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# Applying Disability Theory as an Actor and Director To Theatrical Texts of The Past and Present

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# **APPLYING DISABILITY THEORY AS AN ACTOR AND DIRECTOR TO THEATRICAL TEXTS OF THE PAST AND PRESENT**

Theatrical texts, especially those that regard disability, of the past, present, and even the future will continue to have an impact on contemporary society and should not, and cannot, be understood and interpreted by the general population as ever before.

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# Introduction

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Throughout human history, disabilities have been part of each culture's anxieties. Accordingly, disabilities have long been a part of each civilization's literary culture - from the Ancient Greeks, for example, who wrote about and believed in the god Hephaestus, who was lame; to the Jewish Talmud, which mentions disability as a means of getting to heaven; even to William Shakespeare, who wrote multiple plays that include characters with disabilities; and to contemporary literature, where there is an abundance of stories involving disability. As society has evolved, so too has the representation of disability within these cultures (Kepler).

Unfortunately, these changing views of disability have almost always surrounded possible solutions or cures for disabilities (Kepler). Aristotle wrote in The Politics that "No deformed child shall live" (1335b), and throughout the Middle Ages, popular folklore surrounded stories of the devil creating people with disabilities. Then in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, eugenics, or the idea of selective breeding, became a popular scientific topic while the late 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a great influx in stories that aimed to scare people into protecting themselves against disabilities. Finally, in the early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, sterilization and institutionalization laws became popular and standard. These laws remained in effect in 30 US states until the 1970's. It wasn't until the 1980's that people with disabilities were granted rights in the United States, and not until the 1990's when federal law, the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), required equal treatment of people with disabilities (Kepler). Despite being present throughout all of human history, people with disabilities are only now beginning to gain a small amount of the respect that they deserve. As a theatre artist and friend to professionals with many different kinds of disabilities, I have begun to acknowledge and realize how today's views of people with disabilities can be hurtful, condescending, and unfair, and I believe that more must be done

around the world to help the general public become educated and aware of disabilities and the people who have them.

The growing knowledge, study, and understanding of disabilities are known as Disability Theory. Emerging only in the last thirty years, Disability Theory does not diagnose disability; it studies the social meanings, symbols, and stigmas attached to disability and asks how they relate to enforced systems of exclusion, oppression, etc., in the hope of attacking the belief that being “able bodied” or “able minded” is what determines a quality human being (Kepler). In other words, Disability Theory identifies, “in hopes of eliminating them, the social states of oppression that are forced upon people with disabilities, while at the same time asserting the positive values that they contribute to society” (Siebers 4).

In the scheme of human history, Disability Theory is a radical idea emerging only at the very last instant; but it is revolutionizing the way in which disabilities are viewed, and will be viewed, for the remainder of human history. It becomes necessary and important, then, to apply Disability Theory to theatrical texts to further promote Disability Theory’s existence, but also to continue making theatre socially relevant. Just as minstrel shows are no longer socially acceptable, performances that paint people with disabilities in equally negative connotations should also be stopped. That is not to say that they should be eliminated, their texts destroyed; the study of such texts remains important to understanding the bases of Disability Theory. But with this revolutionary Disability Theory in mind, it is clear that theatrical texts, especially those that regard disability, of the past, present, and even the future, will continue to have an impact on contemporary society, and should not and, because of changing societal views, cannot be understood and interpreted by the general population as ever before.

Across the United States, theatre companies founded on people with disabilities have

begun to demonstrate application of Disability Theory to theatre. One such company, the Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League, or PHAMALy (a company for which I work), is a great example of both the successes of appropriate application, as well as the damage done by inappropriately applying Disability Theory. Nevertheless, companies composed of, or for, people with disabilities do not need to be the only theatre companies applying Disability Theory. Unfortunately, many people are scared by the implications of applying Disability Theory.

However, such new application of Disability Theory does not in any way imply that diminishing the playwright's original intentions, characters, or storylines is necessary. With careful understanding of not only Disability Theory, but also the piece of theatre, as well, an actor or director can apply Disability Theory to his or her own work without compromising the integrity of the text as written, the integrity of a proper and convincing performance, or the integrity of the playwright and director's conceits.

## PART I: Understanding Disability before Applying Disability

### Disabilities: What Are They and Who Has Them?

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Before approaching theatrical texts with the intent of applying disabilities, it is absolutely vital to understand the basic conventions, ideals, and purposes of what is referred to here as Disability Theory. Disability Theory is simply the study of disability: its implications, its history, its current state and social stance, and what these statistics represent about our society. It must also be noted that while Disability Theory is supposed to be inherently neutral, the study of disability has created a social movement that the theory clearly supports: disability advocacy. Tobin Siebers explains how Disability Theory supports disability advocacy in his book titled

Disability Theory when he states that disability theory contains “contradictory usages and attitudes about disability, developing its own understanding of disability as a positive contribution to society and both critiquing and comprehending society’s largely harmful views about disability”(5). What Siebers describes is the fundamental difference between Disability Theory and Disability Studies. While Disability Studies encompasses all of the areas of significance for Disability Theory, it does not have a specific function. Disability Theory aims at securing a shift in attitude toward disabilities and the people who have them. It is for this reason that Disability Theory should be applied to theatre. Also because of this reason, application of Disability Theory to theatre cannot be fully applied until the societal views, as Siebers put it, that Disability Theory is trying to alter, are understood.

Before understanding the societal views, though, disabilities themselves need to be understood. Perhaps the most difficult step in considering disability is comfortably defining and identifying what constitutes a disability. Inevitably, the definition of disability stems from the ideal of “normalcy.” But this definition has obvious and inherent flaws. After all, what is normal? Is normal the ideal state? And who defines normal? Left-handedness used to be abnormal and neo-Nazis said that the Arian race was normal. So who decided that disabilities are abnormal? We must inevitably look more deeply into the statistics of disability to determine who defines “normal.”

In 2009 nearly 50 million Americans, or 1 in 5, had some form of a defined disability. Those without disabilities far outnumber those with disabilities and render this smaller population a minority. Moreover, nearly 40% of people with disabilities live in the South, suggesting that people with disabilities tend to be of a minority race. Furthermore only 57% of people with disabilities are employed, compared to 77% of people without disabilities, further

adding to the wealth gap between the majority of Americans and those with disabilities (Kepler). As is seen within these statistics, people with disabilities tend to be the minority. It immediately becomes clear that a majority defines what is “normal.” This principle implies that the ideal of normal changes along with the majority. In this case, the majority has been white upper and middle class Americans (“U.S. Census”).

It should also be noted that disability is exceedingly expensive and can easily contribute to the lower social status of those who have disabilities. With an increase in knowledge, recognition, and incidence of children with intellectual developmental disabilities like Down syndrome and Autism, however, which require great economic resources—resources which are primarily found within the same white upper and middle class—might there be a shift of normal in the United States? It is impossible to know, but disability theory aims at helping the masses understand and accept disabilities in order to facilitate such a shift (Kepler).

The difficult part, however, is that just because something is out of the societal stereotype of normal doesn’t necessarily make it a disability. As such, one of the ways in which disabilities have begun to become accepted in the United States is through classifications. As such, the US government has classified disabilities through the Americans with Disabilities Act as “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of a person's major life activities (for example, caring for oneself, speaking, breathing, or learning)” (“ADA”). For all intents and purposes, disability in relation to Disability Theory should be defined as it is categorized in the Americans with Disability Act.

There is no doubt that categorizing disability is an essential part of accepting and understanding disabilities. Because of categorizations, the government can estimate resources to serve the disabled population, give the disabled population a voice in government proceedings,

and determine eligibility for services (Kepler). However, because of these same categorizations of disability, a person's identity is often altered in the eyes of the public by the false stereotypes that are built by those same categories. For example, because a person with an intellectual disability needs an individualized lesson plan in school, many people falsely assume that people with intellectual disabilities are incapable of learning the same material as those without disabilities. Furthermore, the language in which these categories are structured reflects society's views, which are often offensive and demeaning. Words found within the 2010 version of the ADA with negative connotations include "mental" and "issues" ("ADA"). In turn, these negative beliefs are spread along with the knowledge and implementation of policies surrounding disability categories. As a result, many people's diagnoses are incorrectly used as a measure of those same people's abilities. The problem, in other words, is that humans cannot be defined by diagnoses, categorizations that lump people together based on limitations or appearances because there is no way of describing their abilities. Each person's disability is different (Kepler).

Despite a difference in each person's disability, the major categories of disability in the United States are physical, intellectual, psychiatric, and cognitive disabilities. Studies show that all four of these groups experience prejudice, but physical disabilities tend to be the least stigmatized (Kepler). Still, outward appearance of any disability is a major factor in the prejudice a person receives. Intellectual disabilities, such as Autism and Down Syndrome, are disabilities that affect mental processing and are NOT learning disabilities. Such disabilities tend to be highly stereotyped (as evidenced by the epidemic of the word "retard" as a slang insult), as are the people with intellectual disabilities. Psychological disabilities like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) tend to be the most feared, least understood, and were the last disabilities to be officially recognized by the US government (Kepler). Finally, cognitive disabilities, more

commonly known as learning disabilities, like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), remain highly stigmatized among younger populations (Kepler). These categorizations are important in understanding the way in which prejudices affect individuals based on the type and outward appearance of their disability.

Equally as important, while a theory aimed at showing that people who are “dis,” or “not,” “abled” are in fact quite capable of living comfortably and productively may seem like a sort of oxymoron, many people with disabilities find a sense of cohesiveness and inclusiveness as a population because they fit into the category of disability. Disability Theory doesn’t aim to destroy this cohesive nature, nor change the word “disabled” – no matter how negative its literal definition is. The theory aims, instead, to show that a population united under the single title of “disabled” are misunderstood and misrepresented in cultural understandings, and aims to change these misunderstandings.

When looking at disabilities, especially when applying them to theatre, it is especially important to understand each character’s limitations and abilities, as well as to understand how a specific disability has been categorized and how many people, including the character, may react to the stigma of that disability. In most cases, in order to positively reflect the disability, in-depth disability and character research will be needed to understand each disability’s particulars.

### In the Mind of Someone with a Disability

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With the iconic American Dream comes a harsh implication for people with disabilities. In a country where anyone can achieve anything if one just tries hard enough, a sort of ideological Social Darwinism is applied to people with disabilities. That is, many people are under the impression that those who are successful are better than those who are experiencing difficulties. They believe that if those people with disabilities would just “try harder,” they would

need less help (Kepler). Clearly, such an ideology is detrimental to those with disabilities who need help regardless of effort - like people with Autism, for example, who make great efforts to accomplish everyday tasks but still need assistance. In lieu of this ideology, it is worth noting that many people with disabilities do not view their disabilities as limitations. Instead, many people view their disability as a different lifestyle. In other words, using a Braille computer is not a limitation; it is simply a different way of achieving the same goal. This is an invaluable lesson to learn not only as a person, but also as a theatre artist trying to understand the lifestyle and motivations of people with disabilities. After all, it is impossible to properly motivate a character's actions and insights without truly understanding how that character would move and react; that's basic theatre.

Furthermore, and perhaps the most important lesson to learn about people with disabilities, is that a majority of them do NOT want to eliminate or cure their disabilities. Many people with developmental disabilities (a disability since birth) have never known another lifestyle without disability and are perfectly content in their current abilities as a person. For example, after the invention of the cochlear implant, a device that acts as an electronic ear, the deaf community was in an uproar. Despite the new possibilities of hearing for the first time, many people simply didn't want to hear; they hadn't before, they didn't want to now (Kepler).

Additionally, many people with acquired disabilities (disabilities acquired later in life) begin to appreciate true friendship more deeply, find profound spirituality, or find a greater sense of self because of their ability to live happily with their disabilities (Kepler). While many people may look down upon people with disabilities, people with disabilities do not want their disabilities to disappear, nor do they want them to blend in. They don't want people to ignore their disabilities; they want them to acknowledge and accept them as they have themselves. The

same ideals apply to parents with children with disabilities. Many parents with children with disabilities feel that their children have enlightened them to a level of humanity they hadn't previously known was possible (Brenneman). Simply stated, the stereotypical angry figure that is turned onto evil deeds because of the bitterness over his disability is more fiction than fact. For many people these positive ideals about disabilities are hard to imagine, but they are an important part of understanding disability culture. Again, these are invaluable lessons to learn when trying to apply disability to a play, a character, or any theatrical text or concept: don't ignore the disability, don't resent the disability, don't try to change the disability, and don't consider people with disabilities to be abnormal. Otherwise, it is neither a true representation of disability culture, nor an appropriate application of Disability Theory.

### Disability Etiquette

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Now that we see that disability is established out of the creation of "normalcy," and that people with disabilities may not view disability under the same negative light as those without disabilities, we can look at the simple ideals that can be manipulated to keep our disability advocacy polite to all of those involved. Likely, the most nerve-racking aspect of speaking about disability for people who don't have disabilities is the fear of saying something inappropriate or offensive. But speaking to people with disabilities, or about disabilities, is very simple.

Perhaps the most basic of principles involved in treating people with disabilities appropriately is known as People First Language (Kepler). The ideal is as simple as the title suggests. When talking about someone with a disability, always mention the person first. That is, when talking about someone with cancer, we do not tend to say "cancer-girl." A person's diagnosis does not define her, so it is more appropriate to mention that she is a human being before defining her in medical terms. Instead of saying "young Down Syndrome girl," say

“young girl with Down Syndrome.” According to one disability advocacy website, People First Language (PFL) “is not political correctness; instead, it demonstrates good manners, respect, the Golden Rule, and more—it can change the way we see a person” (“People First Language”)

Additionally, there are words that have become derogatory slang words. Words to avoid or identify within scripts include retard, cripple, victim, stricken, special, can’t talk, and confined, as well as any other word that implies unnecessary limitations, anger, or pain. However, because people with disabilities do not tend to be insecure about their disabilities, everyday sayings and words do not offend someone with a disability. For example, someone who is blind will not take offense to “nice to see you” unless you mean it with mal-intent.

Also, people with disabilities that are cognitive or intellectual are able to understand what others are saying to them even if they have difficulty responding. Many people may also assume other people’s limitations based purely on outward physical appearance; many people with Autism, Down Syndrome, and other disabilities are often articulate and smart. People with disabilities, every kind of disability, are people. As people, they want to be spoken to with dignity and regard for who they are as people. No need to ignore, nor pay special attention to, their disabilities.

#### So, What about the Theatre Application?

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While the lessons regarding people with disabilities, etiquette, and classification may seem to be most applicable to personal and everyday situations regarding people with disabilities, once appropriate etiquette is learned, one can begin to apply disability to theatre. Such lessons in disability are important for recreating positive disability interactions on stage, as well as recreating negative disability interactions on stage. Without understanding these ideals and rules, an actor or director cannot be sure how to make a clear directorial or motivated

character choice within the world of disability. Once the ground rules, intent of Disability Theory, and etiquette are understood, theatre can enter into the equation.

## PART II: Approaching Disability and Theatre

### Finding a Text and Having a Vision

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As with any theatrical endeavor, before the rehearsal process can begin or the artistic germ be fully developed, the specific text to be used must be completed or selected. Once the text is selected, Disability Theory can then be applied. Application of Disability Theory may include drawing on or illustrating major themes of disability, or may be as simple as updating a single line. Examples of both are discussed later in the essay. The important decision for directors to make is that of their intent. Do they intend to make a statement about disability, update a text to make it more accessible to a modern audience, or both? The goal may very easily dictate the text selection but, more importantly, it may also affect the artistic vision of the show. Regardless of intent, many plays can be seen to include themes of disability through even the shallowest of exegeses.

Whether it is in Shakespeare's *Richard III*, Jim Leanord, Jr.'s *The Diviners*, Major Broadway shows like *Side Show* or Disney's *Beauty and the Beast*, Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, or Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*, most shows contain a reference or a theme that relates, states, or implies disability. Some plays are written about disability like *A Day in the Life of Joe Egg* by Peter Nichols. One simply has to be aware of them. But applying Disability Theory to a play does not have to be "corrective." In other words, Disability Theory need not only be applied when outdated messages regarding disability are used. Much like mixed gender or mixed racial casting, Disability Theory can also be employed as an interesting social commentary in plays

that do not traditionally include disability.

Applying Disability Theory to Arthur Miller, for example, creates an interesting social commentary. The implications of Biff's having a physical disability, but breaking free from his father's expectations, are enormous. In essence, Biff, the one with a disability, is the only one "able" enough to embrace the new economic realities of their changing world. This is but one example where disability can be used to further stimulate social commentary.

However, a director must be careful not to apply Disability Theory simply for the sake of applying the theory. While intended to make a social shift, disability theory needs to be applicable, justifiable, and used to enhance the original world of the play.

Though this may seem radical now, the idea may become revolutionary and eventually, will become more acceptable the more it is seen – just as cross gender casting and mixed racial casting has. Once a director understands the basic principles behind Disability Theory and how to keep the implications of disability from becoming unknowingly offensive, he or she must understand how to apply these ideals. There are some basic principles and ideas that will help disability theory take shape within a production.

### PART III: The Basics – “Playing” with the “Center”

#### Shakespeare's *Richard III* and the “Quintessential Villain”

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Shakespeare's character Richard in *Richard III* can easily be seen as the “quintessential villain.” For example, in the opening soliloquy of *Richard III*, Richard says that he is “rudely stamped ... cheated of feature by this dissembling nature, Deform'd, [and] unfinish'd” (1.1.15-20). Already, in the very first soliloquy, Richard displays that he despises his own body, existence, and thus, his disability. He then continues to talk about his disability, saying that he

has “no delight to pass away the time, unless to spy my shadow in the sun and descant on my own deformity” (1.1.26-27). Richard says that he is so upset by his disability, that when he sees his own shadow, all he can do is seethe about it. As a result, Richard says, “Since I cannot prove a lover, ... I am determined to prove a villain” (1.1.30). With this first soliloquy, Shakespeare has presented the ideas that Richard hates his disability, and that as a direct result of his disability, it is in Richard’s nature to perform villainous acts. By creating a character based on the negative stereotypes that Disability Theory attempts to destroy, Shakespeare has utilized the character structure that would become the model for antagonists for the next two hundred years, which I believe he meant to be the “quintessential villain.”

The “body theory” of Disability Theory suggests that “all bodies are socially constructed – that social attitudes and institutions determine, far greater than biological fact, the representation of the body’s reality” (Siebers 53). In the case of *Richard III*, Shakespeare’s use of disability was influenced by his culture’s understanding and discourse towards those with disabilities. After all, there was no Disability Theory in Elizabethan England to lead Shakespeare to think radically about disability. Because Shakespeare’s culture regarded disability as a “malformation,” something that needed to be fixed, the audience related his wickedness to his disability (“Living”). Not only did the audience think that Richard’s actions in the play were wrong, they also thought that his mindset was a representation of his disability; because his body was malformed, so was his mind. Shakespeare’s opening soliloquy of the play is a direct representation of the sort of discourse that created and fueled these stereotypes of disability and cruelty. As a result of this character description, Richard’s tyrannous acts become even more tragic as they are the direct result of a completely and thoroughly evil person – he is both mentally and physically evil. He is the “quintessential villain,” or a completely evil person.

When placed next to a hero, then, it is easy and exciting to see both the antagonist and protagonist on completely opposite terms; they become binaries. A binary opposition, according to Jacques Derrida, is a pair of direct opposites. These opposites can be in any category and be about anything. For example, “white/black” is a binary opposition, just as “healthy/sick” is. Derrida argues that Western thought defines the world through these binaries (Klages 53). For instance, according to Derrida, Western thinkers define something as either “good” or as “evil,” or as “hot” or “cold,” and so on, using only binary oppositions to make a clear understanding of what we are evaluating.

Derrida continues to say that western thought is structured in this definitive way because one side of the binary opposition is thought of with a positive connotation, while the opposing side is thought of with a negative connotation (Klages 54). Therefore, something positive or negative can be known about the focus of what is being evaluated. For example, in the binary opposition of “right/wrong,” Western thinkers assign “right” a better connotation than “wrong.” Therefore, they “know” that right is better. That, according to Derrida, is how Western thought and knowledge are established. By creating the thoroughly evil “quintessential villain,” Shakespeare has created a story with a binary opposition: Richard and his disability represent pure evil, and Richmond represents pure goodness.

It is not surprising, then, that to create this binary, multiple characters point out and draw on Richard’s disability. For example, Lady Anne herself calls Richard a “Foul devil”( 1.2.24) with a “Foul Deformity”( 1.2.31), while others call him “a foul hunchbacked toad”(4.4.52). Additionally, the use of the boar as a symbol for Richard not only represents Richard’s uncontrollable anger, but also his physicality and resulting inherent danger to the human race. Historical folklore indicates that in Shakespeare’s era the boar was hunted because it was very

much resented and feared. By drawing this parallel, Richard is clearly seen as the greatest kind of villain. These remarks, this discourse, again displays society's attitude towards disability, and helps cement the binary of good/evil.

Even with such an ingrained binary of good/evil concerning people with disabilities as demonstrated in the discourse of the play, Disability Theory can still be applied to *Richard III* while maintaining the script's original intent. Perhaps more important than the usage of disability in the play, when momentarily disregarding disability, the play's foundation would still remain intact - Richard would still be the antagonist; the play would still be a tragedy; and the play's other themes, including the supernatural and the power of dreams, would still be applicable. For example, Margaret's prophecies, the comparison of Richard to devils and demons, Clarence and Stanley's dreams, and Richard's comparison to Proteus would all remain intact. The discourse of disability was simply used to enhance the play's binary. Again, the symbol of the boar and of Richard as the "true devil" allowed Shakespeare to explore the themes of the supernatural and inhuman while building a positive reflection of Tudor rule. Hence, disability in *Richard III* was used to enhance its major themes.

It can be seen, then, that Shakespeare's intent was not to make a negative commentary on those with disabilities – but to use the current discourse to his advantage. It is highly unlikely that Shakespeare wrote the play in an attempt to paint those with disabilities as brutes, but more likely that he was simply using a cultural clue to add "effect" to Richard's character; to create the "quintessential villain" to stress the themes of good vs. evil and the parallel binary of York vs. Tudor rule. In some ways, it is the prejudice against Richard that allows Richard to become such a tyrant. It could even be argued that Richard's tyrannous acts are born from the prejudice against him. But this places the evil in those around Richard, and not in Richard himself, which

seems counterproductive to the Tudor v. York commentary. A director must look at the text to gain inspiration to apply Disability Theory. Since the text of *Richard III* is intended to create the “quintessential villain,” it is not against the text, or the intent of the play or playwright, then, to examine and modify how disability affects the performances of the characters that use disability as a defining feature. In fact, the use of Disability Theory today should achieve the same goal of enhancing the play’s other themes.

When applying Disability Theory, it becomes important to understand how a contemporary audience views his disability and how it can detract from the intended themes of the play. As discussed in Section I, research on the category of physical disabilities reveals that one recurring and inappropriate contemporary reaction to disability is one of pity. In no way did Shakespeare intend for his audience to pity Richard in the opening soliloquy; he was intending to frighten and intimidate the audience with Richard’s “quintessential villainy.” But with modern audiences often immediately endowing Richard with pity because of his disability, when revising *Richard III*, pity is the first ideology to remove. As the studies suggested, an audience is likely to endow Richard with pity because of the visual appearance of his disability. To combat this problem, the actor playing Richard can demonstrate his physical prowess through sword play or jesting upon his first appearance before an audience. By doing so, Richard is able to eliminate some of the pity of being physically “unable” by demonstrating that he really is quite able. Once Richard speaks, what he says can further eliminate the audience’s pity. It is entirely inappropriate to greatly alter the words of the play, and in order for the audience to react differently to disability throughout the play, the actors must use Shakespeare’s text to accomplish an unpitiful Richard.

If the actor playing Richard were to use his disability as a façade for, and not the true source of, his lowly intentions in the play, the opening soliloquy would immediately establish Richard's low moral status and eliminate any pity the audience feels for him. This concept utilizes the problem mentioned in Section I in which negative stereotypes are placed upon the identity of people with disabilities. Here, Richard uses the stereotype of disability to his advantage. If Richard were to discover that his disability could be his excuse for his evil doings within the soliloquy itself, the audience would see him process this idea and immediately loathe him for taking advantage of his own disability. This is an example of manipulating contemporary stereotypes linked to people with disabilities in an effort to display that they are wrong. The actor can achieve such a tactic by using the commas provided by Shakespeare as times for realization. Take the sentence "I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty" (1.1.15-20), for example. If the actor pauses after "I," considers and smirks at the idea of using his disability, and then continues the line "that am rudely stamp'd" in a heightened, overly dramatic and mocking manner, and then continues on in normal fashion with "and want love's majesty," it is clear that Richard will use his disability to cover his true intentions. Such a method could be repeated throughout the soliloquy and the play with small variations.

Furthermore, if the other characters are as acutely aware of Richard's use of disability as a façade as the audience is, those that call him names and reject him can be seen as mocking his senseless and ineffective façade, not his disability. The names they call him do not reflect his disability, but his character. By eliminating the audience's pity for Richard, it becomes clear that he truly understands his disability and plans to exploit it, preserving Shakespeare's text and intention of using Richard's disability to make him seem even more villainous. Finally, this method also demonstrates to an audience that a person with disability needs no pity, nor are they

less intelligent or less capable of emotion than people without disabilities.

With disability as a facade, however, it could still be inferred that because Richard is the only character with a disability, his disability is still a representation of his wickedness. The obvious answer, then, is to even the playing field by endowing a heroic character with a disability.

#### Even the Playing Field; Every Binary Has TWO Sides...

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Every binary has two sides. So far, this adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* has a quintessential villain, but not an equally quintessential hero. According to M.H. Abrams, a hero is simply the protagonist, or the person "on whom our interest centers" (137). This definition is not to be confused with the ideal of the tragic hero, or someone "who moves us to pity because of his misfortune" (Abrams 203). Simply because of the connotation of the word "hero" as it has arisen from Aristotle's definition of the tragic hero as "better than we are" (Abrams 202) and likely our new-age ideal of the "super-hero," a new categorization that includes both the connotation of the word hero, but also precludes the classification of tragedy, is needed. That new classification is referred to here as the "Quintessential Hero," or the opposite of the "Quintessential Villain."

With the goal of creating the opposite of "evil" inside our binary to define our quintessential hero, it would seem appropriate to have Richmond characterized as entirely opposite of Richard, our completely evil but cunning character; but this is not entirely accurate. Shakespeare did not write him this way; and since Richard is cunning, we don't want our quintessential hero to be daffy. Since Richard is articulate, we don't want Richmond to be bumbling, especially given the final speech he gives to his troops. Equally as important, if Richard has a disability, should Richmond be able bodied? The answer is no. When looking at

binaries, a common ground must link the opposites to keep them from being completely incongruent devices. For example, black and white could not be opposites unless they were linked by their relation to light. Derrida calls this link the “Play” of the binary. He says that this play comes from deconstructing the “center” of the binary. The “center” is very much like Stanislavsky’s “artistic germ” and when thought through completely, will help define the structure and statement for the entire show, as well as the choices the actors and directors choose to make about their characters. The center, according to Derrida, is the place from which an entire system comes; a place that guarantees the meaning of the entire system (Klages 55). Derrida’s aim is to deconstruct the center of this binary and create Play. That is not to say he wants to reverse the mark separating the binaries; that is, he doesn’t look to reverse the roles by making good seem evil. He simply strives to erase the boundaries between the oppositions showing that each term, rather than being the polar opposite of its paired term, is actually part of it. In other words, Derrida is looking for the commonality between two opposites (Klages 60). Creating Play in *Richard III*, or whenever applying disability theory, is entirely necessary to establish the link between the binary of Richmond v. Richard in order to help the two characters compete on the same plane.

The first method to creating an appropriate link is attempting to deconstruct the original binary. However, one of the most controversial sections of *Richard III* occurs in Act V when Richmond gives a sentimental battle cry, and Richard gives a heated call for death. While the antithesis certainly exists, many people feel that Richmond’s monologue actually makes him appear weak, while Richard actually appears to be stronger. As a result, many people end up disappointed by Richmond’s lack of passion and by Richard’s pathetic fall in battle. The *stakes* in the play, or how badly each character wants their objective, are uneven. This sentiment

regarding the characters may stem from an originally weak, or even missing, link in the original binary. By being a completely moral character, the opposite of Richard, Richmond actually becomes an utterly boring and uninspiring character. The only link in the binary that Shakespeare has created exists in the two characters' positions in society. But when applying modern disability theory, we are able not only to preserve Shakespeare's original intent, but also enhance and solve the problems associated with the original binary.

In addition to the two characters' positions in society, we can use disability as the link, or "Play," between the good/evil binary. By doing so, we place both characters on the same physical and societal planes, creating equal stakes and a more defined and level binary. So, how can we allow both characters to have a disability without eliminating the iconic *Richard III* stature by recreating it with Richmond? Give Richmond a separate, specific disability. We must be careful of mixing two categories of disability (cognitive and physical, for example) because of their separate stigmas. In other instances (such as *The Diviners* discussed later in the paper) the combinations can certainly be done, but in this instance, because we are attempting to link the two characters, we can keep the disabilities within the category of physical disabilities. By placing Richmond in a wheel chair, the ideology of disability as playing a factor in wickedness is eliminated because the hero also has a disability, and a stronger binary link is established as both good and evil characters possess physical disabilities. Richmond's disability can be acknowledged and played with original text, as well. In act 5, scene 3, Richard describes Richmond as being "shallow." If Richard is to indicate that the word "shallow" is in reference to Richmond's height in the wheelchair, Richmond's disability is acknowledged, and Richard becomes even more villainous because of his mocking of another person with a disability.

Furthermore, if Richmond defeats Richard on stage in a sword fight, despite the disability

of the wheelchair, it would suggest that disability is not a limitation. Eliminating such a stigma is one goal of modern Disability Theory. In addition, such an action would further suggest that people with disabilities should not be pitied, as they are capable of achieving even the greatest of tasks. Placing Richmond in a wheelchair makes Richmond even more of a hero, and Richard even more of a tyrant.

When Richmond is seen giving the problematic speech to his men from his wheelchair and is then able to combat and defeat his enemy with no real regard being paid to his wheelchair as a limitation, only to his cunning and sword play, he will be viewed as quite a hero, especially when compared to Richard's rhetoric, which because of his disability façade, the audience has already learned to distrust. Richmond becomes more of a hero because he doesn't manipulate his disability, and his speech becomes stronger not because of his disability, but because of his strong moral ground and ability as a warrior.

The antithesis between the characters is now complete, and a stronger binary of the quintessential villain against his nemesis, the quintessential hero, not only mirrors Shakespeare's original intention with the characters, but also enhances it.

#### Applying Disability Theory to *Richard III*: Consequences?

Updating Shakespeare's play *Richard III* for a modern audience by using Disability Theory makes Shakespeare's original intentions accessible and understandable in today's society. More specifically, by using disability as a façade, and by putting Richmond in a wheelchair, the play's true intentions of characterizing Tudor v. York are portrayed. While the tactics may seem radical to some, again, such ideas preserve the play's true messages regarding leadership and tutelage while also preserving its text. Therefore, modern Disability Theory should, and can, be applied to Shakespearean texts. Just as Shakespeare utilized disabilities in

*Richard III*, he does so in many of his plays, including *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and many others, and whether he utilizes disability to make a positive statement or not, Disability Theory can be applied to those plays, as well.

The goals of applying modern Disability Theory to *Richard III* are to keep Shakespeare's intended message congruent even as cultures change, as well as promoting disability advocacy. As Shakespeare's goal was to make Richard the "quintessential villain" using his society's standards, it is only fitting to use today's cultural standards, known here as Disability Theory, to display Richard as today's version of the "quintessential villain." Thus, despite the fact that Richmond was not written as having had a disability, such a modification confirms Shakespeare's original intent by creating a full binary, and is, therefore, justified. Additionally, the fact that *Richard III* is classified as a "history" does not, in any way, make its historical content completely and inscrutably accurate. No, Richmond did not have a disability, but Richard's disability is poorly recorded. In fact, Richard's disability cannot be seen in any of his royal portraits, and many accounts of his personal identity regard him as a capable ruler, loyal brother, and faithful husband ("Richard III"). It cannot be forgotten that Shakespeare wrote the play under Tudor rule, and thus, his image of Richard would have been skewed. As a result, *Richard III* with Richmond in a wheel chair does not make the story any less of a "history."

Furthermore, those who argue against applying disability theory to Shakespeare may also argue against any modern adaptations of Shakespeare. It must also be noted that modern audiences aren't often familiar with the historical references in the play. Therefore, the audience will not question Richmond's historical accuracy, and this fact is even more of a cause to update the characters—to achieve the same reaction from a modern audience as the play would have

been originally received. Updating the play with Disability Theory, when done correctly, has very few, if any, negative consequences.

### Applying What We've Learned from *Richard III* and Disability Theory

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When dealing with a story with a powerful antagonist, it can be beneficial to have an equally powerful hero. This tactic can be achieved by establishing the basic antithesis in the binary of good/evil and creating quintessentially evil and quintessentially heroic characters. By looking at any binary in any story, how the binary is established and what center governs the binary will help dictate an actor or a director's choices regarding characterization; but it should also be an important part of a director's concept. Furthermore, disability can be incorporated as a means of "Play" to enhance or cement these choices within the binary while keeping the story relevant to the original intent of the play. These binaries can be found in plays from every time period, and from every playwright; thus, application of the theory is always possible. The next lesson to learn, however, is that of justification. A story does not necessarily benefit because Disability Theory is randomly applied to a single character; nor is Disability Theory furthered by the haphazard usage of a character with disability. (Such an example can be seen in the following chapter.) But disability can be used as a powerful, appropriate, and practical solution to enhancing any performance when used as a leveling tool; a device to link characters that had previously been poorly associated, and also as a way to create equal stakes for each of those characters.

### Other Examples like *Richard III*

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The same lessons learned from Shakespeare's *Richard III* can be used in other texts, as well. Take Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, for example. Both *Richard III* and *Endgame* would be

considered by most as drastically different forms of theatre. But the same lessons of binaries, normality, and stigmas can be applied to both texts.

Just as Richard and Richmond were joined by the Play of disability, so too can Hamm and Clov. While Hamm's character is in a wheelchair, Clov is clearly ailing. He could have cerebral palsy, or another form of disability that can link the two characters. This way, when Hamm complains about being stationary and unable to move (a stereotype) it isn't disability that prevents his lack of movement, it is his lack of will. After all, Clov is able to move and eventually leaves despite his own disability of cerebral palsy. Nagg and Nell are an added area where disability themes come into play, as both have lost their legs. Every character encompassing a disability creates a new normal within the world of the play, and as the two characters battle to meet each other despite being stationary, if it is Hamm's rudeness that causes them both to eventually lose faith, then Hamm is the antagonist; but as in Richard's case, it isn't because of his disability.

Clearly, further exploration of specifics is needed to make the application of Disability Theory to Beckett's plays work, but the concepts remain the same and are clearly applicable. (The wisdom of playing with Beckett against the licensure of his estate is another issue!)

## PART IV: Understanding Implications – Directing.

### Normalcy or Disability Passing: The Debate.

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It is important to remember the purpose of Disability Theory: Disability Theory names, in hopes of eliminating them, the social states of oppression that are forced upon people with disabilities, while at the same time asserting the positive values that they contribute to society. Sometimes, people can begin to misunderstand what these ideologies really mean and as a result,

their attempt at applying Disability Theory is actually counterproductive to the purpose of doing so. This is detrimental not only to the concept of Disability Theory, but also to the play as a whole.

In early 2011, the non-profit Denver based theatre company PHAMALy, or the Physically Handicapped Actors and Musical Artists League, staged a production of Jim Leonard, Jr.'s *The Diviners*. This play is based on a young “idiot boy,” or a young boy with a developmental, likely cognitive, disability who is looked down upon in his town until after his death. At first glance, the opportunity for actors with physical disabilities to begin playing actors with developmental cognitive disabilities seems really interesting and really progressive. Imagine the implications of a physically disabled town discriminating against a young boy with a developmental cognitive disability! What a great concept, and just like *Richard III*, it is the sentiment of disability that links the town (played by people with physical disabilities) and the boy (who is acted as having a cognitive disability), making them equals in the binary of individual v. group, and even more interestingly, physical disability v. cognitive disability.

However, this concept is not the direction in which the company went. Instead, the director chose to have the actors totally disregard their disabilities. As a result, there were townsfolk in wheel chairs and walkers, blind men and deaf men roaming the stage, but with no purpose. It may seem with shallow analysis that by ignoring the actor's disabilities, the director is demonstrating that people with disabilities can live “normal” (as discussed previously) lives; that the audience should see past the disability. But in reality, the director has done much worse for the play and for Disability Theory by implying her own pejorative understanding of normalcy.

At one point in the play, Basil Bennett, a farmer, rides his bike offstage. In the

PHAMALy production, Basil Bennett was played by a person who is blind. However, because the actor's disability had never been acknowledged, when the actor proceeded to ride his bike off-stage, the audience was completely removed from the world of the play and relegated to the spectacle of a blind man riding a bike. In no way is the usage of disability as a spectacle appropriate in this case, nor is the removal of the audience from the world of the play beneficial to the actors, the concept, or the experience of the evening. Remember, people with disabilities DO HAVE disabilities, and don't want their disabilities to be ignored. If anything, people with disabilities want their disabilities acknowledged and accepted. This production did the opposite.

Moreover, the director and actor who played the boy clearly failed to establish what disability the "idiot boy" had. The result was a stereotype-based mix of cognitive and intellectual disabilities. Because of this, the actor's portrayal was forced, unbelievable, unmotivated, and highly unmoving. Had the actor and director done their research, the portrayal could have been far more convincing and moving. Instead the audience was forced to believe in a young man who was more naive and childish than someone who has a disability. In this instance, the director appeared to be preoccupied with the visual representation of disabilities on stage (many stigmas and understandings of disability come from appearances alone) than on any particular concept.

The real problem, besides a shallow directorial concept that failed to see the larger picture, is the promotion of the concept of "passing." Many people have heard of "passing" when it comes to identifying with a race, but passing also applies to people with disabilities. It is not appropriate, nor does it further the cause of disability, for anyone with a disability to pretend he or she has no disability. By choosing to ignore the disabilities of the actors, to make them seem "normal," the director indirectly implied that passing is a more appropriate way to deal with disability than to acknowledge it. Thus, the depth of understanding an actor or director must have

in regard to disability can be clearly seen. In this instance, a director attempted to make the play appear “normal” and, instead, ended up implying that passing was a better choice, indirectly making each actor’s disability a spectacle.

### Solving the “Normal” Problem and Acknowledging the Disability

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So what could the director of PHAMALy’s *The Diviners* have done to promote disability theory while aiming to keep the integrity of the story intact, and about a town and a young boy with a developmental cognitive disability? The answer is simple. Change the notion of normalcy within the world of the play. Had living alongside, or with, a physical disability been normal from the very start of the play, the director would have established a world where disability was accepted. Instead, she was stuck within in her own reality of normal. Had she done otherwise, the audience would have accepted the new state of normal for the rest of the play. Then, when the young man with a developmental cognitive disability arrives and they treat him abnormally, the play is not only about the young man, but also about a community rejecting a young boy. The fact that they all have disabilities, physical or cognitive, links them together and makes their non-acceptance of the boy much more tragic.

As far as the bike riding is concerned, by establishing Basil’s blindness from the very beginning, (he even sings “Amazing Grace” –“was blind but now I see”) the audience can come to terms with the idea of Basil riding a bike, as he continues to have the bike worked on throughout the show in an effort to finally ride it. Granted, many people will still be awed by a blind man riding a bicycle; the director can choose either not to have him ride the bike at all, or to have him ride the bike into an opening tableau of the performance, thereby establishing his ability to ride a bike from the very first institution of the world of the play. It should be noted that lines do not need to be added to acknowledge the disability. Often, dialogue can be found

that helps the actor justify it himself (as was seen in *Richard III*). For example, Basil doesn't need to say that he's blind, he happens to sing that he is in the opening song of the performance, "Amazing Grace." By using the already written dialogue in the song, he can show that he is blind without having to say it directly. The key to acknowledging disability is not ignoring the disability.

Specifically, disability can be acknowledged through simple gestures or jokes, without it having to be a primary focus or directorial intent of the show. In the PHAMALy production of Neil Simon's *Barefoot in the Park*, an actor in a wheelchair played the deliveryman. Additional comedy was added to show because the apartment that the deliveryman delivers packages to is on the top floor of a building. Neil Simon's dialogue had already established that the building had no elevators. So, before the deliveryman's arrival, a slow banging of metal against wood was heard until it stopped with a knock on the door. Staying entirely truthful to the script, the actor playing the deliveryman was able to joke about the long journey up the steps, with the sound cue justifying his slow ascent. While there is no current way for a wheelchair to simply drive up the stairs head on (although some modified wheel chairs can ascend stairs), because the director chose to acknowledge the disability through comedy, the audience had no trouble suspending their disbelief and the scene was able to continue in a traditional manner because of it. Later, upon the actor's exit, a fast "thunk, thunk, thunk" was heard as if the actor was riding his wheelchair down the stairs. Again improbable, but entirely appropriate, comical, and "normal" within the world of a Neil Simon play simply because the wheelchair was acknowledged.

Whether the play is Jim Leonard, Jr.'s, or Neil Simon's, by changing the "normal" ideals within the world of the play, disabilities can be acknowledged and appropriate disability messages can be applied.

### Using the Spectacle?

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In a previous section "Normalcy or Disability Passing: The Debate," the topic of disability and spectacle arose. It is important to note that because of the current lack of understanding of, the concepts of, and especially people with, disabilities themselves possess a sort of spectacle. People are scared, interested, and intimidated by topics they don't understand. When a man who is blind rode a bicycle off the stage in a production of the *The Diviners*, the audience was amazed at the physical feat, or the spectacle, of what they had just seen. In this particular instance, this spectacle of disability was not only harmful to Disability Theory, but rather the show as a whole. However, in certain circumstances, the spectacle of disability could be utilized appropriately in a sort of reverse-psychology.

For example, a major musical sensation like *Side Show* is a wonderful place to employ the spectacle of disability. The musical is already written surrounding the spectacle of conjoined twins. It makes perfect sense for a company of disabled actors like PHAMALy to use their own disabilities to enhance the sideshow spectacle of the musical. In fact, by using their own true disabilities, the show's intended messages regarding love, fortune, and fame are highly enhanced. The opening number, "Come Look at the Freaks," takes on an entirely new, disheartening, socially relevant, and powerful message. In fact, the message and ideals were so powerful that the 1990 PHAMALy production of *Side Show* saw national acclaim, but only after an initial impact of audience discomfort in seeing disabled actors as "freaks." Subsequently, the show received the Denver Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. By playing off of the

audiences preconceived notions, the performance took on a powerful and decidedly pro-disability message. This is but one example of using the spectacle of disability for a positive change by focusing on the negative stereotypes of disabilities.

Other examples of using disability spectacle for a powerful change can be seen in other major shows, as well. For example, looking at the 2010 PHAMALy production of Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* (for which I was the Assistant Director), a major portion of the production concept revolved around the reason for which the beast is banished from the kingdom. Only explained as being wicked to those around him, the production concept for Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* surmised that all people with disabilities were banished to a far off kingdom; the prince among them. The prince was only turned into a beast after his banishment. This concept created a world where people with disabilities were the "normal" (as discussed above) but still outcast, and also allowed for the production team to cast a Belle with a tremendous limp. The result was justification of a Belle who could be more easily seen as "different" as written in the script (again, playing on the audience's perception of a physical disability), but also a stunningly powerful scene in which the Belle with a disability is led around the dance floor by the Beast. Finally, in the last scene of the play in which the beast is transformed back to his princely state, our prince maintained his disability (the binary of ugly v. beauty with disability as the link). The show was exciting, emotional, and theatrical by simply displaying the Beast's and Belle's disabilities in a kind of spectacle of beauty. By applying Disability Theory, the title of *Beauty and the Beast* took on an entirely new dimension, and the *Denver Post* honored the show with a perfect star rating – one of only a few awarded the entire season in the state of Colorado.

By understanding Disability Theory, disability stereotypes, reactions, and themes can be

manipulated to make a statement using these same stereotypes, or Disability Theory can be used to eliminate stigmas that already exist.

#### Eliminating Stigma: Short and Sweet.

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Not all stigma represented in theatrical texts requires major directorial concepts to remove negative stereotypes against people with disabilities. By simply replacing words like *cripple* or *retard* with other words meant as insults, stigmas are eliminated. For example, in one section of Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*, the words "horribly deformed cripple" (65) are used to describe a man who would later be described as a Vietnam veteran, and a man who had his testicles blown off in the war. By simply replacing these words with "elderly," the characterization of the man was nearly identical, and the implications of having his testicles blown off remained the same, only with the removal of the implications of someone who is "crippled." The audience never had any idea of the change, nor was the flow, humor, or intent of the passage changed, though the connotations between elderly and crippled are very different. Examples like these can be found in many texts, and creative solutions to apply Disability Theory are as simple as changing a single word and increasing awareness.

## PART V: Playing and Coaching Disability

### Style

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Despite much confusion and concern over playing a character with a disability, the methods used to believably play a disability are straightforward. Instead of thinking of disability in terms of a character's limitations, think of the disability as a style in which to play the character. As John Barton says in his book *Style for Actors*, style is "a way of understanding the world and then entering it based on what you see" (4). In the case of disability, having a firm

grasp on Disability Theory—its goals, the stereotypes against disability, and the etiquette—constitutes the style, or the way in which the cast and the audience can see the world.

The entire cast of characters, the director, and the designers must all understand this style and the rules that govern it. For example, if actors and designers do not agree on Elizabethan style, then the final product is bound to be a train wreck; there would be no established “normal” state. But once the entire ensemble understands the rules, those rules can be broken, and the actors can begin to explore breaking with and living within the conventions of the world. The same is true for disability.

When the production team and the cast are on the same page, the protagonist can break the etiquette rules of Disability Theory and become the quintessential villain. When the cast agrees on the rules, they agree on the style, or “normal” state of the play. If the cast does not agree on the rules, however, the audience will not comprehend the state of Disability Theory that is supposed to be the normal.

Furthermore, the same full-cast style categories that Barton lays out for applying historical style can be used to apply disability as a style. For example, a category such as “Speaking the Language,” which is based on how language was used during a specific historical period, can still be implemented. In the case of disability style, People First Language is the language to apply. “The Guide to Pronunciation” is yet another applicable section to disability style as individual diagnoses need to be pronounced properly. The section on “Basic Expressions,” or sayings and word usage of a period, is also applicable through the study of today’s slang terms and customs. Words like *crippled* and *retard* fall under this category. “Making Friends” clearly applies to disability style as stereotypes, and how they affect social interaction with people with disabilities is a fundamental problem with prejudice (Barton 8).

Clearly, most of Barton's sections on application of historical style are just as applicable to disability style. After understanding the cast's style, individual style can be applied and, again, it is no different than applying Barton's historical styles.

When looking at personal style - or the social and physical relations of a single character to the overall style of the piece - the same questions that Barton poses for individual actor applies to disability. For example, "What group do others think you are a member of?" (Barton 12) is directly related to stereotypes and images. Other topics that apply include "Appearance and Perceptions," "How Easily you Influence Others," and many more (Barton 13). Again, all of these questions can help create an appropriate style of Disability Theory.

Clearly, by thinking of Disability Theory as a style, a cast of characters can live within a world that has specific beliefs and values about disability which can be observed, broken, or rewritten in order to fit the story, each character, etc.

## Characterization

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Furthermore, style is not to be confused with characterization. Style is what is shared by the characters in a play. Characterization is what makes them unique (Barton 4). Once the style of Disability Theory is understood, the individual characters can enter the world of the play and add characterization. The characterization of disability is the specifics of the disability that is being played. For example, a person with Parkinson's disease may function differently as the disease progresses with the story. These specifics can be researched and applied to the character arc. Furthermore, in-depth research may reveal that some social stereotypes that the cast has adopted as truth in their personal lives are inaccurate. For example, people who are blind do not greet each other by feeling each other's face, nor do they walk with their hands out all of the time, nor do they have extra sensitive hearing as a way to "make up" for their blindness. While

this should be understood in the style of the piece, how the character DOES act is characterization. People with disabilities have the same needs and wants as any other human; there is no huge fundamental difference in playing a person with a disability. The Stanislavski basics still apply. What's their objective? What's their obstacle? How will they achieve it? It is characterization that helps dictate what tactics should be used. In order for an actor to successfully play a person with any sort of disability, it is necessary to research fully and commit completely to the disability as he or she would any other role.

In *Tropic Thunder*, a recent Hollywood movie portraying actors working on a war movie, the actors discuss the ways in which to play a character with a developmental intellectual disability. The phrase used in the movie to describe playing people with disabilities is “Never go full retard.” Although slightly offensive, the moral behind the statement reveals an interesting ideal. The message that is implied is one of half-commitment, or not over-playing the disability. While this sentiment seems at first contradictory to the last section, with deeper analysis of the statement, its relevance becomes evident. Interestingly, the concept of not “over-acting” seems to come from the ideal of playing stereotypes. In this case, “full retard” is in reference to playing the full stereotypes associated with an intellectual disability. When an actor stereotypes a disability, it reads offensively and unconvincingly. However, by fully committing to a researched disability, an actor can be highly successful. Such is the case with *Rain Man*, *Scent of a Woman*, *Forrest Gump*, and *A Beautiful Mind* to name a few. Unfortunately, all of these examples are movies, likely because of the discomfort an audience currently feels in dealing with disabilities. In a movie theatre, the audience is removed; in a theatre, the intimacy can be intimidating. However, when played correctly on-stage through research and style, the application of disability can be very powerful and relatable.

Without the proper understanding and research behind disability, the results can be disastrous. In one production of Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Blind* at the University of Colorado, an entire cast and production team without in-depth knowledge of people with disabilities rehearsed for more than four weeks until, a week before their opening, it was brought to their attention that they had no idea how to play characters who are blind. Such a process seems idiotic, and admittedly, as the person who *did* introduce the cast to a few friends of mine who are blind, the cast had no idea how offensive and how wrong their characterizations had been. Luckily, within the final week of rehearsal, much of what the cast had learned in a single hour with my friends was implemented. Imagine how much more refined the performances could have been had they done their research at the beginning of the process.

#### Playing Disability Overall

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Playing disability doesn't need to be intimidating, or even overly difficult. The key is to simply understand what disabilities are, how disabilities are perceived, and how to apply them. By applying Disability Theory as a style, and the individual disabilities as characterization through research, a convincing, powerful, and appropriate performance can be achieved.

## PART VI: Put into Practice – An Informal Response

### Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*

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Recently at the University of Colorado at Boulder, I put these same techniques and ideals into practice when I directed Lyle Kessler's *Orphans*. The script never mentions disability, but

an opportunity to apply Disability Theory obviously existed. One of the characters, Phillip, is a character that has been kept inside nearly his entire life. As a result, Phillip's character is delayed in his understanding of the outside world. The play concludes with Phillip establishing his own place in the world and triumphing over his oppressive and protective older brother, Treat. As a disability advocate, and in the way in which Phillip's character is written, I felt compelled to apply Disability Theory.

I began the process by identifying the disability that could be applied to Phillip's character without requiring drastic changes to the script, or greatly altering the message of the story. I arrived at a developmental intellectual disability known as William's syndrome. William's syndrome is characterized by certain physical abnormalities in the face – none of which I felt needed to be replicated – as well as learning disabilities, highly social behavior, and a love for music. Because Phillip's character was written as being delayed in understanding of the outside world, but highly sociable, I felt the disability was a great match. I began immediately working with all three members of the cast on understanding Disability Theory, as well as the syndrome as a whole.

While my concept was based on the importance of a mother and traditional family ideals, it was also highly based on Phillip's suppression, and inevitable break from the stereotypes and limitations placed upon him not inherent in his disability. To achieve this message, I knew that the audience had to accept Phillip's disability and heightened social state from the very beginning. In order to do this, the environment the audience entered into was realistic yet heightened: Realistic stage settings were lit with vibrant colors. Furthermore, the opening of the play was the first few seconds of a news story about a person with Williams syndrome, followed by a highly theatrical scene in which Phillip conducts a symphony orchestra in his imagination.

This scene builds and climaxes until it is interrupted by the homecoming of Phillip's older brother. By displaying this theatrical series of events, I introduced the audience to a world of disability in Phillip that is then interrupted by the common world we all share in Treat. In other words, I utilized the audience's current stereotypes of disability while introducing them through Phillip's characterization to a person with a developmental intellectual disability in order to make a statement about those same stereotypes they were experiencing.

When the show opened, Phillip seemed a little out of the audience's normality, but he became an endearing and respected member of the onstage family – exactly as I had envisioned. Phillip was just within the audience's world of normal even with his disability, and as they became more familiar with him, he became even more appreciated and loved. The actor playing Phillip, who was a sophomore with little acting experience and no training, was able to delve into the specifics of the disability, inevitably portraying the character with enthusiasm and an appropriate amount of believability. Overall, his performance was solid and convincing – moreso than one of the actors simply playing older age. However, had a trained professional been given Phillip's role, he would have been able to fully embody and characterize Phillip.

As the story progressed, so did the news story, echoing Phillip's journey. While these sound clips added to the amount of time needed in the transitions, I felt their parallel narrative, which Phillip views on television, was powerful and necessary. I felt that the concept outweighed pacing in this particular instance, but agree that it could have been executed more smoothly. Either way, I'm happy with how the concept echoed the action on stage; and how the cues helped to establish what Williams syndrome was in an effort to help the audience connect Williams syndrome to Phillip's character.

Another struggle that I did need to face, however, was the difference between truth and

reality. Let me explain. I needed Phillip's characterization to be truthful and believable. Just as the pre-show look was realistic in nature, it was not truthful because of the exaggerated colors. The problem arose due to the nature of this performance. While people with William's syndrome are highly sociable, they are not necessarily as expressive as Phillip. So while Phillip was played in a realistic method, the portrayal of his disability was not necessarily truthful. This is likely to be a problem when any intellectual disability is applied to a character written without an intellectual disability. I contemplated changing the disability to others, such as Asperger's – which has similar characteristics; people with the syndrome can be far more expressive, but are far less social. But I felt the characterization of Phillip with Asperger's syndrome was even less truthful to the diagnosis because the social aspect is such an important part of Phillip's character. While Phillip's lines could easily be played in a less social and more matter-of-fact manner, the characterization may be too stark of a contrast from the other characters. One of the aspects of Play in my binary of disability v. non-disability was similarity in energy; the characters were brothers. Changing this energy would have been detrimental.

However, a well-trained actor who knows how to keep characterization simple but highly energized could easily portray the character of Phillip alongside the character of Treat while maintaining the energy level – and both could play less joy and more anger. Again, however, by eliminating the joy of the play, I would be removing a major component of the serio-comedy. The result would be almost two hours of full drama.

Back to the issue at hand, however: while Phillip may not have been entirely truthful, he was fully real, and because each person is affected differently by disability, who is to say that our characterization was inaccurate? Furthermore, the power of the statement of a person with a disability overcoming the prejudice and limitations placed upon him, in this case by his own

family, outweighs the negative impact of the slight inaccuracy in the portrayal of the disability. The important thing is that we were believable and powerful.

It should not go without noting, however, that such implications of playing disability always need to be considered. In this instance, the problem wasn't a major issue, and suspension of disbelief eliminated any real concern around the issue. However, such an acceptable instance may not always be the case if handled inappropriately.

Moreover, I wish I had spent more time allowing Phillip to explore the concept of music. As an important part of his disability, I was not unaware of its impact, and music and singing were certainly integrated into the show. The beginning is one example, Phillip singing alongside his mother-figure Harriet is another. But perhaps other opportunities may have existed to explore music, and perhaps I could have made more of the singing during the show.

I also made a few minor changes to the script during the process to further my themes of the play. Most notably, instead of Treat finding the underlined word "dispensation" (Kessler 14), he found the words "autism" and "Williams syndrome." While Williams syndrome is not a part of the autism spectrum, I felt that the addition of a word familiar to an audience regarding intellectual disabilities was important. Again, it may have led some audience members to equate autism and William's syndrome, but the goal was to allow the audience to consider disabilities beyond William's syndrome in similar circumstances.

The other notable change was mentioned earlier in the article. In the script, the words "horribly deformed cripple" (65) are used to describe a man who would later be described as a Vietnam veteran, and a man who had his testicles blown off in the war. By simply replacing these words with "elderly," the characterization of the man was nearly identical, and the implications of having his testicles blown off remained the same, only with the removal of the

implications of someone who is “crippled.” The audience never had any idea of the change, nor was the flow, humor, or intent of the passage changed even though the connotations between *elderly* and *crippled* are very different.

Overall, I think that the production was a great success, especially when it comes to applying a concept based on Disability Theory to a text that didn’t include it otherwise. A few bumps may have remained, but the same is often said of many concepts regardless of intent. The lesson to learn is that Disability Theory can be applied successfully without too many negative implications or problems; and in the end I feel satisfied that at least one patron felt moved by the performance. In an email directly following the closing performance the anonymous patron wrote, “There are two things in life that have made me feel a powerful, genuine need to cry: The end of ‘Pay it Forward’ and your performance tonight. This production was outstanding. Thank you.” While I am unsure of this patron’s circumstances, I am pleased that he felt the experience moving, and perhaps he will go into the world with a better appreciation for disability and theatre. This, ultimately, is the goal of Disability Theory.

## PART VII: The Next Step and Conclusions

### The Next Step

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It has now been officially shown that Disability Theory can be applied to theatrical texts, and that people without disabilities can play people with disabilities. The next step, however, is utilizing actors with disabilities to play characters with disabilities. Just as we no longer need men to play women, we shouldn’t need the “able-bodied” to play people with disabilities.

University of Colorado Associate Professor Oliver Gerland worked on a project written

by and based on the life of a young man with a developmental intellectual disability that kept the young man from being able to communicate on his own. Through a controversial form of communication called Facilitated Communication, the young man worked with his mother to write the piece. While the performance had little community following and only a limited performance, the implications of such a project are that not only does the general public need to know about disabilities, but also that people with disabilities want to use theatre as a mean of expression. Disability Theory is but one avenue to opening up the art of theatre to the disabled community. Using playwrights, actors, technicians, and directors with disabilities is yet another step to applying Disability Theory to theatre.

Furthermore, services within theaters need to be enhanced and implemented in an effort to make theatre accessible for all. Such accommodations include American Sign Language-interpreted performances for people who are deaf; Braille programs, sensory tours, and audio-described performances for people who are blind; and better wheelchair access for people with physical disabilities. Many theatres, including PHAMALy at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts, as well as other major theaters have begun to implement such programs. Doing so not only broadens the work force, but the audience base, as well.

Applying Disability Theory to theatre can only go so far in promoting disability advocacy in the community. By applying Disability Theory to our theaters, people with disabilities will have more access to theatre, be among the general public more often, and help educate our society simply by being seen. By utilizing the talents of people with disabilities within the community of theatre educators and practitioners themselves, application of Disability Theory will become second nature. Happily, the University of Colorado-Boulder, the University of California-San Diego, and others have begun accepting and exploring how having people with

disabilities within their graduate programs can further diversify and propel their programs into the next generation of theatre.

Disability Theory is the next generation of theatre movements. With an ever-aging population, “the number of Americans with disabilities will continue to grow” (Kepler) and American Theatre will continue to explore the familial and community implications of such a trend. The theatres and practitioners that understand how to apply Disability Theory today can be assured of being at the forefront of the next great American Theatre Movement of tomorrow.

### Summary and Conclusion

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Inevitably, Disability Theory, defining disabilities, and categorizing types of disabilities remains a hotly contested topic. Such a fact should not dissuade an individual from broaching the topic. However, one who does should be aware of the harsh social reactions – some of them from within the disabled community – that may arise from doing so. As an artist attempting to influence an audience, such a reaction should not be foreign; reaction is the nature, and purpose, of making an argument. Disability Theory is a worthy argument, and there may be differing views and opinions on the subject.

Regardless, applying Disability Theory to theatre is essential to making our society more open and accepting of people of all abilities. But even more exciting than that, audiences find performances including Disability Theory to be highly powerful, motivational, and intriguing. When used correctly and not haphazardly, or used to simply fulfill the goals of the theory, Disability Theory not only makes a performance socially relevant, but often enhances the themes and ideals originally written into the text, as well.

While some people may be afraid of the implications, or of disabilities themselves, the application of Disability Theory can be easy and approachable. By simply understanding who

has disabilities, what categories of disabilities exist, appropriate disability etiquette, and how to apply disability through style, characterization, and conceit, as outlined in this article, Disability Theory can be easily applied to any theatrical text. As society changes, so too must theatre; and Disability Theory is a new, radical, easy, and exciting way to help American Theatre thrive in a changing world.

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