becomes his or her defining characteristic. This dominant tradition intrudes upon performance-based classrooms in insidious ways. Victoria Lewis warns us that:

Without an awareness of the social and historical redefinition of disability that has occurred over the past twenty to thirty odd years, the theatre educator will be ill-equipped to resist the force of centuries of tradition



assigning meaning to the disabled figure in dramatic texts and in performance. Educators are encouraged to become as familiar with the prevailing stereotypes of disabled characters (victims and villains) as they are with those of African American depiction (crooks or clowns) or those of women (Madonna or whore). (qtd. in Margolis 187)

Playwrights and screenwriters writing in the tradition of the moral and medical models ascribe powerful meaning to disability on stage. A wheelchair will signify something – dependence perhaps, or instability. Sandahl, in her article “The Tyranny of the Neutral,” explains how these inescapable meanings may help to dissuade people with disabilities from pursuing acting as a career:

Because disability always signifies in representation, the trained disabled actor is rarely given the opportunity to play nondisabled characters.

Disabled actors are told that their impairments would detract from the playwright’s or director’s intent for a nondisabled character. Disabled people who want to be actors learn this tenet early on and are dissuaded from pursuing training.” (Sandahl and Auslander 255)

The social construction model argues that disability is a fundamentally social phenomenon. It “places disability within a society built for nondisabled people” (Sandahl 19). Sandahl explains that “disability is a disjuncture between the body and the environment,” and she writes how disability scholars following this model “unearth evidence that disability’s meaning and expression... change over time according to cultural, religious, political, architectural, and economic factors” (19). Lewis points out that the broad definition of disability supplied by the ADA recognizes that “social forces, such as

myths and fears regarding disability, function to substantially limit opportunity,” even when the actual impairment may not (xxi). Universal Design for Learning, a teaching philosophy described later in this chapter, embraces the social construction model: “Instead of providing accommodations on a case-by-case, situation-by-situation basis, this model explores how individuals interact with the environment to construct knowledge” (Duranczyk 14). Universal Design for Learning aims not to make accommodations for individuals, but rather to create a learning environment and process that is accessible to the widest possible variety of people. The social construction model distinguishes between impairment, “which refers to biological characteristics of the body and mind,” and disability, “which refers to society’s failure to address the needs of disabled people” (Band 892). Sandahl also explores the ways in which “impairment is constitutive of disability” (22). While impairment is often described in terms of suffering and limitation, Sandahl asks, “What does the body know through impairment?” She writes about the need to “bring subjective bodily experience back into the study and performance of disability” (22).

Sandahl also explains the minority model, an extension of the social model wherein “disability becomes a distinct minority community that has been excluded from full participation in society because of discrimination in education, employment, and architectural access” (19). This model gave rise to the political unity and activism that prompted the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Sandahl sees disability in “generative” terms; she argues that the “unique somatic experiences [of people with disabilities] provide ‘doors of perception’ to a space that can sometimes radically differ from the nondisableds” and she discusses ways in which

“disability phenomenology and cultural practice might revolutionize the ways in which we craft theatrical space” (18).

Playwright Sarah Schulman says that “the American theatre will neither reflect the American playwright nor serve the American audience until it decides to expand what is known about being alive, instead of endlessly repeating already established paradigms” (qtd. in Dolan *Feminist ... Critic* xxxvi). The social construction and minority models challenge the moral and medical models, long dominant in theatre, film, and television. These established paradigms have been repeated since the dawn of written theatre and have enormous influence on dominant perceptions of disability in modern cultures. Theatre artists, including playwrights, directors, designers, and actors, can reinforce a dominant paradigm in their work or they can question it. The act of questioning a dominant ideology is one of the arguments for authenticity in casting that will be explained in the next section.

### **2.3 Representations, Visibility, Aesthetics, and Authenticity**

This dissertation rests on two assumptions: that authenticity in representing and casting people with disabilities is inherently valuable and that visibility in media is likewise vital. We’ve already seen in the previous section that disability has been dramatized since antiquity; it has been infused with dramaturgical function at the expense of historical accuracy. The moral and medical models dominate, and the resulting universalized narratives of disability are inherently pervaded with what Victoria Lewis calls “the subtext

of superiority” (xv). “The metaphor of disability,” she writes, “has been so successful in the imaginative arena that it now functions as real” (Lewis xxii). Truth is not being represented, and therefore the fiction creeps insidiously into reality.

Anne Fox writes about this phenomenon as a paradoxical identity, the simultaneous erasure and hypervisibility of disability: “The only two options typically offered have existed as a ‘shut in’ (behind the walls of the nursing home, rehabilitation hospital, institution, or private home) or life as a carefully defined and policed kind of representation (the freak show, the villain, the poster child, the heroic ‘supercrip,’ the inspirational figure, the miraculous cure, or the tragic but noble sufferer, to name just a few)” (38). Drama has a very real influence on public opinion, on accepted social conventions of normality, and consequently on the quality of actual lives.

### **2.3.1 Consequences of Invisibility**

Lennard Davis describes what he calls “the hegemony of normalcy” (qtd. in Lewis xxxviii). “Normal” is an ideological tool, something that describes and prescribes, and something that is culturally enforced (Garland-Thomson 31). The imperative to be normal is central to cultural production. It appears in our stories, instructs us on how we should look, feel, and act, and it dictates the way we think about what is “abnormal.” Theatre is one of the many ways the concept of normalcy is transmitted. Victoria Lewis points out that, “For all time people have used theater as the first tool in articulating a community’s life stories and making them a part of the universal human experience” (x).

The “normalcy” depicted in our theatre, film, television, and advertisements does not include the lives and bodies of people with disabilities. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, “Their unexpected bodies do not fit into a world built for others. Somehow their lives got set up on the wrong stage... The cultural imagination thus ever threatens those who are too large, too small, or too irregular outside of the circle of common humanity” (Garland-Thompson 167). The invisibility of disability helps to create and reinforce a world that discriminates against these “unexpected bodies.”

In *Disability Aesthetics*, Tobin Siebers explains how “the senses revolt against some bodies, while other bodies please them” (1). “We have refused to see disability,” he writes. “We have hidden away disabled people in asylums, segregated schools, hospitals, nursing homes... The hiding of disability has made it seem unusual or foreign rather than fundamental to our human embodiedness” (19). The sight of a visibly disabled body “intrudes on our routine visual landscape and compels our attention, often obscuring the personhood of its bearer” (19). Disability is virtually invisible in the stories we tell, a phenomenon that makes the disabled body seem so surprising and prompts so many stares (Garland-Thomson coins the word “starable” to refer to this aspect of disabled bodies). Most of us will encounter or experience disability at some point in our lives. The elderly will often physically deteriorate in some way before passing away. The fact that disability is perceived as so exceptional is a tribute to concerted efforts that hide it from view.

The world we see represented on film and television is mostly a world of intact white people; a wholly insufficient reflection of the world in which we actually live. Playwright Charles Mee gives this advice about casting his plays, “There is not a single role in any one of my plays that must be played by a physically intact white person. And

directors should go very far out of their way to avoid creating the bizarre, artificial world of all intact white people – a world that no longer exists where I live – in casting my plays” (qtd. in Lewis 233). Hiding disability reinforces the “hegemony of normalcy” and reinforces societal traditions that are hostile to people with disabilities.

### **2.3.2 Authenticity**

In a 2008 article for *Backstage*, the trade newspaper for professional actors, Jean Schiffman discusses strategies sighted actors can use when they have to portray blind characters. “Practicing blindfolded or with eyes shut” is apparently a useful technique as is “walking around in the dark.” Keeping your eyes in “soft focus” might help with the illusion of being blind, as well as “putting your hands out and feeling everything.” Schiffman also suggests that the more thoughtful actor might interview an actual blind person in order to learn something about their lives.

More often than not, when a character with disabilities is portrayed in film, television, or theatre, an able-bodied actor plays the part. As I mentioned earlier, and I will go into more detail on this topic in the next section, I emphatically believe that visibility trumps authenticity. Respected disability studies scholar Lennard Davis makes a strong case for equating inauthenticity in casting with minstrelsy – the tradition of “blackface” in early American performance – and calls for able-bodied actors to refuse to play disabled characters (“Clarion Call”). I could agree with Davis only if I believed those roles would subsequently go to actors with disabilities. But the more likely outcome is that those roles would simply disappear. Those plays, movies, or television shows would not be produced.

If a theatre company or college theatre program has no access to blind or visually impaired actors, must they refuse to consider *Wait Until Dark*, *Scent of a Woman*, *The Miracle Worker*, *Butterflies Are Free*, or *Molly Sweeney* as part of their season? I believe that the greater sin in this case would be for disabled characters to disappear completely from drama.

The tradition of able-bodied actors playing characters with disabilities is firmly established and one that has resulted in much success and celebration for famous actors. Academy Awards and nominations have been given to Leonardo DiCaprio for *What's Eating Gilbert Grape*, Sean Penn for *I Am Sam*, Tom Hanks for *Forrest Gump*, Cliff Robertson for *Charly*, Dustin Hoffman for *Rain Man*, Geoffrey Rush for *Shine*, and Joanne Woodward for *The Three Faces of Eve*, all for playing characters with a variety of developmental disorders. Portraying characters with physical disabilities resulted in Academy Awards or nominations for Jane Wyman (who played a deaf mute in *Johnny Belinda*), Jon Voight (who played a paraplegic veteran in *Coming Home*), Daniel Day-Lewis (who portrayed a character with cerebral palsy in *My Left Foot*), Al Pacino (who played a blind man in *Scent of a Woman*), Gary Sinise (who played wheelchair user Lieutenant Dan in *Forrest Gump*), and Hilary Swank (for playing a female boxer with a spinal cord injury in *Million Dollar Baby*). There are many examples of this phenomenon on stage as well, such as the 2010 Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker* that starred able-bodied actor Abigail Breslin.

While many of these famous movie narratives are problematic manifestations of the moral and medical models, they bring disability into the limelight. It would have been preferable if all of these roles could have been played by actors with disabilities, but it would have been tragic if they hadn't been made at all. There is a value in greater visibility

to the public, but by casting able-bodied actors we reinforce the idea that actors with disabilities are not capable of playing these roles, which simply isn't true.

The issue of authenticity in casting is currently in the news, as NBC has recently announced plans to revive a television show from the 1960s called *Ironside* (Gilman). It's about a detective with paraplegia who uses a wheelchair. NBC has cast able-bodied actor Blair Underwood to play the role, a decision which has resulted in outrage. It is seen as an insult, an offensive statement to the world that people with disabilities are an unnecessary part of the process. "This would be like being in the '50s and having a white guy do blackface, at this point," said Kurt Yaeger, an actor who lost his left leg after a motorcycle accident, and who currently stars in the television drama *Sons of Anarchy*. "You need to start having disabled people playing disabled characters. Period" (Gilman). This casting decision by NBC reinforces the idea that people with disabilities are unnecessary, and must surely discourage young people with disabilities from pursuing acting as a career.

What can authenticity bring to a production and why is it a worthwhile goal? Victoria Lewis writes about disabled American playwright John Belluso, who "struggled to convince producers and directors to cast disabled actors on similar aesthetic grounds, arguing that disability is a social identity with a long history, not a biological medical condition to be mimicked. Belluso pointed to many hours of rehearsal time spent trying to familiarize nondisabled actors with the 'given circumstances' of life lived with disability" (Lewis 396). Ann Fox, responding to exercises such as the ones Schiffman recommends for actors trying to play blind characters, writes:

I refuse to do such exercises (for reasons that are familiar and debated within the disability studies community) because they cannot approximate the



experience of having lived with a disability beyond the one day of the exercise. These exercises deny the wide-ranging and fluid nature of disability as an identity, and they emphasize disability as a pitiable, tragic, and difficult position, completely removing any possibility that power or pleasure could exist as part of disability identity as well. They also do not address the fact that ableism can take on subtler, more multivaried forms than lack of access.

(44)

Able-bodied actors interpreting a role are likely to essentialize the experience and imbue it with their own biases. As an actor, I understand the appeal inherent in “transformation.” It is one of the more alluring parts of the process. Actors love to play characters that are very different from themselves; we use our imaginations to assume different identities. Is it somehow offensive if, as an American, I use my British accent when cast in an Oscar Wilde play? I have no lived experience as a Brit. Victoria Lewis and Ann Fox are not arguing against the actor’s imagination, but that the characters constructed by able-bodied actors are based in large part upon fiction. An actor’s interpretation of disability will do nothing to challenge dominant perceptions of disability, and only reinforces misconceptions. Carrie Sandahl reveals another problem with interpretations of disability by able-bodied artists: “Disabled photographer and cultural theorist David Hevey describes how, in general, artists ‘enfreak’ disabled people as a means of representing their own feelings of being an outsider” (qtd. in Sandahl “Considering” 6). Disability continues to be a metaphor, even when it is a subconscious decision on the part of the artist.

These roles, written and performed by people without lived experience, are unlikely to reflect the actual lives of people with disabilities. Sandahl points out that casting able-bodied actors,

... “tend[s] to filter out many markers of actual disabled bodies. A recent example from film performance is the casting of Patrick Stewart as Professor Xavier, the wheelchair using mutant telepathic in *X-Men*. His body bears none of the markings that bodies in chairs often bear, such as altered posture, atrophied muscles, and curving feet. Even in the realm of science fiction and fantasy, disability becomes a fable for the abled.” (“Considering” 19)

These characters are far removed from the actual experience of people with disabilities. Even working actors with disabilities find that the roles they are often asked to play are stereotypical and untruthful. Shari Weiser, a performer and a little person, said, “On stage I’m always asked to be this diminished person shaped by other people’s ideas... I am always playing people who need someone to tell them what to do. No one has asked me to play anyone remotely like me” (qtd. in Lewis 399). Mark Medoff’s contract to license productions of *Children of a Lesser God* forbids any production unless the roles of Sarah, Orin, and Lydia are played by deaf or hard-of-hearing actors (Lewis 397). This casting policy deters the kind of acting described in the beginning of this section. Plugging one’s ears for a day doesn’t give an actor any more of an idea what it is to be deaf than blindfolding oneself does to prepare for a blind role. Able-bodied actors are tourists in the world of disability, and any director would be wise to avail him or herself of the talents of an actor with authentic lived experience.

### 2.3.3 Extraordinary Bodies

Another argument in favor of authenticity in casting can be found in the realm of disability aesthetics. Disability theorist Tobin Siebers writes, “Disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history of aesthetics” (3). The presence of disability in drama challenges conventions and expectations. Telory Davies, writing about disability dance company Axis, says, “The materiality of dance bodies that are marked as different reminds audience viewers first that these bodies exist, and then that they are capable of movement which has artistic power due, in part, to its [sic] difference” (Davies “Mobility” 47). Davies explains a concept she calls actualism, “where disabled performers change fundamental aspects of choreography and stage dynamics through their physical and cognitive presence in the performance space” (44). The standard notions of the dance body are completely revised by disability aesthetics. Difference is therefore not something to be hidden, but to be celebrated as a fountain of creative change.

Carrie Sandahl also expresses the hope that artists with disability can not only challenge content, but also challenge form. Sandahl doesn’t want disabled performers to accommodate themselves only to traditional forms, “but also fundamentally alter them,” not simply to gain access to the mainstream but to transform it (“Considering” 21). She doesn’t want disabled performers to be “problems” that need to be dealt with, but rather “an artistic constituency with unique offerings” (21). In her memoir, performance artist Terry Galloway describes the moment when she first grasped this concept:

I had failed to understand what I was seeing in that workshop while I was seeing it. The skinny young boy with the hunchbacked shamle, the tubby gray-haired man, his skin puckered by disease, the woman just my age, her eyes disconcertingly whited out. Now I was seeing in my mind's eye those same bodies in the context of theater—bodies that invited stares, whose very presence was evocative, bodies that bucked and shook and seized and couldn't be controlled—and I couldn't help but laugh. When I was doing Shakespeare I'd spent hours applying makeup to get some of those same effects. Those bodies were the very stuff of drama, right there on (what was then) the cutting edge of performance art. ... The raw material for performances that in-your-face had been right under my nose. (Galloway 158)

She discovered that those extraordinary bodies were the “stuff of drama” and began to harness the power of a “starable” body. As Garland-Thomson states, she used “the visual pull of their starable bodies as public announcements that people with significant disabilities have good lives and make valuable contributions” (Garland-Thomson 135). This kind of work celebrates disability as diversity and embraces difference. It is what some performers call “disability cool.” These performers “reject mainstream disability narratives that revolve around tragedy or inspiration; instead [they] emphasize a coming to awareness of disability identity, explode disability stereotypes, flaunt bodily difference, and reflect ‘disability cool.’ Disability cool is a sense of pride in disability community, an often wickedly pointed inside humor, and a re-valuing of the particularities of disabled bodies’ idiosyncrasies” (Sandahl “Considering” 20).

This section outlined a forceful argument in favor of authenticity in casting, as well as for increased visibility of actors with disability in the arts. The next section looks at the state of the industry today. What exactly are job prospects like for actors with disabilities?

## **2.4 Actors with Disabilities in the Professional Market**

There are three major trends that are apparent regarding actors with disabilities in the professional world. The first of these is the underrepresentation of characters with disability in media, the second is the tendency for the few roles depicting disability to be played by nondisabled performers, and the third is an overall lack of actors with disabilities. Underrepresentation has been demonstrated in a number of studies, including one conducted by the Screen Actors' Guild in 2010. This study of minority representation on broadcast television reported about a 1 percent rate of representation for characters with disabilities, in contrast to the approximately 19 percent of Americans that actually live with some kind of disability. Out of 587 scripted characters, only six were depicted with some form of disability, and of those, all six were Caucasian – and five were men. Another study of the 2011-12 television season conducted by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) found five disabled characters out of 647, one fewer role than in the previous year. These statistics are a poor reflection of reality and a dismal comment on potential career opportunities for actors with disabilities.

The I Am Performers with Disability (IAmPWD) campaign has compiled more statistics that are equally discouraging, tracking which performances on and off-Broadway

depict characters with disabilities and how often someone with an actual disability is cast in one of those roles. They document a lack of reasonable accommodations in performance workplaces and offer “PWDs” strategies to deal with recalcitrant employers.

Victoria Lewis and Lennard Davis both argue vehemently against inauthenticity in casting. Davis points out that “in most films there will be no disabled actors, and when there is a disabled character, it almost always will be played by a non-disabled actor.” He uses the examples of *Glee*, *Friday Night Lights*, *My Left Foot*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, and *Rain Man*. (“Clarion Call”). He equates inauthenticity in casting with the tradition of minstrelsy from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, “Never any more would we tolerate whites playing blacks by using blackface to do that, but we have no problems keeping disabled actors unemployed while non-disabled ones struggle to portray and often distort what it is like to be disabled” (“Clarion Call”). Davis’ proffered foil to “one of the most reprehensible forms of prejudice in our time” is a policy he calls, “Don’t Apply, Don’t Accept,” where he asks nondisabled actors to refuse to take roles that could be played by disabled actors (“Clarion Call”). I believe that the danger of heeding Davis’ “clarion call” is that representations of characters with disabilities in film, theatre, and television could dramatically decrease. Jill Dolan described the phenomenon with respect to women at a recent seminar, “Theatre and film persuade us of our social invisibility by not representing us at all” (“Feminist Criticism in Action”). Disability is already a severely underrepresented minority. In an ideal situation, actors with disabilities would play characters with disabilities, and this dissertation stands in support of that goal. But I don’t believe that a moratorium on inauthentic casting would result in more roles for actors with disabilities; it would be much more likely that disability would vanish from the typical spectator’s view. That having

been said, the presence of a greater number of trained actors with disabilities in the market might potentially mitigate that effect.

Victoria Lewis addresses this question in *Beyond Victims and Villains* when she writes, “It is not always easy to find disabled talent” (396). While the dearth of roles must certainly discourage potential actors with disability from entering the business, Lewis situates the problem in the academy, “Aspiring disabled actors are routinely discouraged from pursuing professional training in the arts, which leaves them at a disadvantage in the highly competitive world of the legitimate theater” (396). She quotes director Mike Ervin, “... there is no substitute for casting actors with disabilities. That doesn’t mean that you’ll always be able to find one. You may be forced to punt and go with a walkie-talkie. But if you do, something will always be missing” (Lewis 396).

One of the major concerns of this dissertation is how to increase the numbers of trained actors with disabilities so that roles can be authentically cast, and the number of roles can be increased. I have chosen to address the barriers young people with disabilities face when considering careers in performing arts, such as those identified by Victoria Lewis: “Low expectations, discouragement from adults, lack of support from vocational counselors, lack of art programs that accommodate students with disabilities, and the absence of role models” (398). The economics of the entertainment industry may also be a significant barrier. Most actors must hold more than one job in order to pay their bills while they pursue their artistic goals. People with disabilities may have more difficulty funding their own careers and the accommodations they need may cost a significant amount of money. Lewis writes, “Disabled artists without independent means are blocked

in their pursuit of a career in the arts by the so-called ‘work disincentives’ built into our social service support systems that penalize disabled people who earn money” (398).

Clearly this is a complex issue that will ultimately be decided by artists. Any young person considering a career as an actor will hear about the daunting challenges, the terrible odds, and the negative stereotype of the “starving artist.” Despite those well-advertised obstacles, innumerable young people have devoted themselves to this career that has little chance of paying the bills. Actors with disabilities face additional challenges, including fewer roles, accessibility challenges, less access to training, fewer professional role models, and less ability to weather inconsistent wages. This dissertation might have more force if I could argue that students with disabilities should pursue actor training because there are jobs available, but statistics belie that claim. The first two trends – underrepresentation and the tendency for able-bodied actors to play the few available roles – are disheartening. The third – a lack of trained actors with disabilities – is something that can be actively addressed. But a greater number of trained actors with disabilities is no guarantee of a greater number of roles for them to play, and therefore the situation for these actors remains as precarious as ever.

## **2.5 College Students with Disabilities**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a United States federal law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability. It establishes definitions of disability and of “reasonable accommodations,” and applies to all programs receiving U.S. funding. The Americans with Disabilities Act, enacted in 1990 and revised in



2009, is a civil rights law that creates stronger, more permanent anti-discrimination laws to protect and support Americans with disabilities. In postsecondary education, individuals covered by the ADA have the right to receive reasonable accommodations such as readers, interpreters, adaptive equipment, and architectural accommodations. Institutions are not required to adjust or lower standards to allow individuals with disabilities to participate, nor are they required to make accommodations that would fundamentally alter their programs or cause them to incur unreasonable costs or fees. The accommodations need only address interactions between the functional impairment and the task demand (Kaff). Section 504 states that “no otherwise qualified person with a disability shall be denied a benefit or opportunity or be excluded from participation solely on the basis of that disability.” This legally mandated “equal playing field” has dramatically altered the educational opportunities for people with disabilities.

The *NACADA Journal's* national survey of 2007 observed that “during the last 25 years, the number of students with disabilities seeking higher education has tripled” (Preece et al. 57). The American Council on Education reported that in the fall of 2000, 6% of entering freshmen attending 4-year colleges and universities had a disability. The 2002 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey reported 9.3% of all undergraduates had a disability, up from 2.6% in 1978 (Kaff). The National Center for Education Statistics reported that in the 2008-2009 academic year, 88 percent of two- and four-year colleges reported enrolling students with disabilities (“88 Percent”). These dramatic increases in the number of college students with disabilities are due in part to the civil rights legislation, increased accessibility on campus and throughout our culture, increased availability of

support services and technological innovations (assistive devices), and improved K-12 educational services for students with disabilities.

Dick Vallandingham identifies additional characteristics typical of college students with disabilities: “Compared to their counterparts without disabilities, undergraduates who identify themselves as students with disabilities were more likely to have delayed their postsecondary enrollment a year or more after finishing high school, have lower SAT scores, and to be enrolled in two-year colleges” (157). He also writes that “students with disabilities are more likely to be older, men, military veterans, and to have dependents other than a spouse” (157). These students are also less likely to have stayed enrolled or earned degrees within five years, but those students who did complete bachelor’s degree programs had relatively similar labor market outcomes and graduate school enrollment rates as students without disabilities (Vallandingham 157).

Despite increased accessibility and opportunities legislated by the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act, college students still face significant challenges towards enrollment in and completion of college degree programs. Marilyn Kaff argues that instructors, advisors, and administrators have not kept pace with requirements and are not familiar with the needs of students with disabilities (Kaff). Students who are unable to effectively compete often become frustrated and leave institutions before completing degrees. She also describes a key difference between “visible” and “invisible” disabilities. In K-12 education, students and educators are governed by The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) of 2004 (U.S. Department of Education). Under IDEA, it is the responsibility of the school district to “identify and evaluate students with disabilities at no expense to parents or individuals. Special education services and auxiliary aids must be

stipulated with an Individual Education Plan” (Vallandingham 158). At the college and university level, however, it is the responsibility of the student to identify themselves as having a disability and to provide current, detailed, and professional documentation of the disability (Vallandingham 158). Students in this situation must navigate a difficult route, from passive recipients of accommodations to active advocates for themselves. They must self-identify, request accommodations, and often educate others about the nature of those accommodations. Many students in this situation are reluctant to self-identify; after enduring a stigma they may seek to escape it at the expense of accommodations. These “invisible” students are at a disadvantage in the competitive world of higher education. One strategy to make college courses accessible for the largest variety of students, whether or not they self-identify as disabled, is by using the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

## **2.6 Universal Design for Learning**

“UDL offers a way to extend beyond categories of disability to think about all of us as unique individuals” (Meo qtd in Rose and Meyer 37)

Universal Design is an architectural concept that provides the foundation for Universal Design for Learning (UDL). The University of Minnesota’s 2004 monograph on the topic of best practices for accessibility provides a very clear definition of UDL: “When planning a space, the architect takes into consideration the needs of all potential users of that space. Universal Instructional Design [sic] applies this same concept, advance planning

to meet the needs of all potential users of that space” (Duranczyk 14). There are many variations on UDL championed by different organizations and publications, but one of the foundational concepts is “an approach to designing course instruction, materials, and content to benefit people of all learning styles and without adaptation or retrofitting” (Kaff). UDL removes barriers to access but does not remove or lessen academic challenges. Marilyn Kaff, in her NACADA webinar, says that UDL uses “Instructional materials and activities that allow the learning goals to be achievable by individuals with wide differences in their abilities” (Kaff). The National Center on Universal Design for Learning, established in 2009, brings together much of the current pedagogy about UDL in one web resource. It defines UDL as “a set of principles for curriculum development that give all individuals equal opportunities to learn. UDL provides a blueprint for creating instructional goals, method, and assessments that work for everyone” ([www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org)).

One of the benefits of UDL is that “faculty members who practice UID [sic] are less likely to find themselves dealing with the time constraints that are inevitable when trying to accommodate a student with a disability at the last minute, often when receiving a letter from the institution’s office of disability services hand-delivered by the student on the first day of class” (Duranczyk 16). The UDL Center establishes three primary guidelines when implementing UDL: “Provide multiple means of representation, provide multiple means of action and expression, and provide multiple means of engagement” ([www.cast.org](http://www.cast.org)).

Catering to multiple learning styles is a mark of good teaching in any college classroom, but UDL engages students further by using technology, greater interaction between faculty and students, multiple ways for students to demonstrate competency, clear expectations, clear learning goals, and assessments that are accurate and timely.

In practice UDL may be more directly relevant to traditional lecture style classes than to practice-based theatre courses but the underlying philosophy remains useful. Indeed, I haven't found any literature that applies UDL to theatre curriculum. It is unlikely that this is the result of any bias on the part of UDL, rather, it is likely a product of the relative youth of UDL as a practice, and the fact that successful practice-based theatre courses already incorporate some of UDL's guiding principles: providing multiple means of representation, providing multiple means of action and expression, and providing multiple means of engagement. By their very nature, practice-based theatre courses are already interactive and learner-centered. There is an emphasis on learning concepts, as opposed to many other courses that emphasize facts and figures. Acting classes typically have a short list of concepts and learning objectives that are explored in different ways throughout the semester. UDL encourages teachers to reconsider the ways they approach assessment, recommending "ongoing, formative assessments that inform instruction as it is happening, so teachers can intervene in a timely way" (Meo qtd in Rose and Meyer 38). Coursework in disciplines such as acting and voice typically embrace this approach from the outset – actors are introduced to a concept and coached in its application during scene or monologue work. This teaching method allows a professor to challenge each individual according to his or her abilities, which is the kind of flexibility seen in UDL courses, offering adjustable levels of challenge and multiple ways to be successful.

There are, however, many ways that UDL could be used to make practice-based theatre courses more accessible. When introducing concepts early in the semester, a professor employing UDL may plan to provide the information in multiple formats. If the fundamental information is typically presented in a textbook or handout, a professor may

reiterate those concepts in a class discussion, a PowerPoint slide, or a video on a class website. Classroom activities could be reconsidered and reimagined to include the greatest variety of students. UDL boasts an “ultimate goal of making the learning environment more flexible and effective” (Rose and Meyer 11). By articulating clear goals and learning objectives, practice-based theatre teachers could be more flexible in the actual classroom activities we employ.

UDL encourages students to express what they’ve learned in a variety of different ways. That may be a challenge in theatre courses when assessment is subjective. Capstone projects usually include monologues and scenes, and the measure of success is almost entirely in the eyes of the instructor. A practice-based theatre course that embraces UDL may offer a greater variety of projects that, while not compromising on instructive value, can allow students different ways to demonstrate their mastery of the concepts.

There are many existing solutions that could be incorporated into syllabi and lesson plans that would make courses more easily accessible without having to adjust to individual students. Multiple means of representation can make classes more welcoming to students with disabilities. Disability services at universities may be able to produce braille versions of texts, but the turnaround time can be prohibitive. Digital media has improved that situation with the advent of refreshable braille displays (RBDs) that create temporary print-to-braille transformations (Rose and Meyer 107). These displays receive digital information and convert it into braille characters. The cost of this device is high, but it has a lot of potential for future applications. Nonetheless, many blind students do not read braille: a blind student I once taught had decreased sensitivity in his fingers related to the accident in which he lost his sight. Students may have a variety of e-text software that

will read any text that appears on their computer screens. Professors can make that software more easy to use by providing required readings in a PDF that has readable text. And since “the tonal quality of computer-generated speech is not as good as a recorded human voice,” students may benefit from working together to create recorded texts (Rose and Meyer 110).

UDL is not a panacea. It is a set of guiding principles but it offers few direct, practical solutions that are relevant to a practice-based theatre course. Many of these accommodations are easily discussed in the abstract but in practice take a lot of time and money, “Alternate-format versions of print materials is expensive and time consuming” (Rose and Meyer 121). Disability advocacy groups are engaged in constant struggles to make educational material available in more formats despite prohibitive copyright laws. The hardware and software available to people with disabilities has made leaps and bounds, but the costs remain high and rather than an industry standard there are competing file formats and technologies. And while a professor may adjust a lesson plan to embrace the spirit of UDL, they often have very little control over the physical space in which they teach.

## **2.7 Accessibility, Architecture, and the Politics of Space**

Theatre architecture warrants a separate section in this review because there is much more to effective space design than merely accessibility mandated by law. Carrie Sandahl gives us a theoretical lens through which we can see the biases inherent in traditional performance spaces. If, as we established earlier in the exploration of the social

construction model, “disability is fundamentally a disjuncture between a body and an environment,” how can a space be modeled to address that disjuncture? Sandahl doesn’t think in terms of “accommodation, meaning making modifications of the norm for the exceptional body (such as removing house seats to allow for a couple of wheelchair-using audience members or even building a ramp to the stage)” (23). She is interested in altering the aesthetics and use of a space, reconceptualizing it “with human variety and people from the whole life-span taken into consideration” (23).

“All spaces are inherently ideological,” Sandahl argues, “The layout of physical space tells us who is in it and who can participate and at what levels... dictating power relationships” (23). Due to the minimal accessibility of most theatres, Sandahl writes that “most academic, professional, and community theatres send a clear message to people with disabilities: you may be an observer, but you are not wanted in the sacred stage space” (Sandahl 23). This extends to the classroom and rehearsal hall. As Ann Fox remarks, “The classroom represents a space of performance, in which we might historicize disability, represent disability culture, interrogate traditional narratives of disability, and invigorate our own canons” (39).

Sandahl credits the ADA with the “ramps, curbcuts, bus lifts, automatic doors, widened doors, and elevators [that] have reconfigured public space to be minimally inclusive” (23). But then she asks, “What might our theatre look like if we went beyond the minimum so that disabled artists could fully and boldly participate? Taking disability into consideration would first entail creating barrier-free spaces open to a variety of bodies both in the house, on the stage, and in all backstage areas. Such an environment would immediately alter the space’s ideology, making the environment welcoming to innovative



and genuine input by disabled artists and meaningful participation by disabled audience members” (23). She discusses the benefits of arranging public space in a conference like setting, as opposed to a typical set-up where “those on the performance side of the divide hold most of the power” (25). Sandahl calls this a “web model” and wonders what a theatre space would look like if “verbal language becomes spatial, physical, and collective, not just aural and individual,” and, “Instead of space being arranged on the model of the autonomous individuals communicating across a divide, space is arranged for ‘continuous bodies’ linked in a web” (26). What kinds of exciting things become possible when we use what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called the “because of, not in spite of” way of thinking? (qtd. in Fox 40). Fox asks, “How does disability shape knowledge and creation, rather than being that which production takes place ‘in spite of?’” (Fox 40).

There are many other architectural considerations. Despite the accessibility mandates of the ADA, rehearsal and performance spaces are not necessarily entirely accessible. Students with disabilities may be able to access a space, but may need additional time and assistance. This may affect their class scheduling and their ability to enjoy breaks and use bathrooms. Another challenge in negotiating space is what Carrie Sandahl calls “competing accommodations” (26). “For instance,” she writes, “a visually impaired person may need bright lights for best vision while at the same time a hard of hearing person may need the lights dimmed to read the real-time captioning screen. The presence of a guide dog may make the air unbreathable for someone with severe environmental illness. A person with autism may be overwhelmed by multidimensional communication channels” (26). It is possible to accommodate every performer, as demonstrated by the productions of Denver’s disability theatre company PHAMALY, where

people with diverse disabilities share the stage, but it is a difficult challenge to navigate, even by those with years of practical experience.

## **2.8 Factors Affecting Career Choice**

Whether or not a student with disabilities enrolls in an acting course depends on a number of different factors. Students with and without disabilities enter college with notions of their own strengths and weaknesses. Their experiences in secondary education may depend upon culture, upon what kinds of arts resources were available in their schools and communities, and what sorts of role models they may have had. Careers in the performing arts may be daunting for anyone considering the difficult life of a “struggling actor,” but are students with disabilities disproportionately discouraged from giving it a shot? If so, which majors are these students likely to attempt, and why do they make those choices?

Victoria Lewis writes, “Although many more disabled young people in America are attending university, by the time they leave high school most of them have already gotten the message – the performing arts are not welcoming” (qtd. in Margolis 192). Again, this could be said of most young people who have expressed an interest in becoming actors. My parents were certainly upset by the prospect of a difficult and penurious life for their child. But students with disabilities face significantly more barriers, according to Victoria Lewis, in the form of “low expectations, discouragement from adults, lack of support from

vocational counselors, lack of arts programs that accommodate students with disabilities, and the absence of role models” (qtd. in Margolis 192).

A 2007 study performed by the National Center for Special Education Research examined self-evaluations of strengths and competencies of youth with disabilities and found that 15% of the students surveyed judged themselves to be “very good” at performing arts (Wagner 27). This may seem promising, but not when compared to the 35% that consider themselves “very good” athletes, 26% that consider their mechanical skills to be “very good,” and 33% that consider themselves to be “very good” at using a computer (Wagner 27). This study reveals comparatively low self-evaluations in the performing arts.

Using data extracted from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 and the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, Ahlam Lee notes that for those entering college in 2006-2007, “students with disabilities are more likely to select STEM [science, technology, engineering, math] majors in college than are students without disabilities, and that substantially more students with disabilities enroll in STEM majors at 2-year colleges than do students without disabilities” (Lee 72). Lee, whose aim is to increase the number of students with disabilities in STEM programs, credits the high-wage, high-skill jobs that await these students as their primary reason for choosing to pursue STEM careers.

Since the accommodations many people with disabilities require are expensive, it certainly makes sense that there would be a preference for more lucrative STEM jobs. Students may also find that the STEM facilities on university campuses tend to be newer and therefore more accessible than the aging theatre buildings. But there may be other reasons for a preference for STEM careers. Dick Vallandingham writes that “First year

students with disabilities often base their career information on the healthcare professionals they have associated with for treatment or rehabilitation. It is not uncommon, for example, for students with psychiatric disability to list mental health profession as their career goal or for students with seizure disorder to want to be paramedics” (160). He also discusses the lack of role models as a limiting factor in career and major choice, “First-year students with disabilities may not have had exposure to successful individuals with disabilities in the workforce nor be aware of the areas in which these individuals are working. They may not know that there are pilots and lawyers who are deaf, computer programmers and chemists who are blind, and college professors with schizophrenia” (161).

In many cases, it is the college advisor who helps a first-year college student with disabilities choose a major and career path. A national survey reported in the *NACADA Journal* reveals most advisors feel underprepared to help students with disabilities and a significant proportion of advisors feel a need for further training (Preece 58, 62). This is particularly problematic because an advisor could deter a student from pursuing a major that he or she deems inappropriate for a person with a disability (Preece 58). Since the onus to identify and provide documentation of disabilities is on the college student, advisors cannot provide good guidance and appropriate accommodations if the student doesn’t immediately transition to a “self-directed, personally responsible academic environment” (Vallandingham 158).

Victoria Lewis, however, argues in favor of taking the onus off the student: “The university needs to step up, enforce the laws, explore disability as a cultural and historical phenomenon, and actively recruit and welcome disabled theatre students – because

without some leadership at the top, whether in the regional or the academic theatre, these initiatives are doomed" (qtd. in Margolis 190).

## **2.9 Talent, Skill, Training, and the "Gatekeepers"**

Ask, "What makes a good actor?" and everyone within earshot will express a vehement opinion, from the seasoned trainer of thespians to the movie-buff next door. In the academic world, where we presume to teach acting, there is very little agreement. Perhaps two more useful questions to ask would be, "What innate qualities must a person possess in order to become a good actor," and "How do we train such a person to be the best actor they can be?" Again, there will be little agreement on answers to those questions. Actors, or at least successful ones, are generally perceived as "gifted" in some intangible way. There are various qualities one might hope to see in an actor: an attractive face and body, facility with language and an appealing voice, intelligence, some kind of indefinable magnetism, an ability to be incredibly passionate or curiously aloof, something unique in their appearance or demeanor, and the capacity to be surprising or perhaps curiously familiar. Noted theatre scholar Joseph Roach wrote a book called *It* that explores the evasive allure of the actor in great detail. Many people will have things to add and remove from my list, but it serves to demonstrate that the qualities an actor should possess are the subjects of much debate. As with assessments in any creative field, the subjectivity of the person in power is of paramount importance. In postsecondary acting programs, it is usually a professor that makes the determination. Dictionary definitions of the word "actor" aren't particularly useful in this context. An actor is simply "one who acts" or "one

who behaves as if playing a part” (Merriam-Webster). A better word to focus on is “talent.” A general consensus among professors is that skill can be taught, or improved upon, but talent is innate. The audition process is used to identify those with “talent,” promising clay for the professor to mold in a training program that challenges talented students to hone their skills.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of Education, along with the Jacob K. Javits Gifted and Talented Students Education Program, began funding a study to track performing arts assessment at ArtsConnection, a New York City arts-in-education organization (Oreck 63). This study was concerned with the validity and reliability of current assessments used to choose students for magnet arts schools and gifted programs. These methods were typically one-time, high-pressure auditions, and videotaped performances. Oreck points out that the shortcomings of that kind of audition rely on subjective criteria confounded by “differences in students’ prior instruction, cultural background, English language ability, parent involvement, academic standing, or behavior in other classrooms” (64). Many of these auditions screened for specific characteristics, which would preclude certain individuals with disabilities from inclusion, “assessors are able to focus on a few obvious characteristics, such as a student’s body type, flexibility, enthusiasm, and the ability to imitate what he or she sees” (Oreck 64). A magnet arts high school in Detroit used very specific criteria, “length of legs and arms should balance body, hips should not be too close to rib cage, toes approximately even, lifted arch-high instep, no pronation, wide metatarsal, well-proportioned legs” (Oreck 64). Oreck identifies the danger in this kind of assessment when he writes, “The idealized picture of the dancer, musician, or actor carries pervasive cultural stereotypes that are codified by many style-specific assessments” (64).

Use of language in theatre auditions is of paramount importance. Oreck points out that “the common audition practice of reciting a memorized passage can reflect a reading as much as a speaking skill. This format is an obvious hindrance for many students” (65). Oreck recommends creating an “authentic arts experience” in assessment situations, a suggestion that I expect would be very useful for students with disabilities auditioning for a postsecondary acting program. An “authentic” experience makes it more likely that a student will have the opportunity to be artistic and to demonstrate talent. Oreck notes that “in the performing arts, tasks are most often performed in groups, requiring students to work together, watch, listen, and respond to each other. The arts require time for physical and mental preparation and warm-up and an atmosphere in which students can feel comfortable to take risks, communicate their feelings and ideas, and commit themselves fully to the activities” (65).

The question of how to train an actor remains the subject of much debate. Most acting programs include separate classes in acting, voice, movement, and speech, along with various other marketable skills such as stage-combat, dialects, circus skills, dance, and singing. Joyce Aldridge’s 1993 dissertation completed at the University of Colorado Boulder and titled *The Tradition of American Actor Training and Its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education* proves that the tradition of American actor training is firmly rooted in the work of Constantine Stanislavski. Popular texts include Robert Cohen’s *Acting One*, Stanislavski’s *An Actor Prepares*, and Uta Hagen’s *Respect for Acting* (Aldridge 38). Aldridge’s study reveals that most of the top twelve assigned texts are primarily based in some interpretation of the Stanislavski system. Many teachers are eclectic and incorporate work from Stanislavski, Michael Chekhov, Sanford Meisner, Uta Hagen, and

many others, but these methods all share concepts such as “action,” “objectives,” “obstacles,” “beats,” and “given circumstances,” which emerge from the Stanislavski system (Aldridge 189). Most acting curriculum includes voice and body work, with a focus on “relaxation, proper body alignment, and work designed to encourage physical responsiveness to character creation,” as well as “articulation and vocal expressiveness” (Aldridge 190). Concepts such as “proper alignment” and “correct diction” can be problematic or impossible for actors with certain disabilities. A plurality of acting instructors rely on personal experiences when developing an acting curriculum, particularly their experiences working as an actor or a director (Aldridge 34). It is therefore no surprise that those professional experiences also inform their opinions about what is necessary to succeed in the professional industry.

Whereas definitions of talent are nebulous and the “right” way to train an actor is the subject of much debate, one thing that many people with authority in postsecondary training programs seem to agree on is that students with disabilities are unlikely to make good actors. In an article that appears in *The Politics of Actor Training*, Victoria Lewis lists numerous examples of actors with disabilities that were turned away from training programs because of their disabilities, “The chair of the department... never worked with someone disabled and he is not going to start now...” (qtd. in Margolis 177). Lewis refers to the people that choose who can and cannot receive actor training as the “gatekeepers” of this education. These gatekeepers make decisions based on many different subjective factors, guided primarily by two criteria: Will this student be successful in the training program and will this student be employable upon completion? There may be no formal



policy against applicants with disabilities, but anecdotal evidence shows that biases abound.

Lewis' own experience auditioning for the Neighborhood Playhouse supports that idea:

The school would not, could not, accept me as an acting student. ... These young people in search of professional training in the 1990s heard the same arguments... because of your disability, you will not work and because of your physical impairment you will not be able to fulfill the requirements of our curriculum... The decisions or policies that follow from these positions are not seen as discriminatory by the gatekeepers of training institutions, but rather as pragmatic and based in the realities of American Theatre Practice. (179)

Writer and performer Terry Galloway recounts her attempt to pursue actor training in higher education:

I marched right up the steps of the University of Texas Drama Department, scholarship in hand, and asked to be advised. The advisor took a long look at my hearing aids, then said, "You're deaf," as if I didn't already know it. His next word was "costuming." ... It was the costume shop or nothing. They wouldn't allow me on that stage. Not to act. Not to direct. Not in that department. Then he said again, as if it were the whole explanation, "You're deaf." (98)

In her memoir, Galloway, who would go on to become a prominent and sought after performer, lecturer, writer, and disability advocate, analyzes this man's motivations. She is,

at first, angered by her treatment: “This man advising me felt privilege by his presumed intellect, his supposed talent, his obvious physical beauty, and by the authority of his job, to proscribe worth. And in his eyes I didn’t have any” (98). But as with Victoria Lewis earlier, Galloway accepts that his motivations may not have been entirely personal or hateful:

So I knew too that there was truth in that theater adviser’s rejection of me when I had gone to him full of hope, my scholarship in hand. He’d been right to tell me no. Where he came from, theater wasn’t simply an art, it was a business. And while art can delight in the unruly if it’s passionate enough, business demands a moneymaking perfect. There were so many perfect people out in the world wanting to do the same things I wanted to do, he knew I’d never be able to make it on the professional stage, not the way “professional” was then defined. (108)

The question of how and why actors are chosen for professional training programs remains a complex one. These decisions are nuanced and based on many different elusive factors. Earlier in this chapter, I cite statistics about the employability of actors with disabilities which seem to support Galloway’s assertions; in this business, people with disabilities are less likely to be cast simply because there are disproportionately fewer roles. I recall that one of the gatekeepers where I received my MFA in acting once told me that the incoming class of eight actors is chosen not only based on talent and skill but also on the perceived needs of the industry. Therefore they were more likely to enroll a class of five men and three women, rather than an even split. It can be argued that this shows a bias against women, but it is also a reflection of the clear fact that there are more roles for men than for women in theatre, film, and television. These gatekeepers make choices

based on industry facts, but do those decisions also support an indefensible status quo? Refusing to train actors with disabilities because of a lack of roles contributes to an enduring cycle, a system that is content to allow producers and directors to cast able-bodied actors in the few roles that depict disability and to defend their actions by citing a lack of trained actors with disabilities.

Victoria Lewis also challenges the position that “the inclusion of disabled actors, particularly in MFA programs, is a violation of their mandate to provide actors for the industry” (qtd. in Margolis 180). “From this perspective,” she writes, “any efforts towards inclusive recruiting and expanded casting policies are doomed to irrelevance in the face of an increasingly globalized entertainment marketplace that demands a homogenized, physically perfect product (actor)” (180). For an answer, she directs our attention to the current training and casting landscape for African American actors. Not long ago, it would have been inconceivable to include an African American in an elite conservatory program; now there are rich and varied roles for trained African American actors (180).

Although many may offer business, casting, or other pragmatic reasons for restricting training, I suspect that one of the main reasons teachers balk at training those with disabilities is simply a lack of information as to how to proceed. Speaking from my own personal experiences, it is extremely daunting to adapt a performance-based curriculum to include a disabled student when you have no experience in that area. It may require extra time, outside research, flexibility, and patience. It may require inventiveness, a willingness to try something new, to abandon something that isn’t working, or to embrace a new aesthetic. Teachers may be challenged to rethink their curriculum in ways that can be disquieting, but that effort can also lead to thrilling new discoveries.

## 2.10 Conclusions

“The extraordinary excites us but alarms us; the ordinary assures but bores us.”  
(Garland-Thomson 19)

American theatre director Joseph Chaikin remarks that what “attracts people to the theatre is a kind of discomfort with the limitations of life as it is lived... [theatre] present[s] what is possible in society according to what is possible in the imagination” (qtd. in Margolis 189). We have a mandate, as theatre artists, to present what is possible. I would rather be alarmed by the extraordinary, as Garland-Thomson says in the above quote, than bored by the ordinary. I would rather see the exciting diversity of American society represented in our media than a falsified world of intact people. I would like to see the actual lives of people with disabilities represented, rather than the dominant romanticized and falsified reflections of what we’ve been seeing for the past 2,000 years. I want the largest minority in America to be strikingly visible in the work we create. I want to open what Sandahl calls the “doors of perception” and explore a space that may be radically different (18). There may not be an abundance of well-paying jobs waiting for actors with disabilities, but I believe that there is a growing demand, that the casting landscape will evolve, that the visibility of people with disabilities in media will increase, and there will be an increased demand for trained actors with authentic lived experience with disabilities. As an acting teacher and a director, and a soon-to-be “gatekeeper” of training, my contribution to the process will be on the practical end of things. My aim is to find ways to make acting, voice, speech, and movement classes, as well as rehearsals in university

productions, more welcoming and accessible to students with disabilities. The rest of this dissertation outlines the challenges inherent in that curriculum and explores strategies that students and teachers have used to overcome them.

## CHAPTER 3 ACTING, VOICE, and MOVEMENT

“It’s a very ancient saying but a true and honest thought,  
That if you become a teacher, by your pupils you’ll be taught.”

Anna, *The King and I*

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter addressed the “why” question – why college acting classes must become more inviting to students with disabilities. This chapter addresses the “how” question. While there have been some articles that provide minimal guidance to instructors, there is still a profound gap in knowledge concerning how to make college acting courses more inviting to students with disabilities. It is apparent that this issue is too complex to be solved by simply adhering to the ADA mandated accommodations.

The above quote, from *The King and I* by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II, captures one of the major lessons that emerge by the conclusion of this chapter. Most of the classroom experiences documented here share a common moral: be flexible and treat each student as an individual. A prescribed, predetermined, completely inflexible curriculum will invariably exclude students with disabilities. Attempting to create a curriculum that incorporates students with disabilities without actually communicating with the individual students is likewise doomed to failure. The success stories in this chapter emerge from a spirit of collaboration between teacher and student.

In this chapter I explore various approaches to training actors with disabilities. I begin with a particular focus on strategies for conducting beginning acting classes and continue by exploring challenges specific to other elements of actor training, such as voice, speech, and movement. These approaches are collected from diverse sources, including interviews with teachers, students, and practitioners. I also look to my own experiences and to published material. Much of this research is anecdotal and therefore impossible to measure in any meaningful way, but in this case the subjective experiences of teachers and students are valuable. While speaking with acting teachers, I heard many tales of success and failure. The measure, much like the craft of acting itself, is entirely in the eyes of the beholder, judged only by the responses of teachers and students themselves. The instructors I spoke to have spent decades training actors, and they tap that experience as they evaluate the success of their training methods. I attempt to narrate the collected research but the usefulness and relevance of this information is a subjective matter. The exclusion of any particular acting, voice, movement, or speech pedagogies from this study is not meant to imply that it is in any way inappropriate for students with disabilities. This study is limited in part by the responses I received to my requests for interviews, by the length of the study, and by my own experiences. I explore some methodologies in depth, while others are mentioned briefly, if at all. I encourage any interested reader to further explore the full spectrum of training methods and will attempt to provide useful references when possible.

I believe it is important to reiterate that what works for one student or teacher may not work for another. Two people that share a common disability do not necessarily share identical needs. This research is meant to record numerous and diverse experiences in an

attempt to glean some positive practices that can be employed. As I discovered when I first taught acting to a student with a disability, there are few resources in this very narrow area of research. Many of the people I contacted are well-known teachers with extensive experience teaching acting all over the world, and yet most of these respondents began their reply with a familiar refrain, “I’m no expert in this area.” The most prolific acting teachers, with years of practice conducting acting classes at colleges, universities, and proprietary workshops, may have only trained a handful of actors with disabilities during their entire careers. Nonetheless, these experiences are often among their most vivid memories for teachers, and their successes and failures can serve as a guide for those of us who strive to make classes more accessible.

This chapter begins with background information to frame the discussion. The work of Carrie Sandahl and Victoria Lewis forms the bedrock for this research. The previous chapter’s discussions about models of disability become very relevant to the practical activities in an acting classroom. If a teacher, knowingly or unknowingly, embraces a particular model of disability, to what extent would that inform their pedagogical process when teaching students with disabilities? A teacher’s perception of disability manifests repeatedly throughout a course every time he or she assigns a scene or monologue. Teachers may reinforce dominant disability models throughout the course, mirroring the challenges a disabled actor is likely to face throughout his or her career. This chapter begins with a discussion about what philosophy a teacher might embrace that could help create a positive learning environment for all involved; it encourages us to actively engage with the issue of identity.



The next section of this chapter lays out some basic guidelines for communication. There is a particular vocabulary and etiquette that, were it more commonly known, might make it easier for teachers and students to communicate. If collaboration between teacher and student is key to a successful classroom experience, then a shared language must be established. Certain common expressions can be perceived as insults, and can easily be replaced with others. There is also an etiquette that may be unfamiliar to people that have had little interaction with disability communities. For example, a student in my class explained to me that his service dog, while a friendly and adorable creature, should never be petted while she is working, lest she get distracted and become unable to perform her vital function. While walking with him on a busy university campus one day, the steady stream of people that stopped to pet his dog made it very clear that most people are unfamiliar with that rule.

The chapter continues with my own classroom experience. A student who is blind enrolled in my acting course at the University of Colorado Boulder (CU-Boulder) and I found myself ill equipped to adapt my course. An experienced colleague at CU-Boulder, Amanda Giguere, provided some initial guidance, which I include later in this chapter. I then sought assistance from Ike Schambelan, Artistic Director of New York City's off-Broadway disability theatre company, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers. He provided some very practical advice about casting, identity, and staging that proved very useful over the course of the semester. I include his advice here. After exploring my classroom experience and relating the effect of Giguere and Schambelan's advice, I include more recent interviews with some well-known acting teachers. Bella Merlin, author of several books on acting and a prolific international teacher, explains her thoughts and experiences

teaching actors with disabilities. Rob Roznowski, head of the professional actor training program at Michigan State University and a published author on the subject of acting, contributes his thoughts as well. Robert Cohen is a celebrated master teacher of acting and the author of the book *Acting One*, the most widely used text in college and university acting classes. He provides his insight into the subject of training actors with disabilities. Jason Dorwart, an actor with a spinal cord injury and quadriplegia, contributes some thoughts about representations of people with disabilities.

I then include a student's perspective from Lyndsay Marie Giral-di-Palmer, an actor with hearing impairments that participated in a university actor training program. She sheds light on issues such as visible versus invisible disabilities, as well as competing accommodations in classrooms and rehearsals. Jill Summerville, an actor, instructor, and a theatre scholar with a mobility impairment, contributes some invaluable insights about practical ways that disability identity can positively manifest in an acting class.

This chapter then looks at movement training. What is it, what is the goal, and what are the primary methodologies? With the help of Carrie Sandahl's essay, "The Tyranny of the Neutral," I examine positive ways to adapt certain strategies for movement training. In this insightful article she explores a concept that permeates most areas of actor training, but is of particular relevance to the study of movement. "Neutrality" is a concept, or a metaphor, perhaps, that is problematic for actors and students with disabilities, since it depends on a proffered "ideal," an aesthetic that has been constructed without disability in mind. I include brief thoughts about neutrality from Louis Colaianni and Bella Merlin. Later, I get different perspectives on the concept of neutrality from other master teachers as well as from acting students with disabilities. Continuing the exploration of movement, I

present the views of Michael Lugering, founder of The Lugering Method and author of *The Expressive Actor: An Integrated Method of Voice, Movement, and Actor Training*. This is an approach to training the “total actor,” a way of combining movement, voice, and acting. He shares thoughts about ways to be inclusive, strategies for adapting exercises, and his feelings about neutrality in actor training.

The chapter continues by looking at voice training, answering questions such as: What is voice training, what are its goals, and the primary schools of thought? I include thoughts from David Smukler, longtime head of the voice teacher training program at York University and a master teacher with decades of experience. Rocco Dal Vera, co-author of *Voice: Onstage and Off* and a highly regarded educator with experience teaching at top programs, provides some excellent insight into training actors with disabilities.

Finally, the chapter includes the perspective of actors with disabilities that have navigated actor training programs. Jason Dorwart, an actor with extensive credentials and a theatre scholar, discusses how he successfully continued to study movement and voice after a spinal injury caused paraplegia. Regan Linton, an experienced actor with a particular expertise in voice training, explains how being a wheelchair user affects her study of acting, voice, and movement. Jenna Bainbridge, a successful actor and musical theatre performer with a mobility impairment, shares some of her challenges and the ways that she has addressed them.

### 3.2 “Crip” the Body of Knowledge

Although it is a persistently evolving field, actor training is a fairly dogmatic, regimented, established process where, for the most part, teachers pass on what they have been taught. Victoria Lewis writes, “I argue that serious and rigorous theatre training is possible for disabled students, provided instructors and degree programs are flexible and at least minimally responsive to cultural changes in the individual and social experience of disability brought about by the disability rights movement that began in the 1970s” (qtd. in Margolis 179). How can a teacher address Lewis’ call for a course that is responsive to cultural changes? What does a course look like that reflects current disability models, rather than reinforcing ideas that have been proven to be negative stereotypes and untruthful representations of actual lived experiences?

When instructors present information as “truth” simply because they are teaching the material as they were once taught, they may unknowingly pass on negative stereotypes. To challenge existing assumptions is a much more difficult route to take, but a necessary one if an instructor hopes to embrace more contemporary models of disability. This doesn’t mean that instructors must discard the canon in their field, but they must be willing to question underlying assumptions. Anne Fox articulates the difficulties inherent in engaging with a body of knowledge considered canonical in a field (40). “‘To queer’ or ‘to crip’ the known,” Fox writes, referencing the work of Carrie Sandahl, “is to twist our expectations of it, defamiliarize it, and render it anew in ways that open up new kinds of possibility” (39). “The question for us,” Fox says, “is how to ‘crip’ that body of knowledge, challenge the presumption that is set and unassailable, and seek out literally and

figuratively disabled directions it can take. Or to put it more plainly: How can we introduce disability as part of the identity we teach?" (40). The act of "cripping" a body of knowledge can reveal able-bodied assumptions and "expose the arbitrary delineation between normal and defective and the negative social ramifications of attempts to homogenize humanity" (Fox 37). Questioning the assumptions made in an acting class is a difficult endeavor, but necessary if we are to foster a welcoming environment for students with disabilities.

This idea is at the heart of this dissertation's main research question: to study training methods that help to make practice-based theatre classes more welcoming to students with diverse disabilities, and to seek strategies that can make actor training a viable and successful choice for students with disabilities. It is not my hope to forever discard or reinvent traditional acting curriculum or to aggressively refute a dominant ideology, but rather to record the practices of people that have managed to somehow "crip" the experience in a way that makes it simultaneously more accessible and more meaningful. No combination of physical accommodations, such as ramps and curb cuts, will accomplish this goal. Nor will a whole-hearted adoption of the principles of Universal Design for Learning address this complex issue. Accommodations can remedy the obvious disjuncture created by a world designed for able-bodied people, but Anne Fox reminds us of a more complex issue: identity. Does the act of accommodation put every student on a completely equal and identical playing field, or is there a way to embrace the minority model, to celebrate difference and to "crip" the entire experience? This teaching philosophy embraces all students through cognizance of the many factors that contribute to individual identity, such as disability, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

Central to many acting classes is the pursuit of a truthful representation of the human condition. When studying a scene, actors consider the psychology of their characters. They ask what motivates a line, or a physical action such as a kiss or a cross from stage right to stage left, and they consider the deeper meaning of what they say and do. Acting is an exercise in donning another person's character, or "walking a mile in another man's shoes," exploring and inhabiting the experience of another individual. There are many contradictory approaches towards that end as evidenced by the innumerable books and competing schools that offer different strategies towards truthful acting. Most of the roles available to professional actors in the United States in film, television, theatre, and advertisements demand an actor that can truthfully reflect the world. As acting students explore the characters they hope to present truthfully on stage, their teachers guide them. In the process of actor training, the dynamics of student-teacher interaction are usually more intimate and personal than in other fields. The instructor guides the student in one-on-one coaching; preconceived notions about disability can be difficult to challenge in this environment.

As discussed in Chapter Two, the moral and medical models of disability have dominated our fiction since the advent of written drama. In our culture, people are inundated with very specific kinds of disabled characters in theatre, film, television, and advertisements. To reiterate, in the moral model, disability is an outward reflection of some inner flaw, and, as noted by Victoria Lewis, often represents the extremes innocence or infamy. In the medical model, people with disabilities are somehow broken and their one desire is to be fixed and to return to a state of normality. The social construction model, described in detail in Chapter Two, and the minority model give us more complex,

truthful ways to represent disability, and can be embraced in an acting class through casting and through the choice of material.

This is a very complex issue that has no clear answer, but an instructor that is cognizant of the challenge may be open to a broader and thus more truthful representation of disabled characters during scene and monologue work. An awareness of disability models may prevent an instructor from unknowingly perpetuating negative stereotypes. An instructor must be willing to be surprised by an actor's depiction, rather than trying to fit disabled students into a predetermined mold. Victoria Lewis points out a paucity of truthful disabled characters in written drama, and has published an excellent compilation of plays written by playwrights with disabilities titled *Beyond Victims and Villains*. Although this may be a good place to look for material to work on with students, it is also important that actors with disabilities should not always have to play characters that were specifically written with disability in mind.

Color-blind casting, the practice of disregarding ethnicity when assembling actors for a production, has taken root in today's theatre industry. Directors regularly cast people of all ethnicities, trusting audiences to look past race and focus instead on the characters. A biological family on stage can be portrayed with an Asian brother, an African-American sister, and two white parents, and if done well, the audience quickly accepts it and moves on. Why does the presence of a wheelchair or a white cane on stage suddenly change the tenor of the whole production? As much as I might argue that the presence of disability on stage shouldn't influence the audience, the simple fact remains that it does.

I met Jill Summerville at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in 2011 when she and I presented a paper in the same conference session. She addressed some of these issues in

her presentation “The Presence of the Gimp: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Disabled Theater Companies.” Summerville is an actor with a mobility impairment and uses a wheelchair. To make her point, she asked her friend to lift her into a regular chair so she was sitting next to, rather than on, her wheelchair. She then proceeded to explain how, as a talented actor, she could be on stage and transform into another character, in another time, or place. Her identity wasn’t fixed. The wheelchair, however, would always be a wheelchair. Its presence on stage has a fixed meaning and, since she relies on it for mobility, it becomes an extension of her, and vice versa. Summerville may be a talented actress but the psychosocial meaning of the wheelchair is fixed in the audience’s minds and therefore it inhibits her complete transformation.

While exploring contemporary theories about the nature of individual identity, feminist theorist Jasbir Puar writes about assemblages. According to Puar, Sikh turbans are perceived by average Americans to be a symbol of oppression, Eastern patriarchy, the Taliban, etc., while she considers the turban to be an assemblage: an emotional, political, and biological construct, something folded into the body (117). A wheelchair and a white cane are assemblages as well. To an audience they paint the user as the “other,” and symbolize dependence, need, deformity, or charity. Puar’s concept of assemblage is a reminder that stigma is not something easily shed. Summerville, summing up the thrust of her presentation and her hope for the future of actors with disabilities said, “I want you to think of me as a brilliant actress, not as a brilliant actress in a wheelchair. And I want to be such a great actress that, for just a moment, there’s the possibility that you could fall in love with me.”



Summerville identified a real challenge to actors with visible disabilities: wheelchairs, canes, and other signs of disability inhibit transformation in the minds of an audience. We can acknowledge this and perhaps be disappointed by it, but we can also develop positive strategies for students that will inevitably face the issue throughout their careers. A forward-looking class might explore the benefits of “actualism,” Telory Davies’ term for when “disabled performers change fundamental aspects of choreography and stage dynamics through their physical and cognitive presence in the performance space” (44). One of the benefits of explorations in an acting studio is that we are separated from the demands of performance. There is no audience to please. This is a place for actors to challenge themselves, and for instructors to encourage actors to take risks and to grow. Allowing disability to be a dominant defining characteristic in all scene and monologue work is a disservice to student actors. But disability is a trait that actors with disabilities may eventually need to incorporate into their performance work, so developing strategies early on could be useful.

My interview with Jason Dorwart appears later in this chapter, but his adamant thoughts on this issue should be mentioned here. Dorwart sustained a spinal cord injury in 2000 and is now quadriplegic. He uses a power wheelchair and a service animal. He boasts impressive credentials as an actor and has taken innumerable classes in the subject. The issue of casting and disability identity came up as we were discussing his experience in an improv class at his undergraduate institution.

When it’s an improv class and the disability gets in the way you just throw the disability into what’s going on with the scene. Which is what should happen with performance and disabilities anyway. Instead of superimposing

the disability on top of the character, justifying the disability, it becomes part of the everyday life of the character, like it does for any disabled person. I think that's the way to approach disability in a class: not "This is a problem to deal with," but, "This is just one other trait that informs who this character is."

Dorwart's suggestion opens up the entire theatrical canon to actors with disabilities. Disability adds another layer of complexity to an actor's portrayal, in the same way that each individual's race, gender, and socio-economic background informs their work. But disability doesn't become the primary defining characteristic of the role. It doesn't need to be manipulated as a metaphor or theatrical device, but it likewise shouldn't be ignored. It is another given circumstance that adds richness to the world of the play. Jenna Bainbridge, an actor with a mobility impairment that I interviewed, agrees with Dorwart's approach, "I try not to think about my disability as a defining characteristic of a character. I think that whomever I'm playing is just a girl with a dream and goals and she happens to have a disability. It's not what defines her or what drives her, it's just a part of her. Just like almost anybody in real life that has a disability" (qtd. in Flombert).

This is a complex way to frame a straightforward issue. A great many things inform what happens in an acting class between an instructor and a student, one of which may be preconceived notions of disability. Actors with disabilities are likely to face these notions of what kinds of characters they can and should play throughout their professional lives. A positive acting class must be willing to abandon those assumptions, or at least to question or challenge them through scene and monologue assignments. We can already see that it will be impossible to achieve the goal of "cripping" the experience without an earnest

attempt at communication and collaboration between teacher and student. One of the first issues to address is how to effectively and appropriately communicate with students that have disabilities.

### **3.3 Communication**

In order to conduct an effective and inclusive class, an instructor must be aware of how to communicate with and about students with disabilities. Simi Linton explains that there is very little agreement about what exactly should be considered “ableist,” since “the nature of the oppression of disabled people is not yet as widely understood” (223). So there are few indisputable rules about how to appropriately and effectively communicate with people that have disabilities. There are, however, some guidelines that are generally acceptable. For those who are not used to communicating with people with disabilities, it’s easy to utter an offensive faux pas. A well-meaning but poorly phrased remark could cast a negative pall over a classroom. There is also a worse danger of avoiding communication altogether if one is unsure of how to properly phrase a comment. The first rule in that kind of situation is, “When in doubt, ask” (“Disability 101”). Assumptions can lead to awkward or offensive moments, but by simply asking a question one can avoid the problem.

A good strategy for communication is contained in “People First Language.” The Inclusion Project’s website offers some useful information on this and the general idea is, “put the person before the disability.” For example, while it may not be inexcusably offensive to refer to a “blind person,” People First Language reminds us that the person is more important than the impairment, and therefore it would be better to say, “a person

who is blind.” The most important part of the phrase is the person, not the disability. One might refer to an “actor with visual impairments” or a “student with mobility impairments,” rather than a blind actor or a handicapped student. It is generally more appropriate to say “people with disabilities” than it is to say “the handicapped, the disabled, the afflicted, or the victim of a disability.” “She has a learning disability” is preferable to “she’s learning disabled.” It is also inappropriate to use wording that suggests that a person is somehow limited or suffering from their disability. It can be a mistake to make assumptions about how a person feels about his or her disability. Therefore, “he uses a wheelchair” is preferred to “he’s confined to/is wheelchair bound.” “Wheelchair-bound” gives the impression that a person is somehow stricken, or restricted, or trapped whereas many people with mobility impairments see their wheelchairs as emancipating. There are endless nuances in disability communities but People First Language is a good place to begin.

Above all, it is important to communicate. The communication gap can linger due to ignorance or fear on the part of instructor or student, and the effects can be devastating. There’s no shame in acknowledging that there’s a certain level of discomfort when communicating for the first time with someone who is different from one’s self. If an instructor or classmates are unfamiliar with disability, it can be a real challenge to avoid unintentionally insulting the person standing, or sitting, before you. That is why some people tend to overly restrict their speech in the presence of a person with disability. This emerges from confusion about what’s appropriate. For example, if you say to a blind person, “Do you see what I mean?” you’re not committing a terrible faux pas. But until I heard my blind student say, “I’ll see you tomorrow,” I carried around a level of discomfort about such terms. As it turns out, you can also say to a wheel-chair user, “Hey, let’s go for a

walk.” Judith Butler interviews Sunaura Taylor as they “take a walk” in San Francisco, a conversation which reiterates the challenges of communication and “moving in social space” as a person with a disability. It’s important to be sensitive, it’s admirable to make an attempt to be politically correct, but it’s more important to communicate. One of my former colleagues at the University of Colorado who uses a wheelchair wears a t-shirt that says, “I’m in it for the parking.” He has a disarming sense of humor about his impairment and takes the lead in setting the tone for what’s appropriate. When in doubt, a good rule of thumb is “don’t assume, ask.”

There are also matters of etiquette that become familiar with time, and they are usually related to common sense and having respect for the individual. For example, if you are speaking with a wheelchair user for more than a few moments, it’s polite to take a seat so that you can be at eye level. Also, students using a wheelchair “consider the wheelchair as part of the personal space. Therefore, [you] should avoid leaning on the wheelchair or moving the wheelchair without first asking if assistance is desired” (Vallandingham 163). It’s polite to identify yourself before making physical contact with a student who is blind, and “in situations where the student asks for or requires guidance, [you] will want to offer an arm rather than taking the arm of the student or guiding them by hand. If the student has a guide dog, [you] will want to walk on the side opposite the dog. In either situation, [you] will want to describe the setting and obstacles such as steps or cracks in the sidewalk” (Vallandingham 165). There may be a lot of nuanced information to learn, but the instructor may always look to the student as the information source. “Treat the student as an independent adult, ask before offering help and then only if the student appears to need it” (Vallandingham 160). “Help is something that we all need,” says Sunaura Taylor,

when interviewed by Judith Butler. “We’re all interdependent in all sorts of ways.” We all must be willing to help each other.

A familiarity with the principles of Universal Design for Learning will also be useful to the instructor of an accessible acting class. As discussed earlier, the general principles include providing multiple and flexible methods of presentation, building alternatives into instructional design, and using technology and a variety of materials. Using multiple methods of presentation is a kind of enhanced method of communication. By getting into the habit of presenting material in a number of different ways, an instructor can have a greater assurance of reaching each individual student. This also makes the material accessible to students who may need accommodations but who have not explicitly requested them.

On the postsecondary level it is the student’s responsibility to inform the instructor about reasonable accommodations, usually in an official form generated by a Disability Services office. As noted earlier, students with disabilities in higher education are not required to self-identify. A faculty member can invite students to disclose their needs and to discuss accommodations, but they can’t require it without the danger of appearing discriminatory. Instructors tread a fine line in performance classes. A good strategy is to allow students to take the lead and to embrace the principles of Universal Design for Learning.

Familiarity with assistive technology is useful, but the ever-changing variety makes it a difficult subject master. When a student with a disability enrolls in an acting class and discloses a disability, the instructor can ask the student whether he or she uses assistive technology. Disability Services offices at some universities can often give you very specific

information about the particular student's needs. Not every person who is blind reads braille, nor does every person who is deaf use sign language. If instead you have a student that reads lips, then you can help that student by being certain the room is properly illuminated and that you face the student while you speak. Terry Galloway recounts an instructional tale: "... teachers had a bad habit of turning their backs as they were speaking to write on the board. I'd read their lips as they said, 'We call the theory that there is only one...' then they'd turn their backs and the rest would be lost in puffs of chalk" (77).

Communicating effectively with students about their particular needs can help avoid unintentionally ostracizing a student. A familiarity with assistive technology will allow the instructor to create meaningful but achievable assignments. Text-to-speech screen reading software, scanners, recording devices, service animals, and narration were accommodations I became familiar with as I taught a student who was blind.

I also learned from my own experience that handling a service animal is not only inappropriate, but it's potentially dangerous. Service dogs are incredibly expensive and well trained, but they can be easily distracted. The dogs are serving more functions than one might think. They communicate constantly with their master in nonverbal ways, through the harness, through body language, and through verbal cues. A dog can guide its master down stairs, but a distracted dog might miss that first step. A dog can guide its master from one building to another around a complicated campus, but an ill-timed pat on the head can disorient the dog and leave dog and master lost. The white cane is an extension of the person – it is not to be touched. The cane is also a form of communication. It's bright, white, and a universal symbol that is meant to broadcast to the rest of the world that its bearer is blind and may not see oncoming dangers. In the United States, the white

cane affords its user the legal right of way at all times. If the user of the cane needs assistance, they may ask to touch your elbow and walk half a step behind you. Again, the person with the disability will take the lead and set the tone, but when in doubt: ask.

### **3.4 Blindsided**

I took a stance as an advocate for disability theatre for purely practical reasons: I was presented with a challenge the fall of 2010, and I set out to meet it. But I arrived at that dilemma having had the right blend of experiences to turn it into an opportunity. My introduction to the concept of “accommodations” came as a child from my aunt. She was completely deaf but an experienced signer and lip-reader. She had a career, a family, and was a leader at her church. Nonetheless, as children my brother and I quickly learned to dispel the frustration of miscommunication by making a few changes to our behavior. We learned that it was polite to make sure there was adequate lighting, to speak without covering our mouths or without chewing, to occasionally repeat or speak slower, and to improve non-verbal cues like facial expressions. My mother suffers from a neuromuscular disorder and, when she wasn’t well enough to care for us, my brother and I grew up caring for her. This experience certainly heightened my awareness of how physical differences can affect a person’s life.

Prior to teaching my first college level acting class, I spent a summer preparing, organizing my curriculum, and designing what I hoped would be the perfect foundational class in acting. I had received an MFA in Acting from Case Western Reserve University and the Cleveland Play House, as well as a BA in Acting and Directing from Binghamton



University. I had taken innumerable workshops with master teachers, earned certificates in specialized approaches to performance, and enjoyed success as a professional performer on stage and screen. I felt that I had plenty of experience and strong opinions about actor training, and here, at last, was my opportunity to return some part of what I had been given. My intention was to teach a course that would provide a solid foundation for further acting study and to share an infectious love of acting with future colleagues.

On the first day, in addition to the anticipated group of twenty-four silent, expectant, imposing undergrads, there was a panting guide dog named James (a girl). As it turns out, one of my students was entirely blind. I had to think on my feet and revise the “breaking-the-ice” and “name games” I had prepared, which all involved tossing balls. I didn’t want to exclude my blind student from the first class activities, so conducting the game I had planned was not an option. My bright idea was to have everyone sit in a circle and roll the ball instead. I assumed this would allow everyone to participate. It did not occur to me that even the most well trained dogs cannot resist playing “get the ball!” Needless to say, that exercise didn’t go very well. 11% of US college students have documented disabilities and 3.8% of those are visually impaired, so perhaps I should have been prepared for the possibility (Myers 1).

I realized that training a visually impaired actor alongside traditional students would require me to rethink my entire curriculum. In retrospect, I believe that I took the right steps but in the wrong order. At the end of the first class, this student (whom I will call Kevin, a pseudonym for the sake of privacy) handed me a form from Disability Services that listed some general accommodations that I would be required to make. These accommodations were things like, “extended time for exams,” and “provide readings in a

format acceptable to the student.” The form seemed designed for typical lecture courses and didn’t answer the many questions I had. The step I should perhaps have taken at that point would have been to meet with Kevin and hear his thoughts, but I didn’t even feel prepared to have that conversation. My concern was that I might be legally required to provide accommodations without knowing how to proceed, or that Kevin would ask me for accommodations that I didn’t know how to provide. What format would be acceptable for the readings, and how long would it take for them to be converted? The form that Kevin handed me told me that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) mandated certain things but as an instructor completely new to CU-Boulder I didn’t know what resources would be available to me.

At an appointment with the university’s Disability Services office I confirmed that, while many services exist to support these students, the typical accommodations are largely irrelevant in a practice-based theatre course. They were, however, able to provide me with information about Kevin’s particular needs, his preferred methods of receiving written material, and they demonstrated the assistive technology he used such as the software that reads his assignments out loud and the voice recorder that would become a presence in our classroom. Kevin had reduced sensitivity in his fingers as a result of the accident in which he lost his sight, so Braille was not an option. All of his reading assignments had to be submitted using a format that could be read aloud by his computer. Disability Services scanned the first few assignments and sent them to him by e-mail. After that, I found that I could simply scan his reading assignments using our departmental Xerox and then run it through the Optical Character Recognition (OCR) that comes standard with Adobe Acrobat Pro. Using that process, I could be certain that all his reading assignments

would be accessible. His computer would read the assignment aloud to him in a speedy digital voice.

There were limitations to this process, however. The scan had to be clean enough to be read by Adobe Acrobat Pro. I learned after some time that Kevin disliked listening to the digital voice and preferred a human one, so I made the easy adjustment of recording my own voice for e-mailed correspondence. When I assigned Kevin a scene, I recorded it using a handheld digital device and e-mailed him the recording. In this way I was able to give him not only the text to memorize, but to adjust the timing so that he could rehearse. I was careful to avoid recording any inflections that might influence his performance, but having a human voice was his preference and something I was happy to provide. I also had his scene partner record just her parts of the scene so that he could rehearse alone at a more normal tempo.

My next step was to explore published resources, which I hoped might give me an idea as to how my course could be adapted to the benefit of all involved. As I described earlier in this chapter, there is research available on teaching the sighted to communicate effectively with visually impaired people. One of the most fundamental rules is that when visual cues are removed the importance of speaking clearly becomes magnified. Applied to an ensemble of actors, everyone received a thorough education in articulation and volume. Within the classroom, we began to create a wonderful sense of ensemble. An article by Karen Myers, published in *The Journal of College Student Development*, provided research that introduced strategies to effectively and comfortably communicate with college students with disabilities. Eventually, no student in the class needed to be reminded to be

descriptive and to speak more clearly, which helped to recondition a class full of mumblers better than any vocal workshop I could ever have devised.

Students in my class were required to attend two productions and to write a review. The challenge was for each student to communicate effectively about the acting choices they witnessed on stage using the vocabulary we learned in class. Kevin asked to be excused from the play review assignments, claiming he had never seen a play and never would. I had uncovered some research on “touch-tours” that had been used to enhance the entertainment experience of blind and low-vision audience members, and I decided to try that with him (Udo, Fels). Touch-tours attempt to add a tactile element to an otherwise visual and aural event by allowing people that are visually impaired to feel elements such as costumes, props, and sets, prior to sitting through the performance. I required him to attend touch-tours of both productions prior to performances. Assistant Professor Markas Henry, Design Advisor for the Department of Theatre and Dance at CU-Boulder, handled my request with incredible professionalism. He gathered members of the cast of *Ingenious Chambermaid* who graciously donated some of their time to model costumes for Kevin. The women strapped on their corsets and explained how it affected their breathing, posture, and movement, allowing him to feel the tightness. Henry encouraged Kevin to feel the different fabrics used by high class and low class characters, and Kevin noted the thickness of the fabric and intricacy of the stitching. The actors explained how their costumes reflected their characters’ personalities, replacing traditional visual cues with a tactile understanding of these characters. They let him hold and wear the fop’s hat, an elaborate affair with a comically long feather.

This proved to be time well spent. I went to see the play with Kevin and I could, at various moments, whisper “this is the character that wore the giant hat” or “remember that tight corset?” He had no difficulty following the story and I believe that he and I both appreciated it on a different level than rest of the audience, having had the tactile experience. His paper was insightful and included observations that combined his aural and his tactile experiences.

The next production was *Marisol* by Jose Rivera. I had served as the Assistant Director and Voice Coach for that play, so I gave Kevin a touch-tour of the set and the props. We explored the spatial and tactile sense of 1980s New York City and discussed how the set reflected the style of magic realism, a style that also informed the acting. What began as a graffitied brick wall in Act One became a shattered, abstract, hovering scenic element in Act Two. It was a striking visual effect, and since he had had the opportunity to feel the cracks in the wall, he had a sense of what was happening.

After consulting published materials and learning about touch-tours, communication, and technological accommodations, my next step was to reach out to my nearby colleagues. I found an excellent resource in Amanda Giguere, a graduate of CU-Boulder’s Department of Theatre and Dance who had recently completed her doctorate. She had continued to teach at the university and used much of her time to head the literary and education programs at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. Giguere had a similar experience teaching a visually impaired student in an acting class a few years earlier.

Her most helpful comment right at the start was to paint the experience as a positive one for the student and for the entire class. She believed that the experience helped her grow as a teacher and that the unique situation helped to create a sense of ensemble. That

was heartening news. She gave me some specific advice that would prove invaluable throughout the semester, but of course there were some things that I had to learn on my own. Neither disability services nor Dr. Giguere prepared me for what to do in the event that your students are lying on the floor doing a relaxation or sense memory exercise and suddenly the service dog decides to go around licking faces. Sadly, after that occurrence, we began tying James up at the beginning of the class.

### **3.4.1 Amanda Giguere**

Amanda Giguere is the Literary Manager and Education Associate for the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, a professional summer theatre in residence at CU-Boulder. When I was dramaturg at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival I worked under her direction. She holds a Ph.D. in theatre from CU-Boulder where she continues to teach undergraduate classes. She has worked to develop the Colorado Shakespeare Festival's nationally recognized Shakespeare in the Schools tour. She was immediately responsive and very gracious with her time when I approached her with my challenge.

I had a blind student in my acting class a couple of years ago, and it was one of the most amazing learning experiences (for me, for the rest of the class, and for the student). I ended up tweaking a lot of my teaching style, and it made me really aware of how much I rely on visual clues as an educator. This student could see shapes and colors (sort of) out of one eye, but that was about it.

She began with some logistical recommendations that helped considerably, things that might be useful in any kind of course.

The Disability Office will set your student up with braille versions of the assigned readings, but as I remember, it often takes them awhile to get them processed. I have the students write journal entries every week. Instead of a written journal, my student kept an audio journal with a very cool contraption. I would give him feedback by recording my comments at the end of his entries.

As it turned out, Kevin used the same or a similar contraption. Whenever I got to pontificating, giving notes about scene or monologue work, or reiterating assignments, Kevin used his recording device. He often kept it accessible during class by letting it hang from a rope around his neck. For that class, I didn't require my students to keep a journal (compulsory journaling is a practice I have since adopted) but Giguere's student's audio journal seems like an excellent adaption.

The following is Giguere's advice about communication, which I find vital in every instance. Students with disabilities are familiar with their own needs and usually are willing to explain to an instructor that is willing to listen.

I talked with the student after the first class to lay down some ground rules. I wanted to know exactly what he needed from me to make the experience work. He was really clear about what he needed—chances are your student will be, too. As a class, we talked about [his] visual impairment, and I gave him the chance to tell his peers what he needed. We learned that we all had to be very descriptive (like radio announcers) of what was happening around

us. The results were wonderful. During games that involved gestures, the students next to [him] would describe the gestures for him, so he could do them, too.

This advice proved invaluable for me during my class. As an instructor in a practice based theatre course, I very often employ physical exercises that involve balance, stretching, or movement. Some of these are based on yoga and T'ai Chi. There are numerous challenges involved in teaching such things. Many students need to see the form or movement so they can emulate it with their own bodies. So I am in the habit of performing the moves as I teach them. With a visually impaired student, it's also necessary to very clearly articulate the movement vocally. I have to describe the movement as I perform it. I also must watch each individual student and offer corrections. For example, a gentle reminder to relax one's shoulders may help a particular student, while another might need an adjustment in the position of their hands or feet. I quickly learned how much I relied on the visual cues, since my narration was at times non-specific and left Kevin wondering what I was asking for. It was educational for me, as an instructor, to witness him perform a movement exactly as I had described, but not as I intended. Giguere's advice, that other students in the class assume some responsibility for the gestures of a visually impaired student (with his consent, of course), worked very well for me.

In the scenes and monologues, we came across an interesting question: should the student perform as if he can see? Should he perform as a blind character? It was a really interesting opportunity for the class to talk about what it means to be an actor... is it using who you are, or is it playing someone entirely different from you? [He] decided to use his walking stick



onstage (even though he didn't always need it) and play his characters as blind roles.

This issue harkens back to earlier in the chapter when I explored the concept of “cripping” the classroom, and being cognizant of identity issues when casting scenes and monologues. I encouraged Kevin to make his own choices as to whether his characters would be blind or not. Very often, once the scene or monologue was rehearsed, blindness didn't seem to matter. It wasn't readily apparent whether or not his character was blind, and we were able to focus on other issues at hand. Throughout the semester, I never assigned a scene or monologue that was explicitly written for a character with disabilities, and the work never suffered.

Giguere describes how she and her student navigated the play review assignment:

When [he] attended plays, he would always sit up front, so that he could hear everything. A couple of times, I arranged for him to attend rehearsals, so he could get more of a chance to “hear” what the play was about, and to talk with him about what the production looked like.

As I mentioned earlier, my solution was to use touch-tours, which I believe worked very well in this situation. It's a practice that deepens appreciation of a performance for theatregoers with and without disabilities. Kevin always chose to sit at the back of the house, since he didn't have trouble hearing, and he didn't want his service animal to cause a distraction to other audience members.

When sharing feedback about scenes and monologues, Kevin always provided an interesting, unique, and valuable perspective to his classmates. He was quick to interject with his opinions about what sounded truthful. It was an interesting learning experience

for all of us; what information does an audience member receive aurally when visual stimuli are removed? What sounds truthful? Sometimes, an actor's breathing may be disconnected from the character's emotional state, and Kevin often pointed that out for other actors in the class. Giguere describes a similar experience.

When we shared feedback on scenes, I encouraged [him] to offer his opinions based on what he heard and felt. It was so interesting for the actors to hear how their work sounded, from someone who was unable to see their work. It's definitely an opportunity for the students to consider vocal clarity, and developing character voices...

Giguere concluded, "I have never seen a more connected group than this class, and I think so much of it had to do with [his] blindness." As I mentioned earlier, this was my first experience teaching an entire college level acting course, so I had no frame of reference. But now, with three years of perspective, I can agree wholeheartedly with Giguere's experience. That class came together quickly as an ensemble in a way that often takes other classes the entire semester.

Amanda Giguere gave me some excellent advice that helped to improve my course. I also sought out advice from Ike Schambelan, Artistic Director of Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (formerly called Theatre by the Blind). His advice emerged from decades of experience conducting rehearsals with visually impaired actors. I found that some of these rehearsal practices were very applicable to in-class activities.

### 3.4.2 Ike Schambelan

How does a director or teacher deal with practical issues like blocking when working with a visually impaired student? How does a visually impaired actor learn his or her lines? If actors can't receive visual cues, what is the alternative? Ike Schambelan offers simple, common sense accommodations.

Ike Schambelan is the Artistic Director of Theatre Breaking Through Barriers (TBTB). This company, formerly called Theater By The Blind, is an Off-Broadway theatre based in New York City. Schambelan, along with some of his collaborators, founded the company in 1979, and for 32 years has grown TBTB into a prolific disability theatre company (TBTB.org). The company's mission is "to advance actors and writers with disabilities and change the image of people with disabilities from dependence to independence" (TBTB.org). The company began by showcasing the work of low vision and blind actors, but has since evolved and expanded to include artists with all physical disabilities. They support a company of actors with disabilities and boast nine permanent members.

In addition to his work at TBTB, Schambelan has directed at many notable theatres across the country. He has written a number of plays that have been produced at TBTB, produced and directed radio and television commercials, and earned a Doctor of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Drama. Schambelan started this company not to be altruistic, but to "support my directing addiction" (qtd. in Wolfe). Whatever his reasons, Schambelan offers a wealth of experience directing actors with disabilities in critically acclaimed productions.

As a director, his advice is of the practical variety. In my class, I assigned two scenes and two monologues, both of which were to be rehearsed outside of class and presented before the class for evaluation and coaching. The students were responsible for the initial blocking. I assigned Kevin a scene from *Oleanna*, by David Mamet. I chose it in part because, as a student that was slightly older than all the others, I thought Kevin would be a good choice to play the part. A number of the female actors in my class were appropriate choices for his scene partner, but I cast somebody in particular that I thought would be game for a different approach to rehearsal and blocking. She was advanced and confident enough to try different approaches. I also thought the scene would work well because, for the most part, the two characters would be sitting across from each other at a desk. It would have been acceptable for the entire scene to take place sitting, which would have eliminated the need for Schambelan's tactics and simply allow the actors to focus on acting technique. Despite this possibility, Kevin and his scene partner chose to stage part of the scene standing. They felt that it would be untruthful for his character to sit behind a desk, passively and patiently, while he was being threatened. This is an instance where Schambelan's advice about blocking became invaluable.

"I found that blind actors can learn a space and move about much as they do in their own apartments," he said. Learning the space will give the actor confidence to move about freely and unhindered. Schambelan offers some very practical strategies that allow a visually impaired actor to successfully navigate a space.

When you stage, the thing is to let your student get used to a space and ground plan. To keep changing it on him makes it harder. ... Ground plans where the furniture and walls are parallel to the apron of the stage are better

to use, as opposed to on diagonals. It makes it easier for actors to orient. That may or may not help. Some of these things might be specific to the actors I work with. It helps to have a clear geometric shape to the ground plan if possible. But then as a director I always like that if possible. We find things like rugs that give foot orientation are helpful, they define the space. Furniture that when touched gives a unique indication of, "Oh I'm at the sofa now," also helps. I know in more presentational things we started simply putting down  $\frac{1}{4}$  or  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch molding or simply rope (in the rehearsal room it was always rope as they usually wanted it pulled up when we were done and we could experiment with the most helpful layout). We might do an X that went through center stage, or other shapes you like or that are right for that scene's ground plan. I also know a terrific blind actor/writer who would put ropes under a carpet to orient himself.

Keeping a consistent space helped not only with blocking, but also in the day-to-day business of conducting the class. The studio where I taught doesn't have fixed seating, but it helped Kevin to be able to sit in the same place every day, so we made an effort to keep the space consistent. In blocking a scene, we recorded the relative distance of each piece of furniture. Obviously the furniture and props couldn't remain fixed, but by noting the exact distance between the chair and the table, for instance, he could be certain that the space would feel the same. These guidelines were also useful for physical exercises in class where I wanted students to move freely and confidently without colliding. "I know an actor that liked movement exercises a lot," Schambelan said, "physical things either locked in a space, e.g. on an exercise mat, or moving out from that set home space." By utilizing the

cushioned mats in the classroom as a set boundary, Kevin could be sure that his movements within that area would be safe and unimpeded.

Schambelan discussed another issue related to blocking that didn't come up very often in class since the students did their own initial blocking, but would become a very important lesson to apply in a rehearsal situation. The very best directors encourage creative actors to follow their impulses so that movements on stage are organic and emerge from the actor's own process. With a company of visually impaired actors, it might be tempting to simply stage a scene without allowing for actor input. That would move things along and prevent any dangerous missteps. Despite the inherent challenge, Schambelan insists that blocking initially come from an actor's impulses, regardless of disability. He recounts an example with one of his company members:

When we first started working together he was very desperate for me to tell him where to go but I wouldn't and we had fights. By the end, he wouldn't let me tell him where to move until the end, when I try to clean the blocking and make the pictures pretty and expressive. I like to let people move a lot, try to encourage them to move out all over the space and explore it and arrive at final moves only in time. I find this is no different with blind actors though sometimes it takes them awhile to like it.

This process takes perhaps additional rehearsal time, but it is certainly worth it to have the movement be a product of each actor's impulses. The actor's creative contribution makes the role uniquely his or her own. Schambelan identified other challenges that take time and patience to overcome. It was very useful for me to know, from the outset, that learning lines and participating in read-throughs of scenes would inevitably take visually impaired

students longer than other students. This was not a reflection on Kevin's abilities, but rather on the added challenges he faced. Schambelan describes some additional challenges that actors with visual impairments face:

My experience has been that reading scripts is much harder – slower for blind actors. Actually, it's probably much easier now than when I started, as then everything had to be put into Braille or learned from tape. Now with scanning and voice boxes, scripts can be read off computers. Or if he has some vision, as some of my actors do, scripts can be put into various sizes of large print by the actor himself. The loss, with large print or Braille, is direct access to the script unmediated by another voice. I know a blind star who used to work with me a lot would read lots of books off his computer or tapes but insisted on a script being in Braille so he approached it unmediated. We used to do a lot of slow moving readings of plays to get started. Readings took forever. An actress who's wonderful and legally blind says she has to all but memorize before she works, she "reads" off large print she's hand written herself to learn.

This was an excellent reminder. I had high expectations from each student in the class, but a very real accommodation that I could make was related to time. Studying a script can be time consuming for anyone, but there are innumerable added challenges for actors with disabilities. I tried to schedule assignments so as to allow Kevin the maximum time to prepare, and he never disappointed. His software could read scripts to him, but his preferred method was to work one-on-one with another actor until he learned his part. When I'm studying a part and I can't recall a particular line, I can glance down at my script,

find the line, and move on. A visually impaired actor working solo forgets a line may have to rewind or fast-forward through an entire scene in order to find the line and continue the scene. This is one of the reasons why he preferred working with a partner.

One might think that Schambelan, as Artistic Director of a successful theatre company for people with disabilities, would have solved the issue about casting and identity. Should blind actors play all roles as blind, or should they sometimes “pass” as sighted? Must playwrights write characters with disability as a given circumstance, or can it be added upon as another trait? For him, it is an evolving issue, and something that is decided on a case-by-case basis by the artists involved.

We were always facing the issue of do I play it blind or am I supposed to be sighted. I didn’t know that we ever solved it. As I work now, with people with all disabilities, I find I need to learn to let the disabilities be more visible, what the hell. Depends on the scene/play I guess.

### **3.4.3 Onward**

Mine was far from the perfect course, but with the wisdom of the university’s Disability Service specialists, the generous contribution of Amanda Giguere, and Ike Schambelan’s wealth of practical experience, I believe that I was able to effectively conduct a class that was not only reasonably accessible to a visually impaired student, but managed to capitalize on the situation in certain unanticipated ways. The class bonded as an ensemble very quickly, they learned to communicate effectively and to speak more clearly, and they came to question certain assumptions about disability identity. I don’t believe



that I managed to “crip” the classroom in any profound way, but it was a positive learning experience for all involved, myself included. One of the many things I learned from this experience is that there are few relevant resources for teachers and students. Once I began expanding this project to become a dissertation, I unearthed a treasure of valuable information that makes up the bulk of Chapter Two. But only a very small amount of it relates directly to the way we conduct acting classes. My aim is for all such classes to be welcoming and accessible to students with disabilities. The knowledge that made my class successful came from Amanda Giguere’s teaching experience and Ike Schambelan’s directing experience. I decided to speak with some more teachers and students in order to identify additional positive strategies for successfully incorporating students with disabilities into university acting courses.

### 3.5 Bella Merlin

“I honestly believe that if one gets to the heart/essence of an exercise  
it can be adapted and adjusted for all.”

Bella Merlin

I first encountered Bella Merlin’s work when I read her book, *Acting: The Basics*, published by Routledge in 2010. It appealed to me and stood out among many others because it provides a very clear, concise, and direct approach to the craft of acting. Merlin’s book contains not only an excellent system for student actors based primarily on the Stanislavski System, but also a survey of many other popular approaches by famous executors of acting styles. I was drawn to her practice of providing alternative approaches, displaying her expertise in Stanislavsky, Michael Chekhov, Grotowski, and Laban. Since

then I've come to learn that Merlin is known internationally as a "practice-as-researcher," with active investigations into the acting process that have led to many publications and performances (UCDavis.Edu). Her other publications include *The Complete Stanislavsky Toolkit* in 2013, *The Path of the Actor* in 2005, and *Beyond Stanislavsky: The Psycho-Physical Approach to Actor-Training* in 2001. Her many published articles cover topics such as Stanislavsky in performance, performance as research, and acting pedagogy. She is a teacher actively engaged with cutting edge acting theory for many years and at the top levels of her field.

Merlin, with twenty-five years of experience, is a dynamic performer as well. She performed as part of the acting company of the Colorado Shakespeare Festival (CSF) in 2012. There, she delivered a critically acclaimed performance as Margaret in *Richard III*, directed by Tina Packer. I've also worked with this company as a dramaturg and assistant director during the 2011 season, so we share some common connections. Merlin is a prolific performer, author, and actor-trainer. She holds a Ph.D. from the University of Birmingham and a degree from Guildford School of Acting. She has taught at the Universities of Birmingham and Exeter, at Central School of Speech and Drama, and she is currently the Professor of Acting at the University of California, Davis, where she teaches in both the undergraduate and graduate levels (BellaMerlin.com).

As a prolific actor and internationally renowned acting theorist and teacher, Merlin seemed like an excellent person to approach about this project. It turns out that she had a recent experience teaching a comedy class to a female student with a mobility impairment who used a wheelchair. Merlin said of this experience, "It was both challenging and enlightening. I learned so much from her."

Merlin's first bit of advice relates to positive communication, a theme throughout this chapter. She also found ways to encourage the student to take the lead in deciding how to represent disability. Like Giguere and I, Merlin found the inclusion of students with disabilities to be a positive experience for the entire class.

She and I talked at the beginning of the course about how she would like me to proceed – special accommodations, etc – and she was pretty adamant that she wanted to give everything an equal go. Her stand-up comedy routine was all about being “small” (i.e. in a wheelchair) and her final “sit com” scene involved her and her peers writing a scene in which the controls of her wheelchair become part of the comic routine. The whole class agreed that her contribution was as valuable as anyone else's and we would collectively make subtle adjustments to in no way disadvantage her in the physical tasks. I've also had [people with] learning disabilities, such as Asperger's and dyslexia. I always have a meeting privately with the students at the start of the course, to understand how they would like to address any challenges. It was a great experience.

Because of Merlin's deep knowledge and experience with the Stanislavski System, I asked how that particular process works for actors with disabilities. I also asked if there was a particular school of acting that might be preferable for actors with disabilities, such as Stanislavski, Meisner, Chekhov, or some other approach.

I think the essence of each [approach to acting] can offer something – be it the psychological practitioners such as Adler and Strasberg, the pragmatic practitioners such as Mamet, the physical practitioners such as LeCoq. I

believe in allowing each individual to connect with whatever material on whatever level is comfortable for them. Obviously overly physical activities such as Grotowski's plastiques are not as workable. I'm not an expert in teaching disabled actors on a regular basis, so I don't feel I can really be more specific. I love having mixed "ability" groups, though it is exhausting as a teacher, always juggling such different needs. However, "disabilities" is so wide: I've never worked with a deaf actor or a blind actor, so I don't feel confident addressing the issue beyond psycho-physical coordination – the dialogue between inner feeling and outer expression – which I believe is what being human is all about, so I don't see any reason why Stanislavsky's basic psychophysical technique can't be adapted to any human experience.

Merlin summed up her wisdom in one astute sentence, "I honestly believe that if one gets to the heart/essence of an exercise it can be adapted and adjusted for all." While she admits that over the course of a long career she has only trained a handful of actors with disabilities, her openness to communication and willingness to adapt any exercise makes her teaching effective. Although a proponent of the Stanislavski System, she taps her vast knowledge of diverse acting techniques to help actors choose the approach that works best for them as individuals.

### **3.6 Nick O'Brien**

Nick O'Brien is author of *The Stanislavski Experience*, a workbook containing step-by-step instructions for teaching and learning the Stanislavski System. He has extensive

experience as a performer on stage and screen. O'Brien conducts workshops on acting at venues around the world. He is currently Head of Drama at the North London Performing Arts Centre. I contacted him to discuss how useful his particular work might be for training actors with disabilities. The Stanislavski System is widely practiced throughout the world, so an expert's perspective on its strengths and weaknesses proved valuable.

The Stanislavski system is not about right and wrong, rather about an actor experiencing and creating. Within the system there is no wrong - only discovery. If a part of the system is useful to the actor then they can use it in their practice; if it isn't they can leave it. For Stanislavski, acting was the experiencing of a combination of mind, body and spirit. If the actor is experiencing what the character is thinking and doing then they are using the system effectively. Stanislavski's system, if used practically, would give any actors the freedom to explore and experience, and would allow them to harness their senses and be active in a role. It would also allow them to work at their own pace and ability, giving them a structure to guide them along the path to experiencing a role. Interestingly the system is designed for those who are not naturally talented and I would say it has the depth to help all actors whatever their starting point.

The system, as described by O'Brien, is flexible and has no mandatory benchmarks. Students work at their own pace and ability, and the only expectation is that they continue to grow. I asked O'Brien whether any of the specific exercises he teaches would be particularly useful for students with visual or mobility impairments. He discusses one of Stanislavski's concepts: the invisible ray. An imaginative process, "invisible rays" are a kind

of unseen, communal energy. Actors communicate using their voices, their bodies, and according to Stanislavski, using “invisible rays.” Stanislavski’s famous pupil, Michael Chekhov, further explored this tool and called it “radiating.”<sup>1</sup> Others might call it focus, intention, or charisma, but it is a widely used acting tool.

Communication exercises using invisible rays would work very well as would sense data exercises. Students that are visually impaired could learn to send and receive rays that could help them to enhance their imaginations. A focus on using invisible rays would allow the physically impaired actor to reach an audience spiritually and give them a means of communicating what they are thinking and doing as their character. In many ways exercises on free body and communication enable the disabled actor to heighten the senses they can use to act. Using free body relaxation followed by communication exercises with disabled students would provide a real freedom to explore performance in an active way.

### **3.7 Robert Cohen, Robert Barton, and Rob Roznowski**

I group Robert Cohen, Robert Barton, and Rob Roznowski, three experienced acting teachers together because, while approached separately, they each delivered a similar reply. All have had the opportunity to train actors with disabilities, but the occasion was rare and they felt they could only provide some general guidance.

Among the many books published by Robert Cohen is *Acting One*, which has been for

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information about the work of Michael Chekhov, see <http://www.michaelchekhov.org>

the past twenty years the best selling acting text in the United States. Joyce Aldridge identified *Acting One* as the most frequently assigned text for acting classes in colleges and universities across the country. Cohen is the Founding Chair of Drama at the University of California at Irvine where he continues to serve as the Claire Trevor Professor. He has written over a dozen books about acting, collaboration, directing, and introduction to theatre.

A well-known master teacher of acting, Cohen teaches a practical approach to realistic acting that integrates the many different styles seen on stage today. He incorporates many different approaches, including classical acting, global theatre practice, and scientific theory. His collaborations with Polish director Jerzy Grotowski have had a profound influence on his actor training as well. He has directed over one hundred productions at academic and professional theatres across the country, including the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. He received his Doctor of Fine Arts from the Yale School of Drama. In 1999, Cohen received the Career Achievement Award in Academic Theatre from the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). Here, Cohen explains his experience working with a mobility impaired actor:

Yes, I have worked with students with disabilities, and in fact I once won an award for doing so, but this was a quite unique occasion: an older undergraduate student of mine, an ex-marine who was wounded and confined to a wheelchair in the Vietnam War, was filmed in a documentary shot in my class that showed me working with him in a scene. While the prize was impressive (it was from a Los Angeles charitable group dedicated to such projects, and awarded during its annual convention by Norman Lear

and Henry Winkler), the work I did was in no way different than what I would have done with a non-disabled actor who was playing in a wheelchair. Other experiences I have had with disabled students were similar; their disability simply becomes part of the role.

Cohen provides some practical guidance for directing or coaching actors with disabilities. He encourages actors to focus on their craft, not their disability. He doesn't allow disability to affect his desire to challenge each individual student.

I suppose the best thing I can say is that I find *all* actors unique, and self-doubting in one way or another, and it is useful to find ways to help them overcome this when the role demands it. Three or four times I have worked with an actress of less-than-normal height who has chosen to do a scene from *St. Joan* - and have found that asking her simply to stand on a table when addressing her troops provides her with a confidence and charisma that she had not previously projected in the scene. This is a lot better than telling her to "be more confident" or "be more charismatic," which would only make her more self-conscious (aware of her "disability") and therefore more timid. Making an actor aware of his or her "disability" by labeling it as such probably does more harm than good. We all have disabilities; reminding us of these limits only weakens us. The job of an actor is to "rise to the role" and anything I can help them to do this is, I think, quite valuable.

Robert Barton is a Professor Emeritus at the University of Oregon. His published books include *Acting: Onstage and Off*, *Acting Reframes*, *Voice: Onstage and Off* (with Rocco Dal Vera), *Theatre in Your Life*, and *Style for Actors*. His books are well known and widely



read in the field of actor training. He wrote an article titled “Acting Access,” along with his graduate advisee, Amy Sarno-Fradkin, that was published in *Theatre Topics*. This article explored accessibility in acting classes and was one of the few printed resources on this topic that I was able to find when I was attempting to adapt my acting class in 2010.

Despite having co-authored that article he admitted to having had limited opportunities to work with actors with disabilities, “My experience with actors with disabilities has been virtually non-existent. No one in that category ever enrolled in the theatre program at U. Oregon.” As with Robert Cohen, the advice he had to give was that one ought to be flexible and encouraging.

I think a core unifying element in all acting classes is that students are encouraged to do only as much as they feel comfortable doing, and to give themselves permission to drop out of any activity that feels too challenging. Since this permission is given to able-bodied students, it would naturally expand to those with disabilities. Obviously, a key issue is making members of the disabled community aware that acting classes would welcome their participation, so an outreach program of some kind would be essential.

Head of Acting and Directing at Michigan State University and cowriter of *Collaboration in Theatre*, Associate Professor Rob Roznowski has years of experience teaching graduate and undergraduate actors in a university setting. Recently named “Michigan Professor of the Year” by the President’s Council of State Universities, Roznowski has also performed and directed extensively at theatres across the country.

Roznowski acknowledges the possibility that an instructor's lack of comfort or experience working with students with disabilities might make communication difficult. He counsels moving past that challenge by being open, respectful, and sensitive.

I think a respectful discussion about boundaries with all students at first and then in private meetings can open lines of communication most often closed by an instructor's lack of comfort with the situation. It is really a balancing act of making disabled students feel engaged in all activities while also making adjustments based on specific limitations. You must be sensitive to scene selections and casting without drawing unwanted attention.

He then shares his philosophy of accommodation, which mirrors some of the observations made earlier by Amanda Giguere, particularly with regard to his reliance on visual cues as an instructor.

I think adapting is always part of the process. So my consistent warm-ups, which include stretching and balance, have been adapted based on student's abilities. In working with a blind student in a recent acting class, I found myself adjusting my coaching to avoid my standard feedback that included lots of visual notes or demonstration. It was actually a great lesson, which forced me to reformat my usual ways of teaching.

Roznowski identifies what he perceives to be the greatest pitfalls for an instructor in this situation, "Either being overly sensitive to the situation that you create/draw attention to the disabled student or that you are inflexible and make no adjustment to the realities of the situation."

Robert Cohen, Robert Barton, and Rob Roznowski are three successful educators with decades of combined experience. From them we are reminded to communicate, to listen, to be sensitive to a student's needs while still applying critical standards, and to be completely flexible in a class setting. Students should have the freedom to decide for themselves whether or not they participate in certain activities. And finally, don't let disability be a defining characteristic in casting and coaching.

### **3.8 Lyndsay Marie Giral-di-Palmer**

"If you have confidence in me then I can have confidence in myself."

Lyndsay Marie Giral-di-Palmer

Lindsay Marie Giral-di-Palmer is an actor that frequently performs with PHAMALY, Denver's disability theatre company that produces full scale plays and musicals year-round, cast entirely of performers with disabilities across the spectrum (physical, cognitive, emotional, blindness, deafness, etc.) (PHAMALY.org). She has a bilateral perilymph fistula, which affects hearing, balance, and equilibrium. She is completely deaf in her right ear and partially deaf in the left. She has studied acting at the University of Colorado Denver and Metro State University in Denver. In her first production with PHAMALY she played Sarah Brown in the musical *Guys and Dolls* in 2004. Other PHAMALY productions in which she has performed include *The Foreigner*, *Man of La Mancha*, and *Steel Magnolias*. Lindsay has also appeared at Boulder's Dinner Theatre and the Santa Monica Guild Theatre. She is married to Jeremy Palmer, a fellow PHAMALY actor who also has a number of physical disabilities.

Giraldi-Palmer provided insight into the practice of actor-training from a student's point of view. She discusses the difference between visible and invisible disabilities, explores the nuances of how people are treated based on the nature of the disability, and competing accommodations. She explains the accommodations she requires as a student and an actor.

Giraldi-Palmer started her training as a ballerina at the age of three. Her hearing disability began at the age of six. Following a series of surgeries, an onslaught of problems related to dizziness and equilibrium kept her from pursuing dance. This is when she began to explore acting as a career option. She participated in summer camps for the arts and humanities and performed in many high school shows. Her love of theatre was fanned and so she decided to enroll in the theatre program at the University of Colorado Denver. The actor training program at CU-Denver proved very intense and allowed little time to take other required courses, so she took some time off from school in order to reevaluate her intention to perform as a career. After performing in a number of productions, she felt reaffirmed in her desire to become an actor and so she reenrolled in college, this time at Metro State University in Denver.

I asked her what kinds of performance based classes she took and what were the biggest challenges she faced.

I took improv, I did on camera acting, theatre history – everything – directing, behind-the-scenes, costumes, everything. I read people's lips. That's how I get my cues. If someone's saying their lines from behind me, or saying their lines from the right of me (because I'm completely deaf in my right ear) I really can't hear them or I can't get my cue from them. So I

usually had to adjust myself. Sometimes the director would say, “Why are you doing that? You shouldn’t be looking behind you, you should be looking forward.” “I can’t! I’m going to miss my cue.” That’s a general frustration for me, but most directors are cool with that. They say to just do what I have to do.

Most of the teachers I spoke to mentioned the importance of communicating directly with the student about his or her disability and the accommodations that should be made. Giraldi-Palmer brings up an interesting point about visible versus invisible disabilities. She remarks that people using wheelchairs or canes are immediately recognizable as disabled, and teachers are more likely to approach those students to discuss their needs. For her, it is necessary to self-identify.

Usually they don’t know that I’m hearing impaired until I go up to them and tell them that I’m hearing impaired. They usually say, “Okay great, tell us what we need to do for you to be successful.” Or they forget, because I do well, thankfully. It’s usually not an issue at all until I have to say, “Just so you know, I couldn’t hear this part or I couldn’t focus my attention on this scene just because so-and-so was speaking really softly or they were positioned in the wrong place.” They’re usually pretty good about telling the other actors, “This person’s hearing impaired so please project more.” When I talk to my teacher for the first time he usually asks if I want to make an announcement about myself. Usually, I like to do it so that if anybody has a question they can ask me; I’m very open to people asking questions about myself. So

usually I tell the professor that I would like to announce to the class that I'm hearing impaired and this is what I need to be successful from you guys.

I also asked Giraldi-Palmer about the issue of competing accommodations. I was curious as to whether she might be able to provide any wisdom for teachers that have more than one disabled student in their class. While she has never participated in an acting course with another student with disabilities, she has performed many times with PHAMALY. In any given production, there are always a wide variety of disabilities on stage.

I think in general, whether it's PHAMALY or another theatre company, there are going to be more accommodations for a person with blindness than with deafness. It's come up in the last few years with PHAMALY because they only have just a certain amount of ear monitors and so either the lead is given the ear monitor or a blind person, and I say, "What about me?" And they say, "We don't have the money for it." It can be disappointing, but they've purchased more so they're definitely learning about my needs and other people's needs as far as being hearing impaired. I think people see hearing impaired as an invisible disability and not such a challenge, so they tend to either ignore it, or they focus on people who are blind or in wheelchairs. "Visible disabilities" are more taken care of and people help you more and they're more accommodating. When people have invisible disabilities like hearing impairedness or traumatic brain injuries or depression, they tend to overlook you and think, "They can take care of themselves." That's generally how it feels.

I think she makes many excellent points here that can serve as a warning for teachers. In colleges, students are not required to self-identify as disabled. People with very visible disabilities, like wheelchair-users, are conspicuous and we immediately understand that they need accommodations. No less important are the students with disabilities that are less visible, like the hearing impaired. An instructor must be willing to accommodate any disability, but in order for that to happen, the student must first self-identify and explain his or her needs. It's also important to remember that, although a student may seem to be successfully navigating the course, as Giral-di-Palmer does as a talented and functional lip-reader, they are still dealing with challenges that should not be ignored.

I asked her about the coveted technology she mentioned called "ear monitors."

An ear monitor is... if you've ever seen musicians in concerts wearing something that looks like "earplugs" so they can hear their music filtered and mixed... It's a receiver that sits in your ear. We generally use that so you can tell the sound cue guy that you want to hear the piano player only, or you want to hear your part in the chorus only. So you can hear specific people, or just the piano. It's really cool and it helps a lot. It's definitely something you have to get used to because you're not hearing everything, you're just hearing what you've selected to hear. That can be a bit of a challenge sometimes.

Giral-di-Palmer is interested in pursuing musical theatre as a career, and with the use of ear monitors she has no trouble staying on pitch. Assistive technology puts her on a level playing ground. Unfortunately, she recently had an experience at her university where she was denied an opportunity to sing solo simply because of her disability.

At Metro I recently had to drop out of a show because they gave me a chorus role after promising me a lead role. They learned that I was hearing impaired and they decided not to cast me as their lead. They assumed I would go off pitch so they took it away from me. Ever since then I haven't done a show with them.

It seems as though she was cast based on her audition, and the promised role was revoked after the director learned about her disability. If the director had been aware of the effectiveness of ear monitors, perhaps she could have played that role. When I asked Giraldi-Palmer to name one thing that she'd like to tell a director or teacher that would make her life easier, she said, "If you have confidence in me then I can have confidence in myself." She is very aware that her disability puts her at a disadvantage when attempting to pursue her dream job. "With singing, I rely on the piano to hear and feel the notes and when the drums and all the other instruments come in then it gets very confusing for me to adjust or to hear my notes and I have to adjust and that's very hard." She is willing to meet those challenges, but can only do so when given the opportunity and the tools she needs. "If I really want to be a musical theatre person, then I need to be a singer to do that. I am a singer. I take voice lessons. I'm off pitch from time to time but if they can just have patience with me and have confidence, then I can do it."

### **3.9 Jill Summerville**

Jill Summerville is an actor, poet, playwright, and theatre scholar that I met at the Mid-America Theatre Conference in March of 2011. She uses a power wheelchair and has



some visual perceptual impairments. Summerville has written extensively on the subject of how disability is represented on stage. In her writing, she explores the concept of disability as “performance” and how that complicates the job of actors with disabilities, as they are most frequently cast in roles in which they are required to “perform” their own disabilities onstage. Summerville frequently uses the term “gimp” to describe people such as herself with mobility impairments, in much the same way that some members of the gay community have attempted to “re-appropriate” the word queer. She seeks ways to “separate the gimp from the actor,” as well as constructive ways for people with disabilities to be evaluated as actors. She earned her undergraduate degree from Antioch College, where she was a founding member of The Pathological Upstagers, a comedic theatre troupe. She earned her Masters degree in 2008 at the University of Houston with a thesis entitled *The Presence of the Gimp: A Study of Nonambulatory Actors Onstage and How Their Work Can Be Evaluated*. She is earning a doctorate from the Department of Theatre at The Ohio State University where she teaches courses including *Introduction to Theatre* as well as *America on Stage*.

Summerville offers two main points: the first involves strategies for effectively communicating with student actors with disabilities and the second is an astounding and useful deconstruction of the issue of identity as it manifests in actor training and rehearsals. Her perspective is invaluable and highly astute because she actively participates in all areas of this complex debate, informed by her multifarious roles as an actor, a teacher, a theoretician, and a person with a disability. On the topic of communication, Summerville said,

One of the most challenging things about the classroom setting is that people,

gimpy ones included, are sometimes less forthcoming about their needs than they would be in the rehearsal room. I try to be forthcoming in all spaces, but I'll use myself as an example to avoid incriminating anyone. I have visual perceptual issues. If I don't tell my teacher that, I can get notes from another student. If I don't tell my director that, I won't get the necessary adaptations so I can learn my blocking. Sometimes it's helpful to figure out what difficulties the mobility device you're encountering might signify, as those are different for each person. I always ask the class, "What do you need for this to be a safe space?" My gay husband, Nic, asks, "What's one challenge you face as an actor?" The answers to questions like that might give you tips about all your students. Of course, some disabled actors either haven't had their disabilities discussed or have hindrances to communication. In such cases, you'll have to find out what you can through individual acting exercises. I don't mind if people ask me questions about my gimpiness outright. However, I don't feel comfortable advising you to do that, because some people mind very much.

This reaffirms a point made earlier: students in higher education are not compelled to disclose the nature of their disabilities, nor are they required to ask for accommodations. Many of the actors with disabilities that I spoke to make a practice of enthusiastically sharing the details of their needs with their classmates and professors, but some students may choose not to. In the ideal situation, the student will take the lead and begin the process of communicating with a welcoming and attentive instructor. When this does not happen, confronting a student and asking them directly is an unwise approach and could

lead to a negative student-teacher relationship. Summerville suggests opening lines of communication with the entire class using general questions. Asking everyone in the class to share one of their challenges as an actor invites the student to share information about their disabilities, without forcing the issue or singling out the individual. Asking what is needed to make the class a safe space communicates that the instructor is willing to provide accommodations, but also to supply what a student may need the most: space.

The next question, which has not yet been thoroughly answered in this dissertation, relates to the question of disability identity during scene and monologue work. What is a positive approach to disability identity when training actors? Is it appropriate to ignore the disability, thereby treating all actors equally? Perhaps the harsh reality of typecasting is something that the student will deal with throughout their career, but should it therefore have a prominent place in the classroom environment? Maybe the answer is to conduct a class in which disability is not a defining characteristic. On the other hand, by acknowledging that disability intrudes upon performance and alters the way an audience perceives a character's identity, perhaps the wise thing to do is to study strategies for positively integrating disability identity into scene work. Summerville explains that there is no overarching rule that can be applied to every situation. The way to approach a role will depend, in large part, upon the way the role was written and the nature of the individual's disability. Summerville begins by clarifying the parameters of the specific disability by creating a hypothetical student, one that memorizes her monologues on time, asks for extra feedback, has no cognitive disabilities, and demonstrates a fair amount of flexibility for a manual wheelchair user.

Personally, I don't think a wheelchair can ever be fully integrated into its

onstage world, but let's say it can. That leaves open the possibility of working her disability and mobility device into the dramatic world by essentially treating it like a prop that's meant to serve her character. This approach works best when disability is signifying the same qualities that are ascribed to it in the real world. In *Fefu and her Friends*, for example, Julia's wheelchair signifies that her body is as damaged as her mind, confirming the stereotype that gimp bodies are incomplete. Of course, the metaphorical implications of the wheelchair are most easily controlled when the actor playing the gimp character isn't gimp.

This approach is limited by the significant dearth of roles written with disability in mind. More often, actors with disabilities are faced with the question of how to make character choices when playing roles that do not specifically mention disability. Summerville uses the example of Blanche Dubois from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

It's more difficult to use this approach when a mobility device and its attendant associations complicate or contradict traits that a character is supposed to have. This becomes most evident in situations where the character isn't traditionally disabled like the actor. Blanche Dubois, for example, is physically and emotionally fragile and psychologically damaged. All of these are qualities that work with an audience's perception of disability. However, Blanche is also very seductive, which works against that perception. The presence of her disability will always overshadow the actor's attempt to portray that quality. [Put aside for a moment how Stanley could possibly be redeemed once he had raped a delusional gimp girl.] In its real

world context, Bill Shannon calls the tendency to notice an individual's condition before the individual herself Condition Arriving. How do you help your hypothetical student portray qualities that aren't associated with disability without being upstaged by her wheelchair?

We may also ask whether “Condition Arriving” is a regrettable phenomenon that should be combatted, or perhaps something that can be viewed as an opportunity. Can a skilled director, teacher, or actor manipulate it to great effect? Is it ethical to do so? Summerville, with her dual perspective as teacher and “gimp” performer, has practical experience navigating this complicated path.

The best solution I've found is to bring more attention to the wheelchair (or whatever mobility device) by finding ways to acknowledge moments when this is happening. One possible method is finding moments when the wheelchair reads as an extension of the body. A personal example: Nic and I were a couple in a play that I wrote. We soon found I shouldn't cross my legs even though I was wearing a dress. The recognizable gesture didn't read as feminine, because it broke up the silhouette naturally created by my wheelchair. We looked for other recognizable, feminine gestures. During a moment of sexual tension, I pushed my footrests aside so it looked like I was letting him between my legs...sort of. That gesture was neither normal for the character, who could have made a number of more natural intimate choices nor familiar to anyone in the audience. It worked thanks to something close to Brechtian alienation; the character's emotion was familiar, but her mode of expression was strange.

It seems as though a well-trained actor with a disability must be experienced in making these adjustments. Any actor should be familiar with his or her body and the way that the audience perceives physical gestures. The popular metaphor of actor-as-instrument is particularly apt here; the actor must know how to best play their unique instrument. Actors with disabilities, such as wheelchair users, offer an untraditional aesthetic to the audience. Summerville observed that the traditional and time-tested physical cue of crossing her legs did not have the desired effect because her wheelchair altered the audience's perception of the gesture. She and her partner explored alternatives that were more effective for her body and her assistive devices. She harnessed the expressive power of not only her body, but by extension, her wheelchair. This is also an excellent example of "actualism" – Telory Davies' term for ways in which the disabled body changes the aesthetics of stage choreography – in practice, or what Carrie Sandahl called the "doors of perception" swinging open and challenging the audience's expectations. This is knowledge that Summerville can use in future performances. If the wheelchair is an extension of the body, an assemblage, then the actor must consider it part of the overall "instrument," and learn ways to incorporate it into the body aesthetic. This is a challenging process but an exciting prospect, akin to the birth of a new and mostly unexplored performance tradition. In her memoir, Terry Galloway describes a similar experience, once she and her collaborators decided to embrace the difference inherent in disability and explore the new aesthetic: "It's interesting, because, after we began asking ourselves that question, after we started playing with our differences and became captivated by them, we started making them part of the script, part of the performance itself" (210). Jill Summerville may at times lament that disability inhibits an actor's complete

transformation, but she has also identified ways in which difference can be captivating. The underlying acting pedagogy may remain unchanged, but the execution requires examining the aesthetics of a new “instrument,” in which the person and the disability are inescapably united.

### **3.10 Other Elements of Actor Training: Voice and Movement**

“In order to express a most delicate and largely subconscious life it is necessary to have control of an unusually responsive, excellently prepared vocal and physical apparatus.”  
 From *An Actor Prepares*, Constantine Stanislavski, 15

Contemporary actor training conceives of the actor as instrument in body and voice, “which can be adjusted, refined, improved, and tuned” (Stucky and Tomell-Presto 103). The Yale School of Drama, considered by many to be among the most prestigious actor training programs, looks for the following in their candidates: “A physical and vocal instrument capable of development and transformation” (Yale). Voice and movement make up a major component of actor training programs at the university level. There are many different approaches, but most adhere to the recurring metaphor of “body as instrument.” Students are expected to learn the habits of their own bodies and to correct perceived faults such as body alignment and tension. Athleticism, flexibility, and stamina are improved as part of voice and movement training. Individual pedagogies of voice and movement take different stances on the major question of the mind-body divide. While some acting pedagogies train actors to trigger emotions by recalling significant events in their lives, many voice and movement instructors teach ways that truthful emotion can emerge from the body or the breath. Voice and movement training usually begins as a

general process of guided self-discovery. It continues with an exploration of qualities of movement and voice that can help actors portray unique and expressive characters. Students are trained in healthy strategies for vocal production, preparing for the repetitive vigor of nightly theatre performances. In the latter stages of training, instructors usually move on to the development of special skills, such as dialects and stage combat (Stucky and Tomell-Presto 104).

### **3.11 Movement Training**

“For any actor to cross the stage with presence and energy is a tremendous task.”

Anne Bogart, qtd. in Margolis

There are many different approaches to movement training for actors. Usually, it begins as a proprioceptive practice as actors are guided along a process of self-discovery. Actors must understand their own unique bodies, physical characteristics, and habits. There might be a corrective element in this phase, as instructors teach students that the unhealthy habits they have developed throughout their lives impede their true artistic potential. Some instructors are concerned with the spine during this phase of training, and will introduce the concept of the “neutrality” at this point. A healthy, vertical, or “neutral” alignment of the vertebrae may allow the actor to be more responsive and athletic. Once they have mastered this neutral posture and corrected their own habits, actors are then free to explore the physical traits or characteristics of other characters on stage. Students are also taught to examine the origins of their impulses for movement. They are encouraged to promote and develop movement that emanates from the center, or “core,” of



their bodies, as opposed to peripheral gestures. The justification behind this pedagogy is that strong, powerful impulses begin at the center of the body and emanate outward; small gestures that are disconnected from “core” impulses lack force and truthfulness.

Movement training may also explore the connection between mind and body and teach ways that a character can be understood through physical characterizations. Other approaches offer ways that the physical can affect the psychological. Body movement or patterns may actually trigger emotion. For example, if a person smiles and laughs, they are very likely to feel happy as a result. Likewise, if a person creates the bodily response to fear, he or she may actually tap into the real feeling. This is related to the general approach of Alba Emoting and The Luger Method. More specific skills are introduced in the latter part of training, such as stage combat, clowning, and period styles.

Alexander Technique is an example of a movement pedagogy that appears in actor training programs at many universities. Actor Frederick Matthias Alexander began to develop this work in response to his own personal physical problems. He was a public speaker who lost his voice and believed that the cause of this affliction was rooted in habits that departed from the body’s natural state. By realigning and relaxing his body and alleviating muscle tension, Alexander found that his vocal instrument could perform more consistently. The Alexander Technique, as with most voice, movement, and acting pedagogies, concerns itself with the mind-body connection. The way that these parts work together can affect the overall health, well-being, and effectiveness of the actor. Students learn about their habits and become aware of their bodies in space.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Alexander Technique, see *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique* by Michael J. Gelb, and *How to Learn the Alexander Technique: A* by Barbara Conable.

Many instructors teach variations of the Alexander Technique, a process that continues to evolve and innovate, as represented by the different training and certification programs available to teachers. Carrie Sandahl, responding to a very traditional interpretation of the Alexander Technique, calls it and similar pedagogies “body efficiency approaches” (260). Alexander’s term, “the divine neutral,” which was noted in Sandahl’s essay, could be considered problematic for actors with disabilities, since ideas about what is “correct” or “healthy” can frequently exclude people with nontraditional bodies. Certainly, any instructor that aggressively pursues a “divine neutral” may encounter problems, but instructors that are willing to listen and be flexible can make the Alexander Technique a valuable approach for anybody. The essence of the approach can be useful for anyone. The fundamental part of studying this technique is in the unique student-teacher relationship. Flexibility is at the heart of its practice.

Victoria Lewis interviewed disabled actor Anne Stocking and revealed a positive way of using the Alexander Technique (qtd. in Margolis 184). Stocking characterizes Alexander as a “nonjudgmental, infinitely various system, despite Alexander’s privileging of a ‘divine neutral.’” The impaired body can still benefit from the principles of the system. An actor with severe cerebral palsy, Stocking says, “can do ‘forward and up,’ ‘lengthen and widen’ whether his muscles are contracting or not.” Stocking insists that Alexander Technique can help anybody “get to a place where you can go with your instincts.”

I had a brief conversation with James Brody, Certified Teacher of the Alexander Technique and Associate Professor in the College of Music at the University of Colorado Boulder. He is also Director of the College of Music’s Wellness Initiative. With limited

experience training students with disabilities, he shared his perspective on adapting the Alexander curriculum.

I recall an experience teaching a blind person. Terminology was occasionally an issue but we always found ways and means towards comprehension. This individual very much appreciated physical contact with my life-size skeletons. She also found it helpful to put her hands on me so that she could get a sense of what my movement was. I have not worked with otherwise disabled individuals.

Terminology may be a challenge, but it is one that can be met with effective communication. Brody learned to replace visual cues with aural and tactile ones, which made the training accessible to a visually impaired student. The principles of the “touch tour” apparently can apply to physical exercises as well – visual cues can be replaced by tactile ones when an instructor takes the time to do so.

Anne Stocking, the actor whom Victoria Lewis interviewed, experienced a number of different movement pedagogies (qtd. in Margolis 184). She passed a class in unarmed combat with some difficulty and opted against further stage combat training. She finished a period dance class with the help of her dance partners. She had a very positive teacher in a Capoeira class. Capoeira is a Brazilian form that emerged from a complex game that incorporates dance, music, and martial arts. Her experience may have had more to do with the approach of her teacher, Amen, than the actual movement pedagogy itself. Stocking said,

There’s a spiritual component to Capoeira that is about acceptance and love.

Amen is the model in my experience for how to accommodate a disabled

student. He let the class go on and spent just two minutes stretching me while he's watching the others. He is really paying attention to everyone – I'm not a big deal to him and it only takes two minutes – he's not screwing anybody else out of their education – he is just all about acceptance. (qtd. in Margolis 184)

Sandahl suggests that Laban may be the preferred movement pedagogy for people with disabilities, “since it describes in nonjudgmental terms the ways in which bodies actually move” (qtd. in Margolis 184). Rudolf Laban's movement analysis comes from European modern dance. Actors and movement teachers have used his style of notation to introduce people to the full range of their expressivity. Performance artist, disability culture activist, and educator Petra Kuppers believes that Laban is the methodology of choice for working within mental health communities, because, “It does not matter if one extends an arm, finger, or chin in order to place oneself into a spatial form and experience. My creative work explores these potentials by taking the movement to its smallest, invisible, concentrated extreme” (qtd. in Margolis 184).<sup>3</sup>

Terry Galloway describes her first experience teaching acting to people with disabilities, “If you can't get out of your chair or lift your hand higher than your waist, you can't do the physical games I'd been taught to think essential to theater practice” (150). Not knowing how to proceed, she decided “to skip that part. I wasn't that good at those body warm-ups myself. This group would never miss them, and what did it matter anyway?” (150). But is removing certain difficult aspects of the curriculum the best way to

---

<sup>3</sup> For more information about *Laban*, read *Laban for All* by Jean Newlove, *Laban for Actors and Dancers* by Jean Newlove, *Body Movement – Coping with the Environment* by Irmgard Bartenieff with Dori Lewis, and visit <http://www.limsonline.org>

proceed? What are the expected learning outcomes of these physical games and how can they be achieved in other ways? Moreover, is there any aspect of movement training that could be enhanced by embracing the difference inherent in bodies with disabilities?

In “Considering Disability,” Carrie Sandahl discusses numerous advantages people with disabilities may have in this area of training, “That language is spatial as well as aural/oral and textual is no news to many disabled people” (26). She points out that people who use American Sign Language (ASL) “require the continuous active engagement of the entire body to communicate,” which “goes far beyond the ‘body language’ used in realistic acting” (26). There is a “kinesthesia in language” that can be learned from deaf and hard-of-hearing performers, and Sandahl suggests that this embodied movement training could replace or supplement the traditional martial arts, yoga, or mask work to train actors, “unleash[ing] the expressive potential of all our actors’ bodies” (26). She uses deaf storytellers as examples of people capable of using their bodies “like film cameras,” incredibly nuanced, talented physical performers (26). Impaired bodies may also provide “new movement vocabularies and portray views of the world not normally seen in theatre” (Sandahl 27). Sandahl also writes how wheelchairs, canes, and other assistive devices are extensions of the body, and therefore may be used to challenge existing ideas about choreography, use of space, weight, symmetry, time and balance (28).

Victoria Lewis writes, “People with mobility impairments often experience life at a different pace and with a different choreography” (qtd. in Margolis 191). She herself found Decroux’s mime techniques to be liberating, “Here was a technique that allowed me to create a dance from my waist up and to expand and refine my gestural vocabulary. When I began teaching other disabled people, the Decroux technique worked well with a variety of

disabilities” (qtd. in Margolis 191). She then suggests that the instructor “consider offering multiple methodologies – Alexander, Laban (Bartenieff), Mime, Pilates, Feldenkrais – to fulfill movement requirements” (qtd. in Margolis 191). This reflects the teaching philosophy of Universal Design for Learning; multiple means of representation will open up the experience to the greatest variety of students.

While many movement pedagogies are concerned with “correcting” the body, or doing something “the right way,” Victoria Lewis poses the question that will be most useful in adapting acting, movement, and voice classroom activities, “What is the essence of the exercise?” (qtd. in Margolis 184). The Brazilian Capoeira dance and martial art can be incredibly difficult to do in “the right way,” but if the essence is “acceptance and love,” the system should be inclusive (qtd. in Margolis 182). Can the “divine neutral” of Alexander Technique be replaced with “forward and up, lengthen and widen?” (qtd. in Margolis 184). Can verbal descriptions of exercises supplement visual ones? Are “codified requirements” flexible? Lewis quotes Anne Bogart, who has taught people with disabilities in her Viewpoint/Suzuki training residencies: “I do not look for an idealized body, rather I look for an actor who is willing to put who they are to the test on a daily basis. Watching a person work in the light of tremendous obstacles and seeing them turn their body and spirit into beautiful expression is powerful. For any actor to cross the stage with presence and energy is a tremendous task” (qtd. in Margolis 186).

Stocking’s mobility impairment made an exercise that demanded running, jumping, and being lifted by fellow actors impossible. Stocking asks, “What was the essence of the exercise?” (qtd. in Margolis 184). “That you can trust that someone is going to catch you and that you can fly, baby, when you’re up on stage...” The running and jumping was not an

integral part of the lesson, so there were other ways to accomplish the lesson; she could still learn to “fly” and have confidence that her ensemble would be there.

Carrie Sandahl’s essay “The Tyranny of the Neutral” identifies how many acting, movement, and voice teachers embrace an approach that trains the actor to be kind of a blank slate, a neutral canvas upon which a character can be painted. This “neutral” actor becomes a vessel, which a character can then inhabit. Once the body is in perfect alignment, an actor can then deviate from that “divine neutral” in order to create a specific character’s body. It is a very common approach that appears in many acting classes. Sandahl explores the negative impact of this actor training approach; actors with disabilities often have bodies that defy the image of “neutrality,” and the incorporation of actors with disabilities into actor training programs requires a vigorous questioning of this method. Sandahl warns against this metaphor. Ideas such as the “vertical” and the “neutral” permeate movement training and “can invalidate the impaired body” (Margolis 184).

Sandahl is not alone in her assertions that the concept of neutrality in actor training is dated and problematic. Louis Colaianni is a prominent voice and speech teacher who has spent years developing alternative inclusive pedagogies. In an interview, he said, “I think the ‘neutral’ concept is harmful to artistic development for all actors and speakers.” Bella Merlin, an acting teacher who was introduced earlier, voices an alternative interpretation of neutrality.

For me, neutral is simply a kind of “via negativa,” a return to some kind of blank canvas at the start of each rehearsal, or some kind of “clean kitchen top” or “laboratory desk,” just to avoid bringing in the daily clutter of our

other lives. The only “right/wrong” I have is probably based on whether actors are really connecting with each other or not, are they dynamically listening, are they open to each other and the audience, have they done the necessary preparation? My basic actor training is very fluid and non-dogmatic.

It seems as though this philosophy can be applied to any movement pedagogy. People with exceptional bodies may simply have a different “place of neutrality.” A movement instructor who presents a diagram that demonstrates perfect alignment suggests that anyone who cannot meet that standard can never approach the “neutrality” needed to be successful. But instructors can adapt the pedagogy by acknowledging the uniqueness of individual bodies.

Sandahl argues that, “It is time to take a critical look at the metaphors foundational to our actor training processes” (265). Indeed, she has taken that step, and in so doing has simultaneously salvaged the concept of neutrality. By acknowledging the flaws in the metaphors we use to train actors, we can develop new ones or conscientiously revise the old ones.

### **3.12 Michael Lugering**

Michael Lugering is currently a faculty member of the Department of Theatre at the University of Nevada Las Vegas, where he works as a director, actor, and a master teacher of voice, movement, and acting. His book *The Expressive Actor: An Integrated Method of Voice, Movement, and Actor Training* embodies the holistic approach to actor training that I



pursue in my own work. Voice, movement, and acting are usually separated into separate courses when part of a university training program; in the well-trained actor, however, these skills work in harmony towards the same end. Traditional actor training considers the body an instrument to be “played” by the mind, and therefore voice and movement training is geared towards enhancing the sensitivity and expressivity of the instrument.

The Luger Method trains the “total actor,” privileging neither the mind nor the body (“Principles of Expression”). The Luger Method avoids asking actors to trigger emotions by mining past experiences, an approach central to American “Method” Acting. Rather, Luger explores the connection between the mind and the body, finding ways that physical action can activate genuine emotional responses, which in turn connects to the psychology of portrayed characters. Certified, Associate, and Master Teachers of The Luger Method work as faculty at professional actor training programs across the country. “I teach universal patterns of human expression that transcend the traditional acting curriculum,” Luger replied when asked to explain his work to the uninitiated. “Initially (in beginning courses), my work seeks to build each individual's human potential for clear and effective physical and vocal communication first, and addresses the discipline of acting secondarily.”

I asked Luger about the extent of his experience training actors with disabilities. “I have very little,” he said. “I have been teaching in the university environment for almost twenty-five years. I have taught several students who have needed wheelchair accommodations with varying mobility related disabilities. I have also had one blind student. I have had numerous students with specific learning disabilities. Here in Las Vegas, we have a large senior adult population, many of whom have mobility and auditory

age-related conditions that require attention and accommodation in the classroom.” When asked why, during twenty-five years of teaching, he has had so few students with disabilities, Luger targeted the lack of representation in media as a likely culprit.

I welcome all students to my classes, but suspect that the nature of actor training may be intimidating to students with disabilities. Perhaps, they turn on the television and don't adequately see themselves represented and assume there is no place for them in acting classes. However, I think the benefits of my work can serve, perhaps with specific modification, every member of our general student population.

Luger considers disability to be one of the many individual characteristics that students bring to a class activity. It may make certain tasks more difficult for the student to navigate while pursuing the same goal as everybody else.

Every student in my class brings to the training some type of personal/individualized issue that needs special attention and accommodation at some point in the training process. Whether it is a sinus infection during allergy season, a high school football knee injury that flares up, a genetic propensity to pronate or supinate, chronically tight hamstrings, etc. In my classroom, I don't see how these individual circumstances are necessarily all that different than other disabilities. However, these students are certainly not considered disabled. Perhaps, we are all collectively abled and disabled in our own unique way and responsible, inclusive methods of training should recognize this important condition. This is in no way meant to diminish the significant hardship many disabled persons experience daily,

but to draw parallels that may make the training process more accessible to everyone.

This doesn't mean that disability should be ignored. "Each disability requires specific and individualized directives," Lugerling said. "The only universal tip I have is: 'Do no harm.' This directive applies to everyone in the class equally." He makes an excellent point: our bodies are different from day to day and very often surprise us with unique challenges. For various reasons, performers frequently injure their voices, and must adapt to avoid doing further harm. An instructor of voice must therefore always be prepared to adjust curriculum for the changing needs of the students, whether they enrolled with documented disabilities or are dealing with temporary physical challenges.

"One size does not fit all," remarked Lugerling, when asked about the many different approaches to training. As the creator of The Lugerling Method, one might expect him to extol the virtues of his own system, as opposed to the widely practiced work of Stanislavski, Chekhov, Meisner, Fitzmaurice, or Linklater, for example. But he does not, focusing instead on the potential for each student to benefit from the myriad techniques available.

What is a preferable method of training for some may not be a preferable method of training for others. I think it would be wrong to suggest to any disabled student that this method of training is for them or somehow more user friendly. Disabled students should have the opportunity for training in any method they choose for any reason that they choose. Isn't that fair? Additionally, different disabilities require different accommodations. How could they all be addressed equitably or adequately in a single book or

in a singular approach?

When pressed further, Lugerling made a comment about his own method that could make any approach to acting accessible to any actor, regardless of disability, “My book does not address how specific accommodation might be made for disabled students, but the introduction encourages every student to move at their own pace and make personal adjustments as necessary.”

When asked about strategies for adapting the exercises described in his book, Lugerling said,

I feel any exercises can probably be adapted with a little ingenuity and creativity. I'm constantly adapting exercises. Any of the standing exercises in my work can be performed while seated. Adaptation provides a type of variability of practice that useful for all students. Everyone should try the exercises in a seated position.

This brings up an excellent point. Adapting an exercise for one student may bring a different perspective on that exercise to the entire class. Instructors should consider having the entire class try the adapted version rather than just the disabled students. An exercise that is meant to be done while standing can be tried while seated, or while lying prostrate. In retrospect, the touch-tours I required of my visually impaired student would have been a very valuable experience for everyone in the class. Since I had already arranged the tour for one student, it would have been very easy to extend the requirement to everybody.

Finally, I asked Lugerling to comment on the concept of “neutrality” in performer training, and how it may affect students with disabilities.

I am no fan of "neutral." For me this is a dated term that needs to go away along with "relaxation," "posture," and other prescriptive methods of training that serve to beat the body into some arbitrary "standard of correctness." I most often find in these approaches that the body is secretly viewed as some type of problem. If it could just be "neutralized" in some way, as if this is anything anyone should wish for, then the mind would be free to express itself. In short, let's get that bad body out of the way. The body does not interfere with human expression, but is a co-participant in the integrated process of being human. These methods of training, despite any protestation to the contrary, reflect a kind of "Cartesian Duality" that is not very forward looking.

Lugering points out that many movement pedagogies consider the body a problem to be solved. The body is not an obstacle to expression, but a collaborator. There is no ideal, no one perfect instrument; humanity has the variety of an orchestra. Lugering embraces that variety and looks towards a theatre that capitalizes on unique expressivity. Later in this chapter, I discuss the ideas of master teacher Rocco Dal Vera who provides a different perspective on neutrality.

### **3.13 Voice Training**

Voice training is an integral part of an actor's growth and an area where the student's unique physiology can challenge an instructor's traditional approach. Joyce Aldridge's study shows that voice and speech comprise a major component of actor

training, appearing in the most frequently assigned texts and listed by teachers as a fundamental part of their curriculum (190).

Voice and speech training, like actor training, are traditions with only a few dominant ideologies. Most of these adhere to the extended metaphor of the instrument. Kristin Linklater, founder of the dominant approach to voice training at universities, writes, “The actor’s instrument is composed of the body, the voice, the imagination, the emotions, the brain, and the life experience of the human being that an actor is” (201-202). Her book, *Freeing the Natural Voice*, is one of the most frequently assigned texts in voice classes. The mind-body connection is integral to her work, and actors are encouraged to use imagination as a way to play the instrument of the body. Her imaginative approach to voice training is central to the way she adapts her work for students with disabilities. She told me that the only essential element in order to successfully adapt voice exercises for students with disabilities is a creative teacher.

I spoke with David Smukler, Canada’s senior master voice teacher and a major proponent of Linklater Voicework. He is most directly responsible for the Voice Teacher Diploma offered as part of the M.F.A. Acting Program at York University and he is the founder and director of Canada’s National Voice Intensive. He has taught, performed, and vocal coached at prominent universities and theatres all around the world.

I have worked with paraplegics and quadriplegics. I just do what I need to do and encourage them to employ their image and sensory systems. Through visualization we have been fairly successful in getting them to experience their voices and to enrich their experience without efforts or increased muscular demands. Those who were confined to wheel chairs just did what

everyone else in the session did, except they were working more with imaginal experience than physical experience and achieved what was useful to them.

*Freeing the Natural Voice* teaches actors to use their imaginations first, and the body will follow. Although specific exercises may require adaptation, Smukler points out that the individual's imaginative process can compensate for any demands created by a disability.

Another major school of voice training was created by Catherine Fitzmaurice and takes a similar approach by exploring the relationship between mind, body, and voice. Kristin Linklater and Catherine Fitzmaurice both teach ways that voice and breath can become more responsive to the actor's thought and emotions. Their practices range from studies of physiology to activities based on and similar to yoga, and are highly dependent on the use of the actor's imagination. Part of voice training includes healthy vocal production, ways in which an actor can fill a large house night after night without harming his or her voice, as well as a training process that helps the actor to develop a resonant, rich, articulate sound.

Fitzmaurice's work is generally broken down in two parts: deconstructing and restructuring. First, a student must develop a relaxed, responsive, and unimpeded body through a series of gentle or rigorous exercises. One such exercise is tremoring, when muscles gently shake or spasm, which is the body's physiological healing response to certain extended stretches. This releases deep tensions that may allow the body to become more fully relaxed and aligned. Then the student practices effective and healthy vocal production along what Fitzmaurice calls the "focus line," an imaginary pathway from the

transversus abdominis muscles out through the facial resonators. The aim of this work is improved vocal quality and a more responsive, truthful, unimpeded instrument.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas voice training is concerned with resonance and emotional connection, speech training deals with articulation, phonetics, and dialects. Speech is still largely in the tradition of Edith Skinner, whose book *Speak With Distinction* rests on the belief that there is a proper way to create every sound. The Skinner process uses the International Phonetic Alphabet to teach students the “proper” placement of consonants and vowels. People that live in different regions tend to shape vowels and consonants in slightly different ways. Furthermore, due to the way people have been taught or as a result of differences in their physiology, some people have learned alternate strategies for creating basic sounds. “Proper” placement in the Skinner method aims to eliminate variations in the way sounds are created and for students to learn a dialect called “Standard American” – a “neutral” sound upon which actors can build their unique characters. As we have seen, the ideology of neutrality can exclude people whose bodies depart from the norm. Louis Colaianne has developed a more inclusive alternative to the Skinner approach. His “phonetic pillow” process teaches the International Phonetic Alphabet using a series of physical, active exercises. For him, speech is integrally connected to voice, body, and emotion. Articulation becomes a full-body process and the sounds created are valued if they are truthful, rather than “correct.”<sup>5</sup>

The mechanisms of voice and speech production are also codified and leave little room for exceptional bodies. For example, Carrie Sandahl was told by her voice teacher

---

<sup>4</sup> For more information about Fitzmaurice Voicework, read *Constructing the Holistic Actor: Fitzmaurice Voicework* by Michael Morgan.

<sup>5</sup> For another innovative and inclusive approach to speech, read *Speaking with Skill: A Skills Based Approach to Speech Training* by Dudley Knight.



that the sacrum was the “seat of her soul,” an unfortunate metaphor since Sandahl was born without a sacrum (Margolis 187). Terry Galloway, a performance artists and teacher with a hearing impairment, explains her own experience, “After my deafness took hold, my speech began changing, every vowel out of my mouth taking on a soft slur that people took for southern. ... I could feel all the light and color draining from my voice, feel it becoming a monotonous drone. I’d forget to give the end of a sentence a vocal twist to make it mean this one thing, or drop in the middle to make it mean another” (74). Sandahl and Galloway both had significant obstacles to voice and speech training, although their challenges were distinct. Galloway writes,

I’m deaf. The very word suggests it’s harder for me to do everything that spoken theater requires—get my cues, enunciate tongue-twisting phrases, project enough to reach the back of an auditorium, give sentences nuanced (or even any) inflection. And it is true that those things, which come so naturally to the hearing body, aren’t natural to me at all, especially clear speech, which requires the same passionate hyperattention as lip reading. (Galloway 107)

When a “right versus wrong” mentality infuses voice or speech pedagogy, people with disabilities are at a distinct disadvantage and may often be placed squarely on the “wrong” side of things. It is also worth mentioning that a person’s speech often reflects their ethnicity and socioeconomic background. Imposing judgment upon that dialect, saying that it is inherently “wrong,” can be a subtle but powerful form of discrimination. In pursuit of an open-minded, inclusive pedagogy of voice and speech, I spoke with Rocco Dal Vera, one of the nation’s most distinguished voice teachers.

### 3.14 Rocco Dal Vera

“I usually take refuge in the idea that theatre and acting is about truth, not beauty.”

Rocco Dal Vera

Rocco Dal Vera's book, *Voice: Onstage and Off*, co-authored with Robert Barton, has proven to be an excellent resource in my teaching. As I sought the perspective of an experienced master teacher of voice, Dal Vera seemed like an ideal person to contact. He is the founding editor of the *Voice and Speech Review* for the Voice and Speech Trainers Association (VASTA) and has published numerous books and articles on the subjects of voice, speech, coaching, and musical theatre. Dal Vera is a Professor of Drama and the Chair of Dramatic Performance at the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music where he has been a faculty member since 1998 (“CCM Drama Faculty”). He also teaches at Xavier University and is the former head of the B.F.A. Professional Actor and Musical Theatre Training Programs at Wright State University as well as the former chair of the Voice and Speech Department at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts. His work as a voice and speech coach has taken him to major theatres across the country and he coaches as many as fifty productions a year (“CCM Drama Faculty”). Also a prolific performer, his voiceovers can be heard in innumerable commercials, films, and television shows. He holds an M.F.A. in voice coaching and training for the theatre from the National Theatre Conservatory at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

When approached with questions about training actors with disability in higher education, Dal Vera began by identifying one of the major limitations of this study, “That

'disability' can cover such a huge range of personal experiences, so it's hard to answer the question simply and still be comprehensive and fair." To ask an instructor for wisdom gleaned from limited experiences is problematic, but few people have more experience teaching voice and speech than Dal Vera. I have already acknowledged that it will be difficult, if not impossible, to generate a list of "best practices," since the needs and experiences of each student are unique. To my knowledge, no professor has an exhaustive expertise training actors with disabilities in higher education, so the general conclusions of an experienced master teacher like Dal Vera can still be highly useful. "I don't often get to teach actors with noticeable physical handicaps," Dal Vera explained. "Disabilities can include a wide variety of learning and developmental issues, though, and I have a good bit of experience with that."

I am grateful that he continued to share his point-of-view. The addition of his voice to this project provides a concrete alternative to the problem of "neutrality" as identified by Carrie Sandahl. He offers a more inclusive way of looking at "neutrality" that adapts the idea without abandoning it.

I agree that one has to be very careful about how one uses terms like "neutral" or really any prescribed benchmark that sets up one thing as better and something else as worse. This is a big issue in many dimensions, for example the pronunciation of a word as simple as "ask." Who sets up what is the right way to say something? What is a "good" sound? These are bigger questions than they might first appear to be. I usually take refuge in the idea that theatre and acting is about truth, not beauty. A sound is "good" if it is truthful, and if it doesn't hurt the actor to make it. Bad things are

those that injure the physical instrument. Better things are those that make the person more expressive. Seen that way, we can sidestep notions of what is ideal and explore all the ways humans communicate. The best actors are those who can embody the truth of the character. If "neutral" means releasing your habits so you can experience and express something new, then I'm all for it. If neutral means some notion of an aesthetic ideal, then that can come with complicated judgments that can create as many problems as it solves. I try to teach mastery of craft, and "tools, not rules."

Dal Vera recommends abandoning the pursuit of the "ideal" in favor of what is truthful, expressive, and healthy. Seeking beauty makes an artistic endeavor invariably subjective, informed by the aesthetics of the few. Presenting truth, however, is much more in line with the goals of this research. Disability, when presented through the lens of the moral or medical models, may have some kind of poetic beauty but it lacks truth. Portraying the truth of disability, by actors with lived experience, can be more powerful.

When I studied speech as part of my graduate actor training, I learned using the classic approach laid out in Skinner's *Speak With Distinction*. This is a useful text that has served generations of actors, but my objection is that the "Standard American" dialect was presented as "correct" and "ideal." Rather than teaching phonetics as a way for actors to more effectively make character choices, this work was presented as a way to "correct" the regionalisms of the individual actor. Skinner celebrates this uniformity and yet, to my ear, her Standard American dialect sounds contrived, pretentious, upper class, and oftentimes British. It is useful as a tool, but not as a rule. This is why I've turned to the work of Louis Colaianni and, when I teach phonetics and dialects, I present sounds as choices. Like Dal

Vera, I believe the ideal sound is a truthful sound. Well-trained actors should be able to adjust their pronunciation of the word “ask” depending on the character they are playing. To suggest that there is one “correct” or “neutral” pronunciation is to devalue every other way of speaking. Insisting that an actor change his or her speech patterns in daily life is an inappropriate intrusion by an instructor.

Dal Vera’s book *Voice: Onstage and Off* contains innumerable exercises that help acting students develop their voice and speech. Many of these exercises are physical and would need some small adaptations in a class with students with disabilities. I asked Dal Vera about his experience adapting these exercises and whether he could offer guidance to teachers or students.

I do think that the exercises in my book can be modified to work with almost anyone. For me, the perspective I take is that everyone comes to us as they are, with all their interesting personal strengths and challenges. Those are unique to the person. My job is to facilitate the next phase of their development, to have a sense of the possible that is greater than the student's, and to boost both their abilities, and also their idea of how magnificent they can be.

Dal Vera is a proponent of a training method called Alba Emoting, and is one of the few certified teachers in this method. Alba Emoting offers a unique approach to a common problem: how can actors trigger and experience emotions on demand and in a healthy way? Affective Memory is one of the most widespread answers to that problem, emerging from the early work of Constantine Stanislavski and disseminated as part of the American “Method” approach to acting. Affective Memory asks actors to mine their personal

experiences and trigger emotions using past events. Many actors and teachers, myself included, seek alternative methods that are healthier and more reliable. Alba Emoting is a psychophysical approach developed by the extensive research of neuroscientist Dr. Susana Bloch in partnership with professional and student actors in Europe and South America (“About Alba Effector Pattern Training”).

This technique examines the physiological manifestation of emotions in the body. Breath, muscle control, expression, tensions – these things work in conjunction to allow actors to simultaneously experience and portray emotion, without having to relive past experiences. I asked Dal Vera about this specific approach and whether actors with disabilities found it particularly challenging. My concern is that this work requires the instructor to understand a student’s physiology, and therefore offers greater limitations to students with disabilities.

In the specific area of emotional effector pattern training... I have found that we can teach the work to nearly anyone. However, there are genuine challenges a person might experience that can make that and any work difficult. If the person has severe mental or emotional problems, the work can be wonderful, but it can take them a lot longer because they might not possess a high level of personal control. Still, if we take each person as a person, and train them individually, they can make progress. As you probably know, in extreme cases people with those challenges can need much longer time, more individual coaching and more overall attention than is afforded in many classes.

As a professor with years of experience leading professional actor training

programs, Dal Vera offered additional insights. He quite astutely pointed out that in order to achieve the goal of more effectively training greater numbers of college students with disabilities, more than lesson plans must be addressed. The efforts of a single conscientious instructor are laudable, but the concerted efforts of an entire department are needed. In Chapter Two, I identified many of the reasons college students with disabilities choose not to pursue actor training. Although this research primarily addresses accessibility in classroom activities, other changes will be necessary in order to encourage students with disabilities to undertake this challenging career.

If you decide to take this on as a mission, you'll want to make sure your department is educated and open to the idea. Our lives are much simpler if we don't have to accommodate for difference and asking people to do that can bring up a lot of fear, inadequacies, and resistance in ways that may be overt, but are mostly subtly resistant. A deliberate recruiting plan would also help a lot. If you are going to be exceptional in this area ... then you'll need to let the world know ... and make deliberate plans to reach out and attract students. You'll want to ask for institutional support in a big way (money for recruiting trips and advertising and support). You might start by introducing yourself to the Office of Disability Services on campus.

This is invaluable advice, particularly since I am about to join the faculty of a professional actor training program. Here, Dal Vera's experience as an artist, actor trainer, and administrator combine to produce practical advice that could affect real change.

Finally, I asked Dal Vera what he considered to be the most important and valuable guiding principle when teaching actors with disabilities. As did most of the experienced

teachers I interviewed, he immediately returned to the issue of effective communication. In order for the instructor to be effective, the student must first be the teacher, and the instructor must be willing to listen and to learn.

As a general tip... In working with adults (college students included), I would make sure I had carefully interviewed someone who needed accommodation to make certain I understood how to be the best teacher/collaborator for them. I think that usually, by the time they have reached college, they have a pretty clear sense of what sort of support they need. They are the experts. They will train me on how to create the best classroom atmosphere and the best teaching style. I think the trick is to genuinely listen and solicit feedback so whatever comes up is dealt with optimally.

### **3.15 Jason Dorwart**

Jason Dorwart is currently a Ph.D. student at the University of California San Diego where he researches performances by and about disabled actors. I met him when he was earning his Masters degree at the University of Colorado Boulder. He also holds a B.F.A. from Creighton University and a J.D. from the University of Denver. Jason has extensive experience performing in many different genres and his credits include performances at the Nebraska Shakespeare Festival, and Denver's PHAMALY Theatre Company, where he was a regular acting company member. Dorwart sustained a spinal cord injury in August of 2000 and is now quadriplegic. He uses a power wheelchair, a service dog, and frequently makes use of other assistive technology such as recording and transcription devices.



### 3.15.1 Reacclimatizing: Voice and Breath

Dorwart's injury occurred while he was enrolled as an acting student in the B.F.A program at Creighton University. He was out of school for only one semester following his injury. This gives him an extraordinarily unique perspective on actor training for college students with disabilities because he received training first as an able-bodied student and then as a disabled one. As one might expect, it was much more challenging once he returned from his convalescence, and he found himself questioning whether or not he could continue along that career path.

When I got back to university they kind of pushed me back on stage. I wasn't sure if I even wanted to do this anymore because it was different but my first semester back in college I was cast in a really small role in a play and I assistant directed it. It was the department trying to make sure I stayed involved. They were great about that. I think I had to say three words in that play. I spent all afternoon preparing because I barely had the energy to get three words out. I could barely project to the third row. Putting me back on stage was helpful to me psychologically and then the next semester I started taking voice lessons and that really helped build my strength and prepare me to get back on stage.

Throughout this research I've encountered performers with disabilities, all of whom are in some way unique. Dorwart's spinal injury affects his ability to breathe and project. His wheelchair also changes the way he breathes and projects, demanding different strategies. Traumatic Brain Injuries can affect breathing, as can congenital conditions. Lyndsay Marie Giral-di-Palmer, the performer with a hearing disability who I discussed

earlier, is married to a performer who was born with only one lung, creating unique challenges for breath support. Jenna Bainbridge, a performer with a mobility impairment, has to manage pain and fatigue, which can affect her ability to breathe and project.

Even a voice teacher with decades of experience would be hard-pressed to profess expertise in counseling the diverse needs of such a wide variety of students. Dorwart's voice instructor took what seems to be a wise approach: she guided and supported his own discoveries. Here, he explains the new challenges he faced and the ways in which his voice teacher supported his process. Essentially, he had to familiarize himself with the needs of a vastly different body than the one he had when he began training, and to discover new strategies for vocal production.

The difficulty there was phrasing and breath, learning how to take enough breaths to make it to the end of the phrase. Or learning if I had to take an extra breath in the middle of something. I was learning how to break things up so that it worked for my lung capacity. I have the same problem even now; if I'm rehearsing, the first couple of rehearsals can be hard because my breath support isn't great so I have to learn how I'm going to go through these words and put these phrases together and figure out where I'm going to take my breaths. It takes a couple of rehearsals to prepare and know everything well enough. It's just one extra thing that you have to consider when you're memorizing things and rehearsing.

I asked him what role his instructor played in the process, and what were the positive or negative aspects of her approach. I also asked about the results of this training;

did he develop as a performer? Did his instructor encourage him to grow and push past previous boundaries?

We were figuring it out together. She was willing to listen to me to determine what I needed. Plus, she was proficient enough that she knew ways to rearrange a song so that it would help me be able to deal with it. So both of us brought something to the table. I was open with her about what I could and couldn't accomplish and she was willing to adapt things as I needed. I felt, especially after being in that other show where I didn't have the strength to say two or three lines, just the fact that she was willing to work with me every week and listen to me helped build my confidence. I think that's a large part of it. For any actor a large part of it is the confidence to fail enough that you know what works. And so I was just failing in a new way. And she was great to work with by failing in a new way. I shouldn't say fail - stumble.

Dorwart's thoughts about confidence mirror Giraldi-Palmer's. This instructor provided wisdom, experience, patience, and gave Dorwart the freedom to explore, to fail, and subsequently to succeed. But she also gave him the confidence he needed to continue in this challenging work. A dismissive or discouraging instructor, at that point in his training, could have left him looking for another career. The mechanics of vocal production are difficult to learn for any student, but by encouraging Dorwart to take the lead and supporting his work, his instructor gave him something that can't be found in any textbook: confidence.

### 3.15.2 Reinventing Movement Pedagogy

“Walk like a cow!” “Walk like a duck!” “Walk like a tree!”

As he continued his B.F.A. training, Dorwart took a variety of different performance-related classes, including directing, Shakespeare acting, and improv. He identifies the particular challenges associated with using a power wheelchair. On the surface, many of the movement exercises that were integral parts of these classes demanded that he perform tasks that were physically impossible for him. Rather than simply removing himself from these classes or these exercises, or asking the teacher to explicitly reinvent the exercises on his behalf, Dorwart figured out ways to do that for himself.

Each time you’re figuring out something new, especially in a power chair. I think the improv class was the first acting class that I’d taken after I was in a chair. We’d do warmups where everyone walks around. You know, “Walk like a cow!” “Walk like a duck!” “Walk like a tree!” And I always felt like all I was doing was pushing on my joystick. What’s the point of this? You have to be willing to step back and think, “Okay, maybe while everyone else is walking around or moving around the room, maybe it’s ok for me to stay in one place and work within the confines of that one space and just use my body, you know, so I’m not worried about moving around the room.” I’m just trying to use my arms in place to figure out what I can and figure out about myself. Because when you’re sitting in a chair, especially a power chair,

rolling across the room uses one hand so it limits a lot of your action. Plus it doesn't change a lot.

It's remarkable how much acting, voice, and movement pedagogy is designed for the able-bodied student. I discovered this when I taught acting to a class that included a visually impaired student: I very frequently found myself leading an exercise that would be difficult or impossible for a visually impaired student. As I described earlier, there were many times when I tried to adapt the exercise to include every student. But Dorwart's experience raises an excellent point: I can never be as intimately familiar with a student's needs as the student him or herself. When an instructor asks the class to warmup by "walking like a cow," is it immediately and unforgivably insensitive to students that use wheelchairs? That may depend on individual feelings, but Dorwart clearly proves that conscientious acting students can adapt the exercises themselves, as long as they are given the freedom and time to do so.

You have to figure out two things. One: do I move my chair differently as one character as another? Two: do I just move differently while seated in one place? So in a dance class I took at U.C. San Diego, while everybody else is doing things on the floor, I try to figure things out, like maybe I lean against the wall, or maybe I lay over in my chair (since I can't get on the floor). So when everybody else is doing the same exercise, I'll try three different things to see what works for me. A lot of it is not doing the exercise that everybody else is, but each time they do the exercise I'm trying something new.

I had the opportunity to witness Dorwart's process first-hand during an Asian Performance class at CU-Boulder. A guest artist explained and demonstrated the slow, codified, and

meticulously precise dance-walk of Noh, a classical form of Japanese performance. She then told everyone to try the movement, to experience it in their bodies, breath, and minds. Without needing any kind of explanation or adaptation, Dorwart experimented with the quality of movement in his own way. First, he directed his power wheelchair to move excruciatingly slow. After that experience, he also tried staying in one place while using that quality of movement in his gestures, breath, thoughts, and expressions. “That was fun,” he said, recalling the exercise. “It changed the way I moved even though it was pretty much the exact same motion; it changed the way you’re feeling about the movement.” Dorwart adapted the exercise himself and accomplished the same learning objective as everyone else in the class, but in his own way.

### **3.15.3 Communication**

I asked Dorwart about how he typically approaches initial communication with the instructor of a performance course. As with most of the students with disabilities with whom I’ve spoken, he takes the first step. I find it interesting and hopeful, however, that his experiences have been so positive. He has found that instructors are not only willing to work with him, but eager to incorporate a new perspective on their work. Instructors who have taught the same course innumerable times may relish the opportunity to reinvent their course, to challenge their existing perceptions, and to harness the creative power of difference which emerges from disability.

I always approach them. Most professors are also pretty interested in talking about it with me. For instance, this dance class I recently started taking, I

approached him and asked, “Is this possible?” He said, “Hell yeah, I’d love to try that!” I think partially because they’re teaching the same class over and over and they get to try something new. And they’re interested in exploring movement. So when you have somebody with a different physicality in the class they have to figure out how. It’s one more problem to work through as a professor, one more thing to explore. So I do always approach them and I let them know, if I ever step back and observe, if you’re doing an exercise with other students and I step back and observe it’s not that I’m being stand-offish, or saying, “I can’t do this and I’m not going to participate.” I’m just processing. So I let them know what’s going on up front. And they’re usually accepting. They’ll throw out ideas.

Dorwart explains his point by describing what he perceived to be a less than positive way of teaching movement to a student with disabilities. He’s referring to Regan Linton, an accomplished actor with a mobility impairment whom I also interviewed for this project.

For instance I was just watching another friend of mine in a dance class, Regan Linton, in a ballroom dance class of hers. And she was learning a waltz, and the guy that was teaching her was aggressive and specific with his notes, “You need to hold your shoulders this way,” or “Your posture is off.” I could see her getting frustrated because she’s thinking, “my body doesn’t move this way. Right now I’m just figuring out how to stay balanced in my wheelchair.” So sometimes professors think they know what you need, or they’ve done it so many times so they’ll tell you “do this,” and you’ve got to be

careful not to say “do this and do it my way” because you’re both learning at the same time. It takes a minute to figure it out the first time.

Stucky and Tomell-Presto write, “the received traditions of actor training typically combine what is passed down from teacher to student with books written by important actors and directors” (106). This is particularly true of movement, voice, and dance. Instructors were once students that learned these skills in a particular way and they often feel compelled to pass on what they have learned by creating an identical experience for their students. In order to successfully teach the widest variety of students, including those with disabilities, instructors must be willing to question or even abandon the processes that they themselves learned. The classical lines of ballet dance may not be feasible for people with certain disabilities, but the quality of movement and the expressiveness of the body are still possible. Alexander Technique may offer physiological directives that were originally designed for traditional bodies, but the process can be incredibly useful when students are not forced to fit a predetermined mold.

Another challenge that can be addressed by effective communication between students and professors is related to assistive technology. Few instructors are familiar with the benefits and limitations of the wide variety of technology that students with disabilities employ.

In classes in general – I do have the chair that reclines and it’s kind of noisy, so sometimes I feel like I’m interrupting class, but sometimes I just have to recline because I’m getting sore and have to recline for a while. I try to make sure people know that this happens and that I’m sorry if it disturbs you. In an acting class, there’s a big difference between a power chair and a manual



chair. The power chair works great for a seminar, when you're just sitting there, but for an acting class or any kind of movement class it's much nicer to be in a manual chair, because you're engaging your arms, you're pushing the chair, so you're physically engaged. So in an acting program, technologically, that's the big difference I run across: which chair do I need to be in and what time? I also have a lot of professors that are okay with me recording. I use an iPhone and I'll set it in the table and record for a while, if I can't take notes fast enough.

Having had this conversation in advance, his instructor could perhaps advise him as to which chair might be better on any given day, based on the lesson plan.

James, the service dog that accompanied Kevin in my acting class, was less than two years old. That may help explain why, despite her extensive training, she occasionally gave in to her urges to chase a ball or lick faces during a floor exercise. At six years old, Jason's service dog is much more calm, and very acclimatized to the often absurd goings-on in an acting class and rehearsal. I asked Dorwart how his service dog handles being in classes and rehearsals.

He chills out. He curls under the table and chills out. In rehearsals or acting classes, I put him under a bench or under a table off to the side and he stays there. Everybody wants to play with him and it's so hard to say, "No, you can't do that." He will get excited if we do something loud and boisterous in an acting class; he pokes his head up like, "What the fuck's going on!" But he's slowly getting used to it and now he just looks up and thinks, "Ah, crazy people." So he's not a challenge.

### 3.15.4 Being Seen

Dorwart identified another concept that could be valuable for instructors and students. In performance courses, we take for granted that students are there because they want to be seen. And yet we've established earlier that the issue of personal identity becomes a very complex one when incorporating disability into a character. One of the main questions in this dissertation relates to the reasons students with disabilities may not choose to pursue actor training. Although they comprise 19 percent of the population, disabled people are still a minority and rarely seen in the media. Students with visible disabilities may be hesitant to display themselves when in their daily lives their bodies are "starable" as Rosemarie Garland-Thompson says. This incessant and curious gaze may be disconcerting, and students with disabilities must address that challenge in order to enroll and be successful in performance courses. When asked about his biggest challenge in an acting class or rehearsal, Dorwart said:

Being seen physically in front of other people. It's different in front of able-bodied people than in front of disabled people. I'll come back to this dance class I was just taking. When I'm rehearsing with PHAMALY, the company in Denver, and we're going through the rehearsal process the first few times, and we stumble and we do something physically awkward or non-normative, everyone around expects that. Everybody's supportive and we're all dealing with that. When I first started taking this dance class, the first day, one group went to one side of the room and one went to the other side and we were supposed to explore different motions. I realized I wasn't used to having all

these able-bodied people staring at me, exploring my body. I usually do that in a rehearsal process in front of other disabled people. So, just learning to accept my difference in front of able-bodied people can be challenging.

Lyndsay Marie Giraldi-Palmer explained the challenges associated with having an “invisible disability.” Instructors and fellow students can forget that she needs certain accommodations, and may need to be reminded on occasion. Dorwart’s perspective represents the opposite pole of the spectrum. As a person with a very visible disability, present on his body and marked by a large power chair and service dog, he is “stareable,” in public and in a classroom. I asked what advice he would give to a student with a disability who was struggling with being seen.

You just have to let go, which is really liberating for a person and for an actor.

You just have to focus on what you’re focusing on, instead of focusing on them. Which of course is difficult, that’s the whole problem. But, for a minute you have to tune everything else out. Part of acting is making sure that you are performing for an audience. The first few times you go through it, you just have to tune out the audience. Make it work for you. And then turn that outward to the audience.

### **3.15.5 Inclusion**

Dorwart has made it clear that, with adequate communication, flexibility, and time to explore, he can participate in most activities that an acting, voice, or movement teacher can imagine. As with Giraldi-Palmer, Dorwart values confidence from others, which allows

him to be confident in his own abilities. His greatest pet peeve is when he is excluded due to expediency.

In rehearsal, a big thing that bothers me is when a director is trying to work through a scene for the first time, and they have all the walking people up and they're moving the scene around and they think, "I'll insert Jason later, or I'll insert the wheelchair later," instead of making it part of the process from up front. From their mind they're trying to deal with what they already know and then they figure they'll insert me, but the thing with a wheelchair is you can't always insert it in the same way that it works for everybody else, so I wish people would make it a part of the process up front, instead of superimposing it as part of their vision later.

The most satisfying feeling for an actor (besides a well-earned ovation) comes from being treated as creative artist and collaborator, providing valuable input to the director, the playwright, and the production team. An actor's creativity can shine during the initial blocking of a scene. It is then that the actor's impulses can shape the look of the stage picture. By excluding an actor with a disability from this process, the director or instructor is eliminating the actor's creative input, and devaluing his or her contribution. This may be the reason that Ike Schambelan insists that his actors participate in early blocking, despite the added challenge or danger of being visually impaired. A director who values the creative input of an actor must not deny the creative input of any actor, regardless of matters of expediency. The same issue comes up with casting.

I get cast as old people in makeup a lot. But I guess any actor has to deal with being "typed." When I was in college it was real easy to cast me as the old

guy because I used a wheelchair. I think most directors, when they're casting a show, haven't considered a wheelchair before. So when you show up the first time it blows their mind. I think creative good directors don't see that and think, "Oh, that's a problem." They think, "Oh, that's something new and interesting, we can do something new here." And I don't know what percentage there is of each, but you can tell when a director is interested in exploring something new or a challenge because they think, "What can we do with that?" Instead of writing you off wholesale. But I will say that it means you're usually cast in a minor role because they're not sure if a person in a wheelchair can be a lead, because they don't know how to deal with that. They're willing to take that chance with a minor role. It's not necessarily a bad thing. You just have to work with whatever you have going on physically as an actor.

### **3.16 Regan Linton**

Regan Linton will soon graduate from the University of California San Diego, where she was the first ever wheelchair user to become an MFA acting candidate. She earned a BA in American Studies from the University of Southern California and an MSW in Social Work at the University of Denver. She performed for six years with the PHAMALY Theatre Company, earning accolades as a performer including the Colorado Theatre Guild Henry Award, the Denver Post Ovation Award, and the Marlowe Award. She has since performed at La Jolla Playhouse, UC San Diego, and the UCSD Dance Theatre. Also an experienced

teacher, Linton is a member of the Voice and Speech Trainers' Association (VASTA) and the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE). She has taught in venues ranging from Denver Public Schools to Ted Talks at the University of Denver. Linton sustained a spinal cord injury during her undergraduate studies and she now uses a manual wheelchair.

### **3.16.1 Adapting Vocal Pedagogy**

As a member of VASTA, Linton is familiar with voice and speech pedagogy. She offers a dual perspective, as both a student and as a teacher. She begins on a positive note, discussing what actors with disabilities bring to the table that serves as an advantage.

I think the biggest advantage is that people with mobility impairments already have to think outside of the box in terms of their navigation of a world that isn't necessarily built for bodies like theirs. For me, I find that the ability to deduce the intention of an exercise on my own allows me to adapt it, and I think this encourages creativity in approaching the body as an instrument. I also think that when you know you aren't going to be able to do something EXACTLY the way an instructor is describing something, you don't try to force your way into it, and therefore you discover the point of the exercise more easily.

This echoes the advice that Dorwart gave earlier. Linton has enough experience and confidence not to rely on an instructor to adapt exercises. Rather, she relies on her own clear understanding of the exercise's intention and her knowledge of her own physical

needs. An instructor might best serve her by being very clear about learning objectives, which would in turn allow Linton to make the most effective adaptations in pursuit of that goal. An instructor should also be flexible enough to allow actors and students to figure these things.

I asked Regan to describe the ways in which her favored voice pedagogy, that of Kristin Linklater, was positive or negative for students with disabilities.

Disadvantages: Linklater is what I am most experienced in, but this probably follows for every discipline you mentioned. Most of these approaches are very "full body," meaning that you are engaging every part of your body with the exercises. This is great, but most instructors aren't used to allowing for extra time or attention for students that can't move certain body parts on their own. For instance, I used a raised table for our Linklater voice warmups so that I could transfer on my own during the warmup. But, transferring still takes extra time. So does moving my legs/body/sitting up/etc. during the warmup. Or, I may need a little more space. This is an easy fix for instructors, if they're aware that they just need to take a little more time with transitions in the warmup, or they need to assist a student. But, not all are aware.

I find this all to be excellent advice for students and instructors. The student will invariably be the person most qualified to anticipate his or her own needs, and the instructor would do well to facilitate the student. One of the most valuable things an instructor can provide is an attention to and respect for the needs of the student. This doesn't mean changing expectations or standards, but simply giving the student space and time to accomplish the

tasks at hand. An ideal situation would be very collaborative, where the instructor communicates the essence of an exercise but the student figures out a specific strategy that will work for his or her unique situation. Performing an exercise that aims for full body engagement is not impossible for people with paraplegia or quadriplegia, but it does require that the exercise itself be somehow translated to the needs of the student. Linklater's process connects imaginative or mind experience with breath and body work; Linton has demonstrated that there are several paths that lead to the same place.

I definitely think nearly all the classroom and rehearsal exercises I've done are easily adaptable. Even things that don't seem to be adaptable just need a change in rhetoric, or re-clarification of what the instructor is trying to accomplish. One warmup exercise requires very rapid movement from a "standing" position to being on the floor. I obviously couldn't get on the floor within an instant, and back up again. However, if the instructor had described it more as "be upright" or "as tall as you can" and then "get as close to the floor as possible" or "flatten yourself as much as possible" or something, I don't think I would have felt outside of the exercise.

If an instructor effectively and clearly explains the purpose of an exercise, the student will be better able to achieve it. My own experience indicates that Linklater voice training is highly experiential. Instructors of Linklater voice want the students to make their own discoveries, unpolluted by the expectations of the teacher, and therefore they usually guide an exercise while keeping discussion to a minimum. It would seem that, when teaching students with disabilities, instructors might need to be more flexible on that strategy. They also would benefit from Linton's suggestions of how to translate



pedagogical language so as to make it more inclusive.

Linton's story is reminiscent of Carrie Sandahl's (qtd. in Margolis 187). During Sandahl's undergraduate years, she was told by her voice teacher to imagine that the sacrum (a bone at the base of the spine) was the seat of her soul. Sandahl was born without a sacrum and three of her vertebrae, so she asked the instructor how she could adapt the exercise. He had no answer, and Sandahl recalled, "I was really upset – to be told I was missing the seat of my soul!" The language of actor training is highly metaphorical, and often benign expressions can make a student feel excluded. I wouldn't counsel all instructors to avoid references to physiology, but rather to embrace one of the tenets of Universal Design for Learning: multiple means of expression. As Linton suggests, an instructor may ask people to stand, but also add the possibility of thinking vertically or upright. Sandahl's teacher might have acknowledged the metaphor in the expression and instead asked her to focus on her pelvic bowl, or her place of deepest breathing. Linton continues,

I think the best way to make things more accessible is to open up dialogue and communication about what students need, what they're experiencing during the exercises, and learning how to explain certain exercises/activities in terms of what the overall intention is. And, I think it's important for instructors to be honest about what they don't know, and to be vulnerable, so that students feel that they are approachable. Also, speaking to a student one-on-one before the class begins to figure out what he/she needs is hugely helpful.

Linton offers some pet peeves that could be eliminated by more open

communication between actors, instructors, and directors.

Pet peeves: complaining about bodily challenges that pale in comparison to what we with mobility challenges encounter regularly; non-inclusive language (it's so easy to change, and people just aren't aware or don't take time to figure out how to describe things in a way that doesn't cut people out); not asking a question or communicating openly and involving the person in question in the conversation. Obviously, theatre has a hierarchy like any discipline, but it drives me nuts when directors/stage managers/teachers will sit around talking to each other about something that involves me and is probably easily solvable with my input, but it becomes a bigger challenge because they don't address me directly. Or, when a director wants to do something, but is afraid that it won't work for me, and so they start to brood about it without asking me and seeing if it will work. So, I guess it's mostly lack of communication.

When an instructor or a director takes it upon themselves to make decisions on behalf of the actor or student, without consulting him or her, there is a failure in communication. As Dal Vera stated earlier, "They are the experts. They will train me." There must be a spirit of collaboration in a classroom and rehearsal hall.

### **3.16.2 Little Things**

Finally, I asked Linton for some simple accommodations that would make it easier for her to be a student and to do her job as an actor. I was seeking the sort of practical

advice that I received from Ike Schambelan.

Simple things that are often not done: keeping backstage pathways clear of little obstructions like props and such so I don't have to roll over them; putting me in dressing room spot that's closest to the door if the dressing room quarters are tight; having a lower rung where I can access hanging costumes or hang them up myself; building ramps on sets to ADA code so they aren't too steep; giving me knee-high nylons when possible instead of full ones (they're a bitch to put on!); assisting me with getting out of costume at the end of the night, or hair, because it just helps me speed up my process a bit. Mostly, again, communicating about what things are do-able for me, and what aren't. Another thing that was challenging for me was when we did exercises on grassy terrain...a SIMPLE fix...you just move the class onto a hard surface! This would not have affected the exercise.

### **3.17 Jenna Bainbridge**

Jenna Bainbridge is currently performing in the company of the Colorado Shakespeare Festival as Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. She studies voice performance with an emphasis on musical theatre at the University of Denver. Her performance credits include many of the Denver Metro areas professional theatres. Her roles at PHAMALY include Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, Little Sally in *Urinetown*, and Rosemary in *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. She also performed as Cinderella in the Boulder Dinner Theatre's production of Rodgers and Hammerstein's

musical, *Cinderella*. She played Eva in *The Rimers Eldritch* at Denver Center for the Arts. Bainbridge has been partially paralyzed from the waist down since she was 18 months old (Collins). The nerve damage in her body is a neurological disorder called Transverse Myelitis. It has led to intermittent pain and difficulty walking. She walks with a gait, and she often uses crutches or a wheelchair.

When asked about how she communicates with instructors, she encourages openness, flexibility, and sensitivity to special circumstances.

I think you can make classes more accessible (especially movement classes) by keeping your mind open. Everyone moves differently and everyone adapts to fit their needs, this is just more apparent with a disability. Typically we know what we can and cannot do, and I try to be very open with my instructors about my abilities. Classes should be catered towards the majority, but an instructor should always be aware of people's needs and how they will adapt.

As with Giral-di-Palmer, Bainbridge's successful classroom performance can lead instructors to turn their attention elsewhere, and they sometimes need to be reminded of her particular needs.

My disability rarely hinders my participation in movement classes and doesn't affect any voice classes. However, I do fatigue easily and sometimes need to sit out and watch for a while. Movement is exhausting for me and I know that I need to take it easy and I try to be very open with my instructors about my needs.

One-size-fits-all accommodations would be unfeasible due to the variety of students and their unique challenges. Dorwart, Linton, and Bainbridge all have mobility impairments, but the way they effectively adapt exercises would be very different. Likewise, a student's needs for accommodations may change on a daily basis, depending on their condition.

My disability affects me in different ways every day. I don't have any idea how my legs will feel one day to the next and I have to be ready to take anything. If there's a heavy blocking day and I'm in pain I need to have a back up plan. Sometimes this is just pushing through and taking a few painkillers, other days I need to have a stand-in while I take notes. Other times I'll do it in a wheelchair or with crutches. I have to take it day by day and as long as my director knows what level of pain I'm in there's never been a problem. It is best to have a very open minded director, one that can anticipate back up plans. I am always willing to give ideas of a "Plan B" scenario to these directors.

Bainbridge has a disability that is apparent when she walks, but invisible while she is still. She can get through a performance without using assistive devices such as her crutches or her wheelchair, but the disability is still visible in her limp. I referenced Jill Summerville and Jasbir Puar when I talked about wheelchairs and canes as assemblages, things that anchor their users in the audience's perception. I asked Bainbridge what strategies she uses to either incorporate or hide her disability in the characters that she plays.

I don't have specific ways I incorporate my movement style into each practice, but in every technique you have to create your story of WHY you do

something. If you're fat, skinny, ugly, pretty, etc., you must know why your character has those physical characteristics and how they got that way. A disability is just another physical trait in my eyes and every character I play has a story of how they became disabled and how it affects their life, even if it's never stated on stage to the audience. I know it for myself and it changes the way I portray a character.

I recently had the pleasure of seeing Bainbridge perform as Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Colorado Shakespeare Festival. Her disability was subtly included in the world of the play, occasionally factoring in to the competition between the young lovers. Audiences instinctively look for meaning in disability and it was easy to imagine that her crutches and limp were part of Shakespeare's invention. But her disability was most often just another unique physical trait, overshadowed by the other passionate aspects of her character. Finally, I ended by asking her the same question I asked Regan Linton, about simple accommodations that might make her job as a student and an actor easier.

I've never really had a problem with people being inconsiderate at rehearsals. I've come across many narrow-minded directors, however, that have refused to cast me due to my disability. This infuriates me, but it's life sometimes. I'd say my big pet peeves really come from ignorance. Things like setting up auditions and rehearsals in buildings without ADA regulations, or expecting an actor to walk a mile to and from housing to rehearsal. These things don't stem from bigotry, simply from being unaware.

### 3.18 Conclusion

This chapter explored positive ways to depict disability identity during acting class scene and monologue work. It offered some guidelines for effectively and respectfully communicating with students that have disabilities. I described my own personal experience as I attempted to adapt an acting course for a visually impaired student. I recounted the invaluable advice I received from Amanda Giguere and Ike Schambelan, and the positive effect that advice had on my class. This chapter invited opinions from master teachers of acting and from students with disabilities.

We learned that effective communication by instructors is paramount from the outset. Instructors must provide clear expectations while listening to the needs of each individual. Effective communication by students is also important, as some may need to self-identify and explain their particular needs. Instructors must be willing to have confidence that these individual students are capable and willing. Instructors must above all be flexible by interpreting and understanding the core aim of each exercise so that it can be adapted to any actor. There are no one-size-fits-all accommodations, no blanket solutions that can make classrooms universally welcoming to all students. Perhaps the only universal truth in this work may be that which was offered by Lugering: “Do no harm.” Some things may have worked for the instructor, and for some members of the class, but a willingness to adapt an exercise on the spot is the mark of a good teacher. Incorporate time, and space, and freedom to fail. Students with disabilities sometimes need time to figure things out. The best thing an instructor can do for a student is to give him or her the confidence and the tools to succeed.

Instructors must also be sensitive to issues of identity in casting, being careful not to strengthen undesirable models of disability. In scene work, instructors may treat disability not as a defining characteristic or a metaphor in a fictional character's life, but as one of many given circumstances. Instructors and students should also embrace difference and explore nontraditional ways in which the disabled body and assistive devices can communicate character.

Even though many voice and speech exercises are experiential, shrouding the intent of class activities can do more harm than good. Instructors must communicate the intention of exercises, so that students can then make an informed decision about how to adapt their own execution of it. Jason Dorwart and Regan Linton agree that, when given some time and the proper information, they can make their own adjustments. Students are most successful when they choose to communicate their needs to the instructor and to the other members of their class or ensemble. No one will be more intimately familiar with the student's needs than the student him or herself. Accommodations are a very individual and personal thing, related not only to the student's physiology, but to their past experiences and familiarity with assistive technologies. "They are the experts," says Dal Vera. "They will train me."

Any exercise can be adapted. The important question to ask is: What is the essence? Or what is the purpose? With that in mind, certain changes can be made for individual students. Jason Dorwart and Regan Linton provide excellent examples of how they make those adaptations. Furthermore, once an exercise has been adapted, other students in the class may benefit from trying it in a different way, too.



Voice and movement teachers would do well to incorporate one of the fundamental principles of Universal Design for Learning: multiple means of expression. This can manifest in two ways. For a particular voice or movement pedagogy, instructors might explain the intent verbally, provide readings, show images, demonstrate it themselves, or allow a student to witness the exercise in a tactile way, such as an Alexander teacher allowing a visually impaired student to feel body alignment in another student or the instructor. Voice and movement instructors would also be wise to learn and teach more than one approach. A student that fails to connect with Linklater work may succeed with Fitzmaurice. Where Alexander might not work for an individual, Capoeira or Laban might work for another.

Question the fundamental vocabulary of the field. Analyze it, qualify it, and expand upon it. Neutrality is problematic, and Carrie Sandahl explores the many facets of this concept with expertise. But Bella Merlin, Michael Lugering, and Rocco Dal Vera provide insight into a concept that can evolve and continue to be useful in some ways. In order to successfully teach the widest variety of students, including those with disabilities, instructors must be willing to question or even abandon the processes and language that they themselves learned. The body and the voice should not be considered a problem, something that works in opposition to expression. This mindset is negative. The body is a collaborator.

There are many things that may make a student feel excluded from an activity. Linton expressed frustration when an exercise was conducted on grass, which made it difficult for her to participate. The language of an activity can make a student feel unwelcome or outside of the experience, as Carrie Sandahl encountered when her voice

teacher referenced the sacrum. These training systems, passed from teacher to student, can be revered as dogma. In many instances, they offer an extended metaphor such as the body as instrument, or neutrality, which require critical analysis and revision. Sometimes, a change in rhetoric is all that's needed. Must a student "walk like a cow" or can the student "move like a cow?" Is the sacrum truly the seat of the soul, or can we refer to the pelvic bowl, or a person's place of deepest breathing? Can the "divine neutral" be a personal place, rather than a universal one?

Seek truth, not beauty. Rocco Dal Vera gives us a philosophy that extracts the "right" and "wrong" from voice pedagogy, and instead values expressiveness, truthfulness, clarity. Teach "tools, not rules." Seeking beauty, or neutrality, imposes the aesthetics of a few. It stifles difference and creativity. Disability is not a challenge to be overcome, but an opportunity to bring creative difference to a classroom or a stage. There is no ideal, no one perfect instrument; humanity has the variety of an orchestra. This can shake up an otherwise tired class. This can challenge existing perceptions.

On a final note, Victoria Lewis warns us to "apply critical standards. Avoid knee-jerk approval for performers solely on the basis of disability. A lack of expectations has been identified as one of the main barriers for disabled students in all fields" (qtd. in Margolis 192).

The following chapter of this dissertation is a conclusion. It summarizes the research, discusses how the findings inform the primary research question, and explores the larger academic context and relevance of the findings. It discusses limitations inherent in this research and proposes avenues of future research.

## CHAPTER 4 CONCLUSION

### 4.1 Introduction

Feminist theatre critic Jill Dolan writes, “In the illusionist tradition that dominates American theatre practice... [the] spectator has been assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual, and male. That theatre creates an ideal spectator carved in the likeness of the dominant culture whose ideology he represents is the motivating assumption behind the discourse of feminist performance criticism” (Dolan, *Feminist Spectator* 1). The ideal spectator is most certainly also able-bodied. Realism is the dominant acting style in theatre, film, and television today, a form that ostensibly mimics life as it is. Dolan reveals that the “reality” presented in popular media is a reflection of dominant culture, not of the real world with all its vibrant diversity. Media is a mode of cultural reproduction, of disseminating what Lennard Davis calls “the hegemony of normalcy.” This pervasive fiction, what playwright Charles Mee called “the bizarre, artificial world of all intact white people,” asserts itself as real while disability is simultaneously erased and fetishized (qtd. in Lewis 233). Mass media marginalizes people with disabilities, diminishing a minority of 19% to less than 1% while appropriating and distorting their stories. This tradition has far-reaching consequences. Disability is hidden in our society, a practice that makes the sight of a visibly disabled body seem unusual or foreign, “often obscuring the personhood of its bearer” (Siebers 19). Disability must become more present in our media, and must reflect the authentic, lived experiences of people with disabilities.

Chapter Two demonstrates that disability is underrepresented and that able-bodied actors most often perform the few roles written for characters with disabilities. This practice is sometimes compared to minstrelsy. Today, few would stomach the sight of a white actor in blackface, and yet an able-bodied actor performing in a wheelchair, as we see in the popular television comedy *Glee* or the upcoming NBC procedural *Ironsides*, will most likely garner the actor respect for his “transformative” performance. Embracing the minority model of disability studies underscores the importance of authenticity in casting. There is an ongoing struggle to promote authenticity and to encourage greater numbers of roles for people with disabilities. Actors’ Equity Association (AEA) and SAG-AFTRA collectively represent over 210,000 professional actors in the United States. Their joint committee, I Am Performers with Disabilities (IAMPWD), is an alliance for inclusion in the arts and media. They compile statistics, organize summits, and provide extensive resources for actors and for employers. This dissertation is built on the foundational idea that playwrights and screenwriters must tell the untold stories of people with disabilities, and that actors with disabilities must be hired to play those parts.

Having stated those underlying assumptions, the specific problem this dissertation addresses is the one Victoria Lewis identifies in *Beyond Victims and Villains*: “It is not always easy to find disabled talent” (396). She quotes director Mike Ervin, “... there is no substitute for casting actors with disabilities. That doesn’t mean that you’ll always be able to find one” (396). There are myriad reasons why people with disabilities choose not to pursue acting careers. Job prospects are poor for any actor, but more so for actors with disabilities. As Jill Summerville points out, the visibly disabled body continues to be laden with meaning in our dramas, which results in a reluctance to cast people with disabilities

unless the roles have been specifically written as such. Hope Shangle, who was employed by a bicoastal talent agency in Los Angeles, told me about one of her clients who was an amputee, an actor with a successful career performing voiceovers, but with very limited opportunities to perform on stage or screen. “Why this particular actor wasn’t being sent in for onscreen roles that didn’t specify an amputation is beyond me.” The industry is competitive, not only for actors but also for directors, casting directors, and agents. People are loath to think outside the box and to take risks, an unfortunate “safe” mentality that ignores the creative power of difference.

Clearly there are many other reasons people with disabilities may choose not to pursue acting careers, including a lack of role models, lack of accessibility in our rehearsal and performance spaces, the financial demands of self-accommodations, lack of support from counselors, and lowered expectations. This dissertation focuses narrowly on access to training. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 mandate “reasonable accommodations” at colleges and universities, which has resulted in greater numbers of students with disabilities enrolling. However, the mechanics of day-to-day accessibility relies on the efforts of individuals – teachers, students, directors, and advisors – who may not have experience adapting their curriculum. The preconceived notions of the “gatekeepers” may create additional barriers, as the pervasive notion of the “neutral” aesthetic and the ideal actor’s body influence their decisions about who to admit into exclusive programs. Gatekeepers make pragmatic decisions about who to admit based on their perception of the candidate’s likelihood for success in the industry. The ideal actor is a reflection of the ideal spectator: neutral, versatile, attractive, athletic, and malleable.

The acting, voice, and movement instructors that I interviewed have decades of experience in higher education, and yet only rarely did a student with a disability enroll in their courses. Because of this infrequency, instructors are usually unfamiliar with ways to make their classes welcoming and accessible. Actor training is a process that is slow to evolve, steeped in tradition, and resistant to change. Carrie Sandahl writes, “acting teachers perpetuate their methods as truth by presenting themselves to students as unquestionable authorities” (257). There can be no unquestionable authorities in a contemporary and accessible classroom. These tired methods must be interrogated and reinvented if performance classes are to be inclusive of people with disabilities.

When a student who was blind enrolled in my college acting course in 2010, I sought advice from those who had more experience, including Amanda Giguere and Ike Schambelan. Their assistance proved invaluable, so I determined to gather similar wisdom and to add the perspectives of students with disabilities. My class was successful in part due to my willingness to organically and spontaneously reinvent activities that I had been taught, to risk failure by departing from a long-established norm, and to communicate effectively with my student. It was a class that, with retrospect, could have been much more successful had I access to the thoughts collected in this dissertation.

## **4.2 Context**

This dissertation is reflective of broad trends in higher education. The disability rights movement that gained traction in the 1970s led to federal legislation, which has resulted in greater numbers of students with disabilities than ever before. Institutions of

higher education across the United States are engaged in ongoing discussions about how to adhere to ADA requirements. As the role of technology expands on campuses, and new hardware and software become essential to the educational experience, colleges and universities must continuously reexamine their strategies for accessibility. While older buildings on campus undergo slight alterations such as curbcuts and the widening of bathroom doors, newer buildings are more frequently built using the principles of Universal Design, anticipating the needs of the greatest variety of potential users. Disability Studies is becoming a more prominent subject for an increasingly interdisciplinary cohort of scholars.

Theatre programs in colleges and universities are likewise expanding curriculum to be less exclusively focused on the western canon: "Theatre training programs, built on a tradition of Western realism, have begun to widen their course offerings to include a variety of styles as well as courses that recognize the diversity of theatrical performance, increasingly recognizing the mixing of global cultures and the impact of mass media on the theatrical arts" (Stucky and Tomell-Presto 122). Disability studies is still a rare presence in theatre programs, but the connection to diversity and global culture makes it a relevant subject that will no doubt be explored much further in the near future.

The question of authenticity in casting occasionally gets some press, but never enough to change the casting habits of the theatre, film, and television industries. When a high profile inauthentic casting decision is made, such as the recent casting of an able-bodied actor to play a paraplegic detective in NBC's *Ironsides*, there is a vocal uproar from the disability community. It becomes a brief topic of conversation in blogs and entertainment magazines, but the vocal opposition has not yet successfully challenged the

practice. There are vibrant communities of disabled theatre artists, such as Theatre Breaking Through Barriers and PHAMALY, where actors with disabilities can find professional opportunities, though they are segregated from mainstream performance.

The interrogation of actor training from the perspective of students with disabilities is work that is just beginning. Amy Sarno-Fradkin visited the issue in her 1996 article, written with Robert Barton, called “Acting Access.” Carrie Sandahl has blazed the trail with insightful articles including, “The Tyranny of the Neutral.” Victoria Lewis makes an important contribution with her collection of plays written by disabled playwrights, *Beyond Victims and Villains*. Her article, “Disability and Access: A Manifesto for Actor Training,” articulates the problem and offers some strategies. Few people have written on this specific topic and the available information remains largely anecdotal.

### **4.3 Main points**

Due to the diversity inherent in disability and the multifarious approaches to training actors, it would be impossible to compile a list of best practices. This dissertation instead reveals certain “positive practices,” which may be employed as recommendations but certainly not dogma. The overwhelming wisdom here is that the only universally positive approaches are related to being flexible, listening to students, and being aware of disability identity.



### 4.3.1 Overall Philosophies

- “Do no harm.” Michael Lugering’s universal tip should be practiced with every student.
- Teach “tools, not rules.” Rocco Dal Vera reminds us that this is a craft that offers theories, not laws. Give students strategies to succeed but don’t present what you teach as infallible and unchangeable rules.
- “Rise to the role.” Robert Cohen says that focusing exclusively on disability can be counterproductive. Focus on the goal and figure out how to get there.
- “Seek truth, not beauty.” Rocco Dal Vera tries to remove judgments such as right and wrong from acting, voice, movement, and speech training. Instead, value expressiveness, truthfulness, and clarity.
- Avoid pedagogy that treats the body as a problem to be solved. Michael Lugering teaches that the body does not work in opposition to expression – it is a co-participant in the process of being human. Work with positive pedagogies.
- Embrace difference in your classes and rehearsals. There is no one perfect instrument. Humanity has the variety of an orchestra. Challenge existing perceptions.
- All actors are unique and frequently self-doubting – a good instructor can instill confidence, which is often the best gift any student can be given.
- Don’t lower standards. Actors with disabilities can meet the same challenges, but may need additional time or space to do so.

- Actors are creative artists – don't make decisions on behalf of actors with disabilities that you wouldn't make for able-bodied actors. Each actor's impulses are valuable and they must be a part of the creative process, regardless of matters of expediency.

#### **4.3.2 Flexibility**

- What works for one student may not work for another. There are no one-size-fits-all accommodations.
- Be willing to be surprised by an actor's choices. Don't lock the "doors of perception."
- Give students the time and the space to figure things out. Be aware that if a student needs to drop out of an exercise they may just need time to figure things out for themselves.
- Incorporate time, and space, and freedom to fail. Students with disabilities sometimes need time to figure things out. The best thing an instructor can do for a student is to give him or her the confidence and the tools to succeed.

#### **4.3.3 Communication**

- Don't rely too heavily on the fundamental vocabulary of the field. Question it, criticize it, and revise it. Metaphors like "the body as instrument" or the concept of

neutrality can be problematic for students with disabilities, but can be useful if presented in the right way.

- When in doubt, ask. Let the student be the teacher when it comes to their accommodations. Don't make assumptions. "They are the experts," says Dal Vera. "They will train me."
- Use "people first language." Remember that the person comes before the disability.
- When concerned with questions of etiquette or phrasing – don't hesitate to ask.
- Learning about assistive technology in advance can be helpful. Students can teach you about the technology they use.
- Adapting a specific exercise must be a collaborative effort between student and teacher. Even though many exercises are experiential, shrouding the intent of class activities can do more harm than good. If instructors are willing to communicate the intention, the "heart" or "essence" of an exercise, anything can be adapted. Students with disabilities understand their own needs, and they can make informed decisions about how to adapt their own execution of exercises.
- Don't be coercive. A student may choose not to discuss their disability or disclose their needed accommodations. It is their right to do so. Forcing the student to discuss it can be discriminatory and illegal.
- Invite all students to meet with you privately or to communicate via e-mail. Some students may feel comfortable discussing disability face-to-face, while others may feel safer disclosing that information online.
- Jill Summerville suggests trying to open lines of communication with the entire class by using general questions: What's one challenge you face as an actor? What do you

need for this class to be a safe space? Don't force the issue; create a safe and encouraging space.

#### 4.3.4 Disability Identity

- Be willing to “crip” the body of knowledge that you teach (defamiliarize it, render it anew, and expose able-bodied assumptions). Identify and challenge ableist ideology.
- Familiarize yourself with the disability models described in Chapter Two. When they appear in texts, be prepared to expose them, to discuss them, and to interrogate them during scene and monologue work. How does the playwright present disability? How does that portrayal differ from the lived experience of disability? Is an actor being upstaged by his or her disability?
- Acknowledge the way that “assemblages” such as wheelchairs or canes may affect an actor's transformation. The audience may perceive a visually impaired person's cane or a paraplegic person's wheelchair as an integrated part of the overall body “instrument.” Be aware of the effect Bill Shannon calls “condition arriving,” the tendency to notice an individual's condition before the individual herself.
- The way to approach a role may depend upon how it was written and the nature of an individual's disability. Jill Summerville says that disability can often be worked into the dramatic world of the character.
- Jill Summerville suggests that a good strategy may be to find ways to bring more attention to the disability, to acknowledge it, which then allows the audience to

move on. Whether or not to employ this approach should be the disabled actor's choice, not an imposition by an instructor.

- Traditional gestures may take on different meanings in disabled bodies. An actor must learn to be familiar with her or her body, which may mean mastering an entirely different gestural vocabulary. Actors, instructors, and directors must be willing to experiment and discover this new vocabulary of their unique instrument.
- Playing this different instrument is an opportunity to capitalize on “actualism,” disability aesthetics, and to challenge audience expectations. As Terry Galloway suggests, play with difference, become captivated by it, and incorporate it into the performance.
- Be open-minded when it comes to casting scenes and monologues. Disability can be a part of any character's makeup. Disability adds another layer of complexity, but does not need to be the central or dominant trait. Actors may be typecast their entire careers; it doesn't need to begin in the classroom.

#### **4.3.5 Embrace UDL**

- Look to Universal Design for Learning when planning lessons - the general principles include providing multiple and flexible methods of presentation, building alternatives into instructional design, and using technology and a variety of materials.
- UDL may make a class accessible even for those students that choose not to disclose a disability to their class or instructor.

- Instructors can choose textbooks that are readily available in other formats, such as e-text, Braille, or OCR PDFs.
- Incorporate more than one approach, particularly when teaching voice and movement. Alexander may work for one student, Capoeira for another, and Laban for a third.
- Be open to alternative assignments, such as the touch-tours I implemented in my class. Consider involving all students in those projects.
- Accept assignments in alternate formats – such a digitally recorded journal in place of a written one.
- Be aware of how much you rely on aural or visual cues as an educator. Consider alternate ways to deliver material. Be descriptive and encourage others in the class to be as well.

#### **4.3.6 Practical Matters**

- Encourage all students to try variations on traditional assignments. A preshow touch-tour may benefit a seeing impaired student, but everyone else might benefit from that experience as well.
- Encourage every student to provide feedback for peers after work. For example, a visually impaired student might offer a perspective about what sounded truthful.
- Keep rehearsal and class spaces consistent from day to day. Allow students to sit in the same place. Keep furniture in predetermined spaces. Keep the rehearsal spaces

clear of cables. Carpeted or grassy spaces may be difficult for wheelchair users to navigate.

- Create artificial boundaries for actors that may need their own space to work. A visually impaired actor on a gym mat will have guaranteed safe freedom of movement in that space.
- Be cognizant of invisible disabilities, such as hearing impairments. It can be easy to forget that such students still need accommodations. Students must also take responsibility for reminding teachers about their needs.
- If your class includes time for a bathroom break, be aware of how long it would take each individual to reach the nearest bathroom.
- Encourage your departments to invest in technology that will allow more students to participate in productions, such as ear monitors.
- Actor training programs can implement policies that encourage active recruitment of people with disabilities.
- Theatre programs can reach out to university advisors and let them know that students with disabilities are welcome in their classes.
- Instructors should be careful about overemphasizing social media in their classes – many popular websites are inaccessible to students with disabilities. Have websites tested by disability services before assigning them to classes.
- Be aware that part-time faculty and graduate instructors need support, resources, and training, as well.

- Make a connection with a company like PHAMALY, whenever possible. The presence of a disability theatre company on campus can create interest and help challenge conceptions about disability.

#### **4.4 Limitations**

There are several obvious limitations to this original research. While I cast a wide net and contacted many acting, voice, movement teachers, as well as students and professional actors with disabilities, I ultimately conducted interviews with fewer than twenty-five people. This is a relatively small subject population. A greater sampling would have led to a greater variety of approaches. However, this limited study uncovers significant similarities among the responses.

Most of the actors with disabilities with whom I spoke had one thing in common: PHAMALY. Jason Dorwart explained how well actors with disabilities work together during PHAMALY productions, each using their strengths to contribute to the production. Regan Linton called PHAMALY her saving grace. Lindsay Marie Giraldi-Palmer and Jenna Bainbridge have also done many shows on the PHAMALY stage. These actors share an overwhelmingly positive common experience, something that is unavailable in many cities across the country. PHAMALY creates unique opportunities for performers with disabilities living in the Denver area. A theatre company can be a powerful presence and a motivating factor for students with disabilities. While people with disabilities may not see themselves represented on film and television, a local company provides a medium for these actors, which in turn gives students motivation to pursue training. It also provides a



local supply of potential role models. To what extent has this positive environment informed the opinions and development of these individuals? PHAMALY is an incredible resource with few similar companies; would actors with disabilities that did not have that opportunity have a different perspective on actor training?

The actors I interviewed offered their unique perspectives, which were informed by the nature of their disabilities as well as other aspects of their backgrounds including class, gender, and race. There are many kinds of disabilities that are not represented in this research, so I warn readers not to consider the positive practices that I have extracted as universal truths. Likewise, the people with disabilities that I interviewed are, for the most part, from the Denver metro area, and may be influenced by the local social, political, and economic situation.

The instructors I interviewed have, for the most part, enjoyed success in the form of continuous employment and impressive publications. This also may not be a limitation, but it is certainly worth noting. There are many fine, experienced yet unpublished acting teachers, and their experiences have not been recorded as part of this dissertation. Each instructor interviewed offers a particular expertise, which is in itself one of the limitations of this study. There are myriad alternatives when choosing an acting methodology to study. I've encountered many of them throughout my educational and professional life, and those that I encountered are likely to be the pedagogies that I explored for this dissertation. For example, the fact that I spoke with multiple experts on the Stanislavski System but no experts on Meisner's or Chekhov's approach is not meant to imply that their approach is any less accessible. The limited scope of this research forces the exclusion of some major acting, voice, and movement pedagogies. It also bears repeating that

professors with decades of experience may only have had a small number of students with disabilities in their classes, so they may be basing their opinions about accessibility on very limited experience.

This research does not study the entire spectrum of disability, focusing instead on college students and the disabilities that are likely to appear in college classes. Having made that delimitation, there are many disabilities that are not represented in this research. These disabilities can vary widely and they are part of the 19%. They should perhaps be represented in this research. It is certainly an area for further study.

This research assumes that the skills taught in an actor training program are in some way necessary for an actor to be successful in the professional market. Many people would argue the opposite point. There are countless stories of students that dropped out of high school, moved to Hollywood, and worked their way to the top. Those students didn't receive extensive acting courses, nor did they receive years of voice and speech training. I know some people who would argue that an extensive actor training program can be counterproductive, serving only to deaden an actor's original spontaneity. Years of training can result in actors that fit a very generic mold: actors that sound, look, and move the same.

There are ethical implications to this work, as well. Anyone exploring the work of a group of which they are not a member can be guilty of appropriation. One of the common themes in this dissertation is the benefit of what Telory Davies calls actualism, or the materiality of bodies. Tobin Siebers refers to disability aesthetics and Carrie Sandahl discusses the "doors of perception" opened by people with disabilities. I argue that this potential should be harnessed in class, on stage, and on screen but it is important for me to acknowledge that this approach also carries a risk of appropriation. Playwrights and

screenwriters frequently exploit people with disabilities by employing the moral and medical models in their work. What of the theatre artist who uses the “starable” disabled body as part of a spectacle? As this work progresses, there may be some potential dangers down the line. The history of the representation of gay characters on stage may offer certain parallels. At first, gay characters were not seen on stage. When they began to appear the only palatable plotline included a tragic ending. They then were depicted as more comic and benign characters. In the present day, they are often presented in a homonormative, homonationalist light: as good monogamous non-threatening care-giving Americans. Many queer theorists argue that this negates the unique queer identity and is therefore far from the ideal depiction. Nevertheless, it’s a step forward towards visibility and equal representation. As attempts to make disability more visible progress, what are the risks of exploitation? What are the dangers in supporting “crip-normativity” that may downplay the creative power of difference?

Throughout this dissertation I have argued in favor of authenticity in casting, but there is also the question of my own authenticity. Despite having compelling personal, professional, and political reasons for pursuing this work, there is a real danger of my work being perceived as appropriating the disability experience, or of being somehow inauthentic. Dr. Amy Sarno-Fradkin, who wrote her dissertation about actors with disabilities, had some cautionary advice:

One thing you might want to be aware of is that the community of scholars that work on these issues are themselves disabled. If you pursue this topic and you don’t have a disability, you will need to have significant experience creating work by, for, and with people who have disabilities. There’s a

cultural aspect you have to be fluent with in order to be taken seriously.

“Tabbies” (temporarily able-bodied people) can often make critical mistakes that contradict progress that’s been made in theatre by, for, with and about people with disabilities.

This is a very real concern, and something that I considered deeply before embarking on this journey.

A final ethical implication is one that many acting teachers in higher education face. The job prospects are grim. I aim to encourage more students with disabilities to enroll in acting courses and pursue acting careers in order to enhance visibility. To what extent will I be culpable when most of these students, when following their dreams to become actors, inevitably fail?

#### **4.5 Areas for Future Study**

I believe there’s a lot of room to continue this line of research, deepening the main focus while expanding to other areas. This narrow field of study would benefit from a more general integration of knowledge about accessibility and Universal Design for Learning. Other fields in the arts and humanities may have developed their own processes, which could be useful when applied to performance training.

The major limitations of this study could be addressed by conducting a nationwide survey. Actors with disabilities in greater numbers and from different socio-economic backgrounds could provide more perspective. Greater numbers of instructors from a greater variety of sub-fields could shed light on different tactics.

While this study attempts to explore some of the major methodologies currently taught in actor training programs, it is far from comprehensive. There are many excellent training methods that are not represented within these pages. Their exclusion is not meant to imply that they are insignificant or inappropriate for actors with disabilities. This study was limited by my own experiences, and by the responses that I received from interviewees. A future study might address any one of the rich varieties of training methods and gather in-depth opinions about its efficacy, as well as specific strategies for adaptation.

While this dissertation focused narrowly on training actors with disabilities, some of my secondary questions linger unanswered. Creating a more accessible and welcoming acting course is admirable, but it's only one step in the process. How can we encourage more students to enroll in these programs in the first place? Should we focus on college advisors, on high school experiences, or perhaps on local arts programs for youth? Should we start at the top and encourage playwrights, screenwriters, directors, and producers to create more roles for people with disabilities? Or do those artists merely supply the public with what it wants, meaning that the onus for change is on the viewing public? These are complicated questions, all of which deserve a thorough answer.

## 4.6 Conclusion

Feminist scholar Audra Lourde discusses the “creative function of difference in our lives.” She writes:

Difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic... Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate.

(15)

We should seek out difference and celebrate it. The presence of actors with disabilities in film, television, theatre, and in our classes, enriches the experience for all involved. In her memoir, Terry Galloway captures one exciting experience, “... we played together with a happy disregard for usual expectation, but always with a longing to reach each other and our audiences in moments of genuine understanding—even if all we were sharing was the thrill of a screw-up. How could I have forgotten that generous, if sometimes messy, ethic of accommodation that had welcomed and nurtured me?” (157). This process can indeed be messy, and requires the space, freedom, and courage to fail. It is not a goal that every teacher embraces.

The interviews contained in this dissertation were invariably the result of each individual’s generous commitment to better teaching and learning. Many of my requests for information received no reply, perhaps for lack of time, or experience. In one instance, I received a negative response from a “gatekeeper” of training. I was castigated for my questions. This person believes that a teacher with any small amount of talent or

experience can accommodate any student, and that to seek advice from others is the mark of a poor teacher. Clearly there are people that think differently about the value of this work, and their voices are not recognized here.

In the fall I join the faculty of the Department of Theatre at Michigan State University, where I will have a voice in the recruitment and training of actors for their BFA and MFA Professional Actor Training Programs. As someone who is about to transition from student to gatekeeper, this work takes on added meaning. I will soon have the unique opportunity to put these practices into play. In the course of discovering some, but not all, positive practices for training actors with disabilities, I developed a very clear picture about the kind of instructor and artist I intend to be.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "88% of Colleges Report Enrolling Students with Disabilities." *Huffington Post*. 23 Jun. 2011. Web. 22 Jul. 2012.
- "About Alba Effector Pattern Training." *Alba Emoting Workshop*. Web. 3 March 2013. <AlbaEmotingDalVera.com>
- "About Jason Dorwart." UC San Diego Theatre & Dance. Web. 1 May 2013
- Aldridge, Joyce S. *The Tradition of American Actor Training and Its Current Practice in Undergraduate Education*. Diss. University of Colorado Boulder, 1993. Print.
- Bailey, Sally D. *Barrier-Free Theatre: Including Everyone in Theatre Arts-in Schools, Recreation, and Arts Programs-Regardless of (Dis)Ability*. Enumclaw, WA: Idyll Arbor, Inc., 2010. Print.
- Band, S.A.G. Lindsay, V. Freakley, and J. Neelands. "Disabled Students in the Performing Arts - Are We Setting Them Up to Succeed?" *International Journal of Inclusive Education*. 15.9 (2011): 891-908. Print.
- Barton, Robert, and Amy Sarno-Fradkin. "Acting Access." *Theatre Topics*, 6.1 (1996): 1-14. Print.
- Brault, Matthew. "Americans With Disabilities: 2010, Household Economic Studies, Current Population Reports." *United States Census Bureau*. Jul. 2012. Web. 22 Mar. 2013.
- Cameron, Ben. "Sharing the Spotlight." *American Theatre*. TCG. Apr. 2001. Web. <[http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2001/exec\\_april.cfm](http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2001/exec_april.cfm)>
- "CCM Drama Faculty." Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music. Web. Apr. 2013.
- Clark, Nicky. "Punchlines, Prejudice and a lack of disabled actors." *Disability Horizons*. 12 Dec. 2011. Web. 17 Jul. 2012 <<http://disabilityhorizons.com/punchlines-prejudice-and-a-lack-of-disabled-actors>>
- Cohen, Robert. *Acting One*. Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield Pub. Co., 2002. Print.
- Collins, Mark. "Boulder's Dinner Theatre 'Cinderella' star got her start with PHAMALY." *Daily Camera*. 11 May 2012. Web. 1 April 2013.
- Conley, Willy. "From Lip-Reading Ants to Flying Over Cuckoos Nests." *American Theatre*. TCG. Apr. 2001. Web. <<http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2001/lip.cfm>>



- Davies, Telory W. "Mobility: AXIS Dancers Push the Boundaries of Access." *Text and Performance Quarterly*. Vol. 28, Nos. 1-2, January-April 2008, pp. 43.63. Print.
- Davies, Telory W. *Performing Disability: Staging the Actual*. Saarbrücken, Germany: VDM, Verlag Dr. Müller, 2009. Print.
- Davis, Lennard J. "A Clarion Call to Non-Disabled Actors to Refuse to Play Disabled Characters." *Huffington Post*. 8 Mar. 2012. Web. 18 Jul. 2012.
- Davis, Lennard J. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body*. London: Verso, 1995. Print.
- "Disability 101." *Actors' Equity Association*. 8 Dec. 2009. Web. 18 Jul. 2012.  
<<http://www.actorsequity.org/newsmedia/news2009/dec8.disability101.asp>>
- "Disability Stats and Facts." *Disability Funders Network (DFN)*. 2009. Web. 18 Jul. 2012.
- Dolan, Jill. "Feminist Criticism in Action." University of Colorado Boulder. Loft Theatre, Boulder, CO. 3 April 2013. Guest lecture.
- Dolan, Jill. *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*. Ann Arbor, Mich: UMI Research Press, 1988. Print.
- Dolan, Jill. *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Print.
- Duranczyk, Irene M, Jeanne L. Higbee, and Dana B. Lundell. *Best Practices for Access and Retention in Higher Education*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Research on Developmental Education and Urban Literacy, General College, University of Minnesota, 2004. Print.
- Education Longitudinal Study*: 2002. Data Files and Electronic Codebook System : Public Use. Washington, D.C.: NCES, U.S. Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, 2004. Computer file.
- Examined Life – Judith Butler and Sunaura Taylor*. Youtube.com. 6 Oct 2010. Web. 28 May 2013.
- "Fast Facts – Students with Disabilities." National Center for Education Statistics. 2011. Web. 17 July 2012 <<http://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=60>>
- Flomberg, Deb. "Acts and Answered: Jenna Bainbridge." *Examiner*. 31 July 2011. Web. 5 May 2013.
- Flitsos, Anne L, and Gail S. Medford. *Teaching Theatre Today: Pedagogical Views of Theatre in Higher Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.

- Fox, Ann M. "How to Crip the Undergraduate Classroom: Lessons from Performance, Pedagogy, and Possibility." *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability*. 23.1 (2010): 38-47. Print.
- Fries, Kenny. *Staring Back: The Disability Experience from the Inside Out*. New York: Plume, 1997. Print.
- Galloway, Terry. *Mean Little Deaf Queer: A Memoir*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2009. Print.
- Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Staring: How We Look*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print.
- Gilman, Greg. "Hollywood's Disabled Actors Protest NBC's 'Ironside' Casting – When Is It Their Turn?" *The Wrap*. 21 May 2013. Web. 21 May 2013.
- Hall, Kim Q. *Feminist Disability Studies*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011. Print.
- Hayhoe, Simon. *Arts, Culture, and Blindness : A Study of Blind Students in the Visual Arts*. Youngstown N.Y.: Teneo Press, 2008. Print.
- Henderson, Bruce, and Noam Ostrander. *Understanding Disability Studies and Performance Studies*. London: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Horn, L., Berktold, J., & Bobbitt, L. *Students with disabilities in postsecondary education: A profile of preparation, participation, and outcomes*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. 1999. Print.
- "How We Do It." *Theatre Breaking Through Barriers*. Web. 18 Jul. 2012.  
<<http://www.tbtb.org>>
- Hunter, Mary S, Betsy McCalla-Wriggins, and Eric R. White. *Academic Advising: New Insights for Teaching and Learning in the First Year*. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina, 2007. Print.
- Jindal-Snape, Divya. "Self-Evaluation and Recruitment of Feedback for Enhanced Social Interaction by a Student with Visual Impairment." *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness* 99.8 (2005): 486. Web.
- Kaff, Marilyn. *Making the Grade: What Advisors and Administrators Need to Know to Better Assist Students with Disabilities*. Manhattan, KS: NACADA, 2009. Computer file.
- Küppers, Petra. *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

- Küppers, Petra. *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. Print.
- Lee, A. "A Comparison of Postsecondary Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (stem) Enrollment for Students with and Without Disabilities." *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals*. 34.2 (2011): 72-82. Print.
- Lewis, Victoria. *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2006. Print.
- Linklater, Kristin. *Freeing the Natural Voice*. New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1976. Print.
- Linton, Regan. "About Regs." ReganLinton.com. Web. 3 April 2013.
- Linton, Simi. "Reassigning Meaning." *The Disability Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Longmore, Paul K. *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003. Print.
- Lourde, Audre. "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." *The Essential Feminist Reader*. New York: Modern Library, 2007. Print.
- Lynch, Ruth T., and Lori Gussel. "Disclosure and Self-Advocacy Regarding Disability-Related Needs: Strategies to Maximize Integration in Postsecondary Education." *Journal of Counseling & Development*. 74.4 (1996): 352-57. Print.
- Margolis, Ellen, and Lissa T. Renaud. *The Politics of American Actor Training*. New York: Routledge, 2010. Print.
- Masefield, Paddy. *Strength: Broadides from Disability on the Arts*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham, 2006. Print.
- Merlin, Bella. *UC Davis Theatre & Dance – Faculty Bios*. University of California Davis. Web. 1 May 2013.
- Mitchell, Alice A, and William E. Sedlacek. *Freshmen with Learning Disabilities: A Profile of Needs and Concerns*. College Park, Md: Counseling Center, University of Maryland, 1994. Print.
- Mitchell, David T., Sharon L. Snyder, Cheryl M. Wade, Carol J. Gill, Anne Finger, Harlan Hahn, Robert J. DeFelice, Julie Trahan, Kenny Fries, Brad Rothbart, Carrie Sandahl, Mary Duffy, Eli Clare, Marcy Epstein, and Simi Linton. *Vital Signs: Crip Culture Talks Back*. Boston, MA: Fanlight Productions, 1998. Film.

- Moore, John. "PHAMALy actor Regan Linton works her magic in San Diego." *Denver Post*. 03 March 2012. Web. 17 Jul. 2012.  
<[http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci\\_19880409](http://www.denverpost.com/search/ci_19880409)>
- Myers, Karen A. "Understanding Communication Preferences of College Students with Disabilities." *Journal of College Student Development* 51.3 (2010): 265. Web.
- "New Study Reveals Lack of Characters With Disabilities on Television." *Screen Actors' Guild*. 29 Sept 2010. Web. <<http://www.sag.org/new-study-reveals-lack-characters-disabilities-television>>
- Oreck, Barry A, Steven V. Owen, and Susan M. Baum. "Validity, Reliability, and Equity Issues in an Observational Talent Assessment Process in the Performing Arts." *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*. 27.1 (2003): 62-94. Print.
- Palmer, Charles, and Richard T. Roessler. "Requesting Classroom Accommodations: Self-Advocacy and Conflict Resolution Training for College Students with Disabilities." *Journal of Rehabilitation*. 66.3 (2000): 38. Print.
- Preece, Julie E., Norman L. Roberts, Mark E. Beecher, Phillip D. Rash, David A. Shwalb, and Edward A. J. Martinelli. "Academic Advisors and Students with Disabilities: a National Survey of Advisors' Experiences and Needs." *Nacada Journal*. 27.1 (2007): 57-72. Print.
- "Principles of Expression." *Expressive Actor*. Web. 2 May 2013. <[ExpressiveActor.org](http://ExpressiveActor.org)>
- Puar, Jasbir K., and Amit Rai. "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: the War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots." *Social Text*. 20.3 (2002): 117-148. Print.
- Ramos, Manuel. *Advising Students with Disabilities*. NACADA. Monograph Series Number 5, 1997. Print.
- Rao, Shaila, and Barbara C. Gartin. "Attitudes of University Faculty Toward Accommodations to Students with Disabilities." *Journal for Vocational Special Needs Education*. 25 (2004): 47-54. Print. <<http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/EJ854908.pdf>>
- Roach, Joseph R. *It*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. Print.
- Rose, David H., and Anne Meyer. *A Practical Reader in Universal Design for Learning*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Education Press, 2006. Print.
- Sandahl, C. "Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology's Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. 16 (2002): 17-32. Print.
- Sandahl, Carrie, and Philip Auslander. *Bodies in Commotion: Disability & Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. Print.

- Schiffman, Jean. "Playing Blind Characters." *Backstage*. 2008. Print.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010. Print.
- Strickling, Chris Anne. "Actual Lives: Cripples in the House." *Theatre Topics* 12.2 (2002): 143. Web.
- Stucky, Nathan and Tomell-Presto, Jessica. "Revising Tradition in Acting and Movement Pedagogy." Fliotsos, Anne L, and Gail S. Medford. *Teaching Theatre Today: Pedagogical Views of Theatre in Higher Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004. Print.
- Stumbo, Norma J, Jay K. Martin, and Brad N. Hedrick. "Assistive Technology: Impact on Education, Employment, and Independence of Individuals with Physical Disabilities." *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*. 30.2 (2009): 99-110. Print.
- Summerville, Jill. "The Presence of the Gimp: The Advantages and Disadvantages of Disabled Theater Companies." MATC Conference, 3-6 Mar 2011. Minneapolis, MN. Speech.
- "Survey of Americans with Disabilities." Kessler Foundation. 2010. Web. 17 July 2012. <<http://www.2010disabilitysurveys.org/indexold.html>>
- Tolan, Cathleen. "We Are Not a Metaphor." *American Theatre*. TCG. April 2001. Web. <<http://www.tcg.org/publications/at/2001/metaphor.cfm>>
- Tomlinson, Richard, and Richard Tomlinson. *Disability, Theatre, and Education*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. Print.
- Udo, J. P., and D. I. Fels. "Enhancing the Entertainment Experience of Blind and Low-Vision Theatregoers through Touch Tours." *Disability & Society* 25.2 (2010): 231. Web.
- Uncertain Welcome*. General College, University of Minnesota, 2002. Film. Web. <<http://mediamill.cla.umn.edu/mediamill/display/70826>>
- Wagner, Mary, and David Malouf. *Perceptions and Expectations of Youth with Disabilities: A Special Topic Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (nlts2)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Dept. of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Special Education Research, 2007. Print.
- "Where We Are on TV." *Glaad.org*. Web. 22 Mar 2013
- Wolfe, Kathi. "Blind to Barriers." *Washington Blade*. 20 Sept 2012. Web.
- "Yale School of Drama." *Yale*. Web. 5 May 2013.

## Interviews

Bainbridge, Jenna. Personal interview. 20 May 2013.

Barton, Robert. "Re: teaching question." Message to author. 1 June 2013. E-mail.

Brody, James. "Re: Alexander Technique Questions." Message to author. 2 May 2013. E-mail.

Cohen, Robert. "Re: teaching question." Message to author. 15 May 2013. E-mail.

Colaianne, Louis. "Teaching and Disability." Message to author. 4 May 2013. E-mail.

Dal Vera, Rocco. "Re: teaching question." Message to author. 13 May 2013. E-mail.

Dorwart, Jason. Personal interview. 17 May 2013. Skype.

Giraldi-Palmer, Lyndsay. Personal interview. 13 May 2013. Phone.

Giguere, Amanda. "Teaching Question." Message to author. 23 Aug 2010. E-mail.

Giguere, Amanda. "Re: Teaching Question." Message to author. 6 March 2013. E-mail.

Shangle, Hope. "Re: Question for Hope." Message to author. 13 May 2013. E-mail.

Linklater, Kristin. "Re: Teaching Question." Message to author. 28 May 2013. E-mail.

Linton, Regan. "Re: Acting Question." Message to author. 16 May 2013. E-mail.

Lugering, Michael. "The Expressive Actor." Message to author. 20 May 2013. E-mail.

Merlin, Bella. "Re: teaching question." Message to author. 10 May 2013. E-mail.

O'Brien, Nick. "Re: The Stanislavski Experience." 9 May 2013. E-mail.

Roznowski, Rob. Personal interview. 8 May 2013. Phone.

Sarno-Fradkin, Amy Lynn. "Re: U. of Oregon Dissertation." Message to author. 6 Jun 2012. E-mail.

Schambelan, Ike. "Question about blind actors." Message to author. 25 Sept 2010. E-mail.

Smukler, David. "Coaching actors with disability." Message to author. 14 May 2013. E-mail.

Summerville, Jill. "From Jill Summerville, Who Hasn't Forgotten About You." Message to

author. 27 May 2013. E-mail.

Vasiliades, Tom. Personal interview. 7 May 2013. Phone.

## **Web Resources**

### **Casting/Industry Information**

<http://www.dontplaymepayme.com/>  
Don't Play Me, Pay Me

[http://www.sag.org/files/sag/documents/IAMPWD\\_2012\\_Resource\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.sag.org/files/sag/documents/IAMPWD_2012_Resource_Guide.pdf)  
I Am PWD (Person with Disability) Resource Guide

<http://inclusioninthearts.org/>  
Alliance for Inclusion in the Arts – Promoting full diversity in theatre, film and television

### **Post-Secondary Education**

<http://www.nea.gov/about/504Workbook.html>  
Section 504 Self-Evaluation Workbook

<http://www.nea.gov/resources/accessibility/pubs/NEA-TipSheet.pdf>  
National Endowment for the Arts – Artworks  
Revised Regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act Titles II and III – Tip Sheet

<http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/resources.html>  
Disability Services – University of Colorado Boulder

<http://www.going-to-college.org/>  
A Resource for Teens with Disabilities

### **Universal Design for Learning / Universal Course Design / Universal Instructional Design**

<http://tash.org/>  
Equity, Opportunity and Inclusion for People with Disabilities

<http://www.suffolk.edu/campuslife/36414.html>  
Universal Course Design

<http://www.universalcoursedesign.org/>  
Universal Course Design (includes file validator, syllabus tool, and videos)

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/universaldesign/intro.html>

Universal Design

<http://udeducation.org/>  
Universal Design

<http://www.cast.org/>  
Universal Design for Learning

### **Accessibility / Accommodations**

<http://www.nea.gov/resources/accessibility/index.html>  
National Endowment for the Arts - Office of Accessibility

<http://www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/fact/jan.htm>  
Department of Labor's Job Accommodation Network

<http://abledata.com/abledata.cfm>  
Assistive Technology

<http://ataccess.org/>  
Alliance for Technology Access

<http://www.apple.com/accessibility/>  
Apple's Accessibility

<http://www.nea.gov/resources/Accessibility/pubs/DesignAccessibility.html>  
Design for Accessibility: A Cultural Administrators Handbook

<http://www.learningally.org/>  
Reading resources for visually impaired

[http://www.w3c.hu/talks/2006/wai\\_de/mate/watchfire.html](http://www.w3c.hu/talks/2006/wai_de/mate/watchfire.html)  
Tests websites for accessibility

<http://www.inclusionproject.org/>  
The Inclusion Project

### **General Information**

<http://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc>  
National Arts and Disability Center

<http://disstudies.org/>  
Society for Disability Studies

<http://codi.buffalo.edu/>



## Cornucopia of Disability Information

<http://www.ldaamerica.org/>  
Learning Disabilities Association of America

<http://www.semel.ucla.edu/nadc>  
National Arts and Disability Center, UCLA

## **Theatre & Dance Companies**

<http://axisdance.org/>  
Axis Dance Company

<http://www.uppityco.com/>  
That Uppity Theatre Company

<http://www.phamaly.org/>  
PHAMALY – Denver Theatre Company

<http://www.tbtb.org/>  
Theatre Breaking Through Barriers