

## **Participation, politics and provocations: People with disabilities as non-conciliatory audiences**

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### **Abstract:**

Disability has always had a prominent place on the theatrical stage. Throughout the C19th, C20th and C21st to date, disabled characters have been used to signify corruption, innocence or suffering, and, of course, as salutary examples of how to overcome such suffering. In the past three decades, the work of disability scholars, activists and artists has also provided opportunities for people with disabilities to produce their own plays, performances or installations challenging these stereotypes. Interestingly, though both the body of literature on theatre makers with disabilities and the body of literature on theatre audiences has grown apace over the past decade, there is still surprisingly little written on people with disabilities as theatre audiences. In this article, I draw on observations made during five years of practical, empirical and theoretical research into disability theatre to discuss how people with disabilities work as a distinctive sub-group of spectators, with distinctive spectatorial processes, modalities and preferences, within contemporary theatre audiences. I begin with the factors that make attending theatre difficult for people with disabilities. I note that people with disabilities respond to the challenges they face in attempting to become active audiences of contemporary theatre in three common ways. I then unpack what these spectatorial modalities teach us about people with disabilities as audiences, other marginalised groups as audiences, as well as about audiences, audiencing and the part audiences play in theatre practice more generally.

**Keywords:** Disability Theatre & Performance, Audiences, Spectators

Disability, and the distinctive corporeality of people with disabilities, has always had a place on the theatrical stage – as a means of symbolising corruption, innocence or suffering, presenting a metaphor for the problems people have to overcome, or, more recently, in plays, performances and installations by artists with disabilities. In the past thirty years,

artists, activists and scholars have done a great deal to deconstruct the images of disability that traditionally dominate stage, screen and society. The work of Petra Kuppers (2004, 2011), Phillip Auslander and Carrie Sandahl (2004), Kanta Kochhar-Lindgren (2006), Victoria Lewis (2006) Michael Davidson (2008), Michael Chemers (2008), Collette Conroy (2009), Anna Hickey-Moody (2009), Bruce Henderson and Noam Ostrander (2010), Kirsty Johnson (2012), and others is thought-provoking, passionate, and has a lot to teach us not just about disability performance, but about the practice, politics and ethics of staging marginalised identities in drama, theatre and performance more broadly.

Interestingly, though the literature on disabled people as theatre makers has grown apace over the past decade, and the body of work on theatre audiences has also increased, there is still little written on disabled people as theatre audiences – that is, as individual spectators, and collectives of spectators, who perceive, interpret and attach value to theatre practices in particular ways based on their own position in the public sphere. In a scholarly climate increasingly interested in the heterogeneity of audiences, and in analysing the gender, race, ethnic and class dimensions of audiencing, this is an interesting limitation in the research. It suggests that, whilst researchers are more willing to acknowledge psychological and cultural differences in audiencing, they are less aware of physical differences, and less likely to acknowledge continued exclusion of people with physical differences in contemporary theorisations of spectatorship.

In this article, I draw on observations made during five years of practical, empirical and theoretical research into disability theatre to start this discussion of how disabled people work as a distinctive sub-group of spectators, with distinctive spectatorial processes, modalities and preferences, within contemporary drama, theatre, performance, installation and public space intervention. I begin by outlining factors that make attending theatre difficult for people with disabilities. These factors include character stereotypes, the crip-drag presentation of these stereotypes by able-bodied actors in prosthetics, and the architecture. Most critically, they include the fact that many people continue to think that an ad hoc policy or a staff helper deployed to address the logistical problems of getting people into the building constitutes ‘accessibility’. Consequently, a more critical consideration of the programming, performance and performer-spectator interface that might characterise a truly inclusive theatre is rarely considered warranted nor worthwhile. Although speaking about people with disabilities as a group is always difficult – the term, as Shildrick notes, ‘bundles together a large variety of disabling conditions into a single category that runs the risk of erasing the specificity of [...] different disabilities’ (2009:61) – these factors seem to come up again and again across theatres, cultures, and communities, at least for the people with corporeal and cognitive disabilities I research and work with.

This paper will explore how disabled people respond to the challenges they face in attempting to become active and acknowledged audiences of contemporary theatre in three common ways. First, of course, people can simply abandon hope of attending. Second, people can fight for access in public, provocative and non-compliant ways. Third, people can form counter theatre communities in which equally non-compliant performance and

spectatorship practices play out beyond the view of mainstage producers, performers and audiences. Throughout this article I will refer to the latter responses as non-PC, non-politically correct, or non-compliant modes of spectatorship. For many readers, the use of a term like non-PC may bring to mind practices and discourses that exclude minorities. For instance, the right-wingers who bemoan the fact that political correctness ‘goes mad’ when it provides too many accommodations for people with gender, racial, or, in this context, cognitive and corporeal differences – accommodations that unnecessarily change, cost or burden the dominant culture. In this context, though, I deliberately use the term in a different, paradoxical, and thus potentially productive way. I use it to refer also to the fact that if ‘politically correct’ practices are simply about ad hoc accommodations for crips within current systems, rather than changes that actually address social, institutional and systemic inequalities at their core, these PC discourses are seen by many activist disabled audience members to be just as problematic as the anti-PC discourses. They can result in superficial rather than substantive change. They can therefore still warrant the sorts of challenges I refer to as non-PC spectatorship, non-compliant spectatorship, or a non-conciliatory politics of spectatorship. The very paradoxes of using the term this way may prompt readers to consider whether simple acceptance of so-called politically correct practices will be useful to disability politics in the long term.

Having established these common approaches to ‘audiencing’ or ‘performing audience’ in an often-hostile context, I use an example, Ju Gosling’s ‘Letter Writing Project’ (2009-ongoing), as one instance of a disabled person taking a museum to task. By addressing museums’ general unwillingness to allow access to an interactive installation art piece in a very public way, Gosling’s project turns the incident into another more accessible performance of her own. I give examples, also, of what happens when disabled artists and audiences move into their own communities outside the mainstream.

I conclude by considering what these phenomena teach us about people with disabilities as audiences, about other marginalised groups as audiences, as well as about audiences, audiencing and the part audiences play in theatre practice more generally. Although only a beginning to a perhaps overdue aspect of studies in audiences and audiencing, I thus hope to at least start to address this gap in the literature to date, and to indicate some of the ways in which attention to their practices might be productive for the future of spectatorship studies more broadly.

### **Analysing Theatre Audiences**

Although it has been nearly twenty years since the publication of Susan Bennett’s seminal *Theatre Audiences* (1997), it is only in the past five years or so that we have seen a real growth in books about audiences, spectators and spectatorship in the theatre. The books published in this period include Helena Grehan’s *Performance Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (2009), Dennis Kennedy’s *The Spectator and the Spectacle* (2009), Helen Freshwater’s *Theatre & Audience* (2009), Alison Oddey and Christine White’s *Modes of Spectating* (2009), Bruce McConachie’s *Engaging Audiences* (2008), and Clare Bishop’s

*Participation* (2006). Each of these authors takes a slightly different approach to the study of spectatorship – variously phenomenological, psychological, neurophysical, ethical, political or historical. What they share, though, is a desire to develop a more sophisticated understanding of spectatorship than that which prevailed in pre-modern and even a lot of modern theatre theory, in which the audience was simply a mass assumed to make the same meanings of a work the author or critic made. All acknowledge that performance texts are ephemeral, and that, after the moment of encounter, they exist mainly in the comments, memories and meanings made by spectators, which are interested, plural, unpredictable, and subject to change over time. They acknowledge in other words the ‘emancipation’, as philosopher Jacques Rancière would put it (2011), of the spectator as an active agent with a critical part to play in meaning-making and thus in the personal, social or political impact of any performance text. Theorists of theatre spectatorship tend, in this sense, to be more strongly influenced by structuralist, poststructuralist and postmodernist theory, as well as by political studies of spectatorship, than by empirically-oriented audience or reader response research in media studies.

Accepting that spectators are a mixed group who may well make different or conflicted meanings of a given performance text, theorists of theatre spectatorship do face a fundamental challenge when they write about this aspect of theatrical practice. If meaning-making is individual, and self-interested, and differs from spectator to spectator depending on their social position – and if comments in reviews, critiques and comment-books or on social media sites are impacted by spectators’ literacy, impression management practices and prejudices as much as their primary responses – then these unpredictable patterns of response are always going to be difficult to discuss. In my own prior writing in the area, I have tried to work through this problem by incorporating comment about the way spectators bring their own habits, or, in Pierre Bourdieu’s terms *habitus* (1997, 1998), to their encounter with a performance text (cf. Hadley 2014). This concept is useful in understanding the unpredictable responses of individual spectators as well as specific audience sub-groups, along with the factors that inform, influence or drive the flows of their interpretation of particular performance texts.

Where there is room to develop further work, of course, is in discussion of distinct sub-groups of spectators, and how the flows of their interpretation of particular performance texts can unfold. A couple of significant book length studies that attempt something like this do come to mind. There is, for example, Matthew Reason’s *The Young Audience* (2010), or Jill Dolan’s *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), and spectatorship is also covered in some of her comments about utopian communities in *Utopia in Performance* (2001). The field, though, clearly holds much more scope for study of such areas. This is certainly the case when it comes to people with disabilities, who face particular challenges in their efforts to attend any type of drama, theatre or performance. It is with this sort of discussion that I wish to start this article.

## **Analysing People With Disabilities As Theatre Audiences**

Although scholars of theatre spectatorship have historically based their arguments on theory more than on empirical audience research, in fields such as media, film and television studies a wider range of methods is starting to emerge. These methods are starting to be adopted by those theatre scholars developing government-funded research reports that evaluate the effect, value, and value-for-money, of publicly funded theatre programs. It is a method that I developed for just such a government-funded evaluation project (Gattenhof & Hadley 2011), an observation typography, that underpins my analysis, discussion and arguments about disabled audiences in this article.

This was initially developed whilst working on a book, *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship* (2014), which analysed the way disabled artists try to disrupt stereotyped modes of ‘audiencing’ their bodies. When a reviewer praised this publication’s reflections on how people with disability act as audiences, I realised that writing up the emerging themes around disabled people as audience – themes that could not be unpacked in that book – might be useful. Though the informality of the typography’s application to date precludes citing or creating statistics from what were at the time fairly informal observations for context rather than content. The results are also in some ways more revealing, gleaned as they are from observation, conversation and commentaries in which people were not so self-aware of being watched as they tend to be in full scale government-funded empirical evaluations of audience effects of work, such as the one the typography was initially designed for.

The typography prompts the researcher to track audience behaviours: the main ones being arriving, leaving, interacting in the foyer, seating and stage spaces, interacting with one’s own group, interacting with other groups, physical indicators of affect, and physical indicators of attention. The intention is to shed light on whether audiences find a work engaging, enlightening, enjoyable, accessible, annoying, etc. These are tracked through six Tables (below) that prompt observations. The typography can be coded against desired qualities such as access, experience, participation, self-expression, connection or sense of community. It can be combined with photographic analysis, vox pops, surveys, interviews, focus groups, comment books, debriefs, and so forth, to provide further insights into audience behaviours.

Drawing these observations together with information gleaned from conversations with fellow artists, arts-workers and professionally-interested audiences (individually, or at industry conferences), as well as expert commentary in the press, non-expert commentary in online platforms, reviews, industry reports, and theory, has allowed me to formulate the preliminary ideas about how disabled people act as audiences.

## **People With Disabilities As Theatre Audiences**

Participating in the theatre in any capacity – as producer, playwright, director, performer or audience member – has historically been a rather difficult prospect for people with disabilities. As I established in the book that first prompted me to start reflecting on this

**Tables 1-6:**

**1. Nature and number of activities happening at present?**

Activity	Number	Description	Outdoors / Indoors

**2. Aesthetic and quality of activities**

Activity	Narrative	Imagistic	Music	Auditory	Visual	Passive	Active	Participatory	Observatory	Raw	Refined	Controlled	Coherent	Unrestrained	Rambling	Spontaneous	Energetic	Vibrant	Anarchic	Sensual	Serene	Emotional	Intellectual	Other (Please Specify)

**3. Nature and number of participant groups at present?**

Activity	Singles			Couples			Friends			Families			Other groups											
	Singles (<30)	Singles (30-50)	Singles (>50)	Couples (<30)	Couples (30-50)	Couples (>50)	Friends (<30)	Friends (30-50)	Friends (>50)	Families (with children)	Families (with teens)	Families (with extended families)	Mixed groups	Anglo Australian participants	Indigenous Australian participants	African participants	Disabled participants	Other participants (Please specify)						
Roving Performances																								

**4. Patterns of participation**

Activity	Group	Intragroup eye contact	Intergroup eye contact	Intragroup proximity	Intergroup proximity	Intragroup conversation	Intergroup conversation	Intragroup physical contact (e.g. dancing, games)	Intergroup physical contact (e.g. dancing, games)	Intragroup shared movement patterns (e.g. pushing towards vantage point)	Intergroup shared movement patterns (e.g. pushing towards vantage point)	Other participation patterns (Please specify)	Enablers of / barriers to specific participation patterns
		Singles											
Couples													
Friends													
Families													
Others													

**5. Ambience / atmosphere / tenor of participation**

Activity	Group	Anticipation	Enthusiasm	Happiness	Sentimentality	Togetherness	Trust	Surprise	Fascination	Interest	Active engagement	Passive engagement	Non engagement	Loud	Quiet	Boredom	Impatience	Disappointment	Sadness	Disgust	Contempt	Anger	Aggression	Other (Please Specify)	
		Singles																							
Couples																									
Friends																									
Families																									
Others																									

**6. Distinctive / individual / creative forms of participation**

Activity	Time	Participant	Distinctive characteristics of participation (e.g. informing others, organising others, expressing views in attitude / action / speech, etc.)	Impact

subject (Hadley 2014), there are three main factors that make attending traditional theatre difficult for people with disabilities.

The first factor is the way the stereotypes about disability that spectators see unfolding on the stage align with those that prevail in society (Garland-Thomson 1996, 1997, 2002, 2005, 2009). As Sharon Synder and David T. Mitchell argue in *Narrative Prosthesis* (2000), the bodies and bodily idiosyncrasies of people with disabilities have consistently been deployed as ‘props’ or prostheses that serve the narrative practices of Western canonical theatre, cinema and literature. The blind, deaf, or deformed character can represent the inspirational overcomer, the innocent victim, or the corrupt villain, but rarely comes close to realistically approximating the lives or lifestyles of people with disabilities.

The second factor is the fact that disabled characters are, to this day, too rarely written or played by people with disabilities themselves (cf. Lewis 2007; Johnson 2012). In the US, UK, Europe and their former colonies in Canada, Australasia and elsewhere, people with disabilities are rarely offered roles in theatre training programs or productions. This is partly because they are not seen as capable of fulfilling the requirements of the actor’s role, partly because they are not considered readily employable in such roles, and partly because their real corporeality would complicate and at times stand in conflict with the very representational stereotypes they could be called upon to represent.

The third factor is the lack of architectural access to stage, wings, seating banks, foyers, and all the other aspects of theatrical auditoriums. This is the most consistent area of complaint, amongst lay audiences, not just amongst disability artists, activists and scholars as audiences. ‘Without disability access,’ as Carrie Sandahl says, ‘disabled people [artists, arts-workers and audiences] literally cannot enter certain spaces, even when granted “permission”’ (2002: 24). In other words, without ramps, lifts, leg space in the seating, captions, and so forth, disabled people simply cannot be theatre spectators. In the last decade or two, as disability access legislation in the US, UK, Western Europe and Australasia has improved, many theatres and theatre funding agencies have received grants to redress this particular problem. In a lot of cases, however, the refit provides access only to the front of house and auditorium and not to the stage itself. Plus, it often still requires people to rely on the help of ushers or specialist staff employed by the theatres, attend only specific performances, attend on special timetables, or spend significant periods of time waiting for service based on somebody else’s convenience. Most disabled spectators can recall incidents when they – whether alone, with a group of disabled spectators, or a mixed group of disabled and non-disabled spectators – have been made to wait to enter or exit a venue, because the only access was via a space in which an activity was in progress. Or, worse, never able to enter because it turned out the show unexpectedly had an unadvertised element, such as promenade, in which they could not participate. Most disabled spectators can describe the blank look of the attendant wondering why a disabled person would want to burden or disrupt the rest of the spectators by, for example, leaving on their own timetable, leaving a device on, talking, failing to move during a promenade part, etc. when they had already been ‘helped’ so much by an ad hoc solution provided to deal with the problem of disabled people wanting to attend at all.

The blank stare of those who wonder why ad hoc logistical accommodations would not be 'enough' seems, from my research with and into disabled artists, arts-workers and professionally interested audiences, to be the most pressing problem for people with disabilities wanting to see drama, theatre, performance, live art or installations today. In most cases, access operates at the level of logistical access, not at the level of aesthetic, symbolic or social access. In other words, attempts to address the third issue (logistics) are not integrated with attempts to address the first (symbolic) and second (social) issues that make accessing theatre spaces difficult for people with disabilities. The observations, conversations and commentary that underpin this article indicates that there is not enough support for presenting or programming work that people with disabilities would like to see, and would like other audiences to see. There is not enough support for breaking down spectatorial conventions (seating, scheduling, and proximity patterns) to facilitate the modes of spectating people with disabilities would like to participate in, and would like other audiences to participate in. Or, at least, for breaking down these conventions in mainstage, as opposed to community, disability, diversion or health, production contexts.

Equally, there is not enough support for presenting the disabled spectator's point of view in critical practices. In my own work in five years as a critic for my national newspaper *The Australian*, for instance, I was never given scope to move beyond a neutral – that is, able – spectatorial eye in my assessment of work. Whilst there are some critics who have successfully moved from disability community critical media, for example Jo Verrent or Allan Sutherland, they are often still mainly called upon to comment on controversial work. Accordingly, incorporating this viewpoint still isn't part of regular critical practice, any more than disabled people's participation is part of regular production and reception practice. These are issues that come up regularly in practice, and in the conversations about practice and commentaries, that I have encountered in the course of this research.

In theatre, as in so many aspects of a disabled person's life, attempts to point to the still-problematic status of access initiatives for disabled spectators are not always met with compassion, concern or action. The problem is that people still tend to think either in terms of the medical model of disability, or in terms of the social model of disability, both of which have been subject to criticism. The medical model, which sees disability as an individual problem a person should want to overcome, so it is not a burden to them, their family, friends or society, is what makes it hard for many to understand why disabled people would want to bother anyone with their needs. The social model, which sees disability as a social more than a personal problem – insofar as social systems, institutions and architecture are set up to preclude access – is what makes it hard for many to understand why disabled people would not see adaptations to seating and so forth as sufficient. In disability theory, both models have been criticised (Shildrick 2001, 2009), because they fail to acknowledge disability – pain, paralysis, amputation, alternative physicality, and the alternative perspectives they bring – as an experience, or as a mode of embodiment, identity or culture characteristic of a group of people. As Shildrick (2009) says, whilst the work of activists, scholars and artists of the last thirty years has resulted in legislation that shifts the

responsibility for dealing with disability from individual sufferer to society, and thus substantially improves access to social institutions (such as theatres), this law only actually asks people to offer reasonable accommodations within current institutional structures, it does not actually ask people to consider changes to institutional structures. In this sense, the accommodation approach deals with logistical factors that make day-to-day social life difficult, but does not necessarily contest the underpinning ideologies that position disability as an abnormality, pathology or unfortunate personal problem rather than a political problem like that of gender, race, or class.

What these problems mean is that, for people with disabilities – unlike for people with gender, race or class differences – a set of standardised logistical accommodations, that allow them to participate without disrupting, challenging or changing the theatre practices in any significant way, are thought to be ‘enough’. If a blind, deaf or otherwise disabled spectator can attend a designated session, so that their visual, physical or tactile mode of spectating can be dealt with without disrupting the pleasure of their fellow spectators, then this is thought to be ‘enough.’ This is not, of course, to say that my research suggests that most disabled spectators are political about this the minute they start participating in the arts – on the contrary, I would argue that often many become politicised only when they find their way into the specific disability theatre communities I describe below. This, as Shildrick says, is because disabled people do not find it any more easy to ‘escape the coils and effect of normative discourse’ (2009:67) that defines them as abnormal, as a burden, or as needing to be grateful for any help society provides, than anyone else. Within this paradigm, addressing needs without addressing interests or desires is considered ‘enough’. Many people – disabled and non-disabled alike – are so thoroughly indoctrinated into this that they would be mortified to think disabled people might complain about well-meaning attempts to ‘help’ them with special assistants, seating or sessions. It is as if only a bitter cripple, bludger or malingerer would want to burden fellow spectators with requests for more. I have found this point of view particularly prevalent in my own country, Australia, which does not have any direct equivalent to the USA’s *Americans with Disabilities Act* (1990), or the UK’s *Disability Discrimination Act* (1996), to direct theatre institutions to address issues of access in set ways (cf. Carlson 1997). It is only with greater advocacy from access arts organisations, gradually allowing more people to access the disability arts communities where they do start to become more politicised and politically conscious, that more significant sections of the disabled audience are starting develop the language to speak to the benefits of accommodating their wishes as well as their basic logistical needs.

### **Activism, Access and Non-Politically Correct Politics**

The continued challenges people with disabilities face in becoming active audiences of contemporary theatre practices tend, on the whole, to result in three common sorts of spectatorial responses. That is, three responses over and above attempts to fit in as best

one can by means of whatever architectural or procedural accommodations have been provided.

The first, simply, and somewhat apolitically, is to avoid theatres, in the same way disabled people might also avoid other social institutions that present too many barriers to participation. For instance, being forced to provide vast amounts of personal information to 'prove' one is not faking disability in order to 'take advantage' of a theatre's accommodation schemes, like cut-price tickets for carers, can make attending just too complicated to contemplate (Tozer 2014). Accordingly, as one Australian survey in 2012 found, even with the big improvements in recent years, which mean nearly 40% of theatre companies now at least have access plans (Australia Council for the Arts 2014), attendance by people with disabilities at such venues and events can be as much as 27% lower than the rate in the general population, and is actually decreasing currently amongst some groups within the disabled community (ABS 2012).

The second, more political, is to fight to make theatre more accessible.

The third, more political again, though in a different way, is to move into non-mainstream practices, contexts and communities, where alternative modes of spectating are more accommodated.

### **Making Theatres More Accessible**

One way of reacting to theatre's inaccessibility for disabled audience is to fight for more access. A good example of this emerges from the work of UK artist Ju Gosling who, beginning in 2009, has turned the experience of being unable to access a supposedly participatory letter-writing installation into an interventionist performance of her own. This has gained its own ever-increasing audience, as she posted her correspondence with the installation's creator and producers online. Gosling describes herself as a multimedia storyteller and producer with LGBT disabled people's organisations. Encompassing performance, installation, performative interventions in public space, and online projects, her work often reflects on attitudes towards disability in Britain (Gosling n.d., a, Gosling 2010). The title of her book *Abnormal: How Britain Became Body Dysphoric and the Key to a Cure* (2011), succinctly captures her interests, and her diverse history of practice, documented on her website with a level of detail only a multi-disciplinary artist working across textual, visual and physical media could achieve, shows a lengthy history of sole and collaborative projects addressing disability rights and politics in a range of ways. Like many professional artists with disabilities, Gosling has her own highly developed lexicon for describing disability and disability prejudice, which assists her in confronting the stereotyping she feels that she and other disabled people are subject to in day-to-day life.

In 2009, Gosling presented her *Abnormal: Towards a Scientific Model of Disability* installation, the result of a Wellcome Trust residency, around Britain. Whilst in Edinburgh during the festival she wanted to participate in Lee Mingwei's *The Letter Writing Project*, an installation in which participants write and leave letters to loved ones (in envelopes if they want) in a small pagoda-like structure based on traditional Taiwanese/Japanese

architectural principles. Arriving at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, where this was presented as part of Julianna Engberg's Enlightenments exhibition at the Dean Gallery, Gosling found that – though the museum advertised itself as accessible – this installation was not (Gosling 2009-2014). Instead of taking the compliant, conciliatory or socially 'correct' route, accepting the inaccessibility and walking away without being a 'burden', Gosling took issue with the museum. Not just at the time, but also later:

I could have left a complaint with the box office; but in fact I switched off my scooter and refused to move until I was put into contact with the artist and the curator to find out why people who required step-free access were excluded from participating. And then I set up my own letter writing project, beginning with [one] which I left in the gallery for the artist. (Gosling, n.d., c).

In her own Letter Writing Project, a performative intervention, she corresponded with artist, curator and curating organisation administrators again, and again, and again, over a period of years, looking for their assistance to access the installation. She then posted any correspondence sent or received – together with her commentary, and later her spectators' commentary – online.

At the time, Gosling was performing a piece that involved putting stickers on inaccessible objects encountered around Edinburgh, so noting this inaccessibility was in effect extending work she was already doing. Though Lee Mingwei never replied, letters to Jonathan Mills (Head of the Edinburgh International Festival), Jackie Westbrook (Marketing Manager of EIF), Simon Groom (Director at the MOMA), Julianna Engberg (Curator), Alison Riach (Director of Operations + Planning at the MOMA), and a variety of other parties to the problem, did write replies. Though claiming to take issues of access seriously, most claimed her request was not 'practical' or 'reasonable' or 'allowable' (cf. Simon Groom, and Alison Riach, cited Gosling, n.d., c), arguing that an artist's aesthetic in a theatrical, performance or installation piece – unlike an architect's aesthetic in a building – cannot be changed to provide access regardless of what might be happening in the social, institutional or legislative climate. They clearly felt that ad hoc alternatives could, and should, be enough. Naturally, Gosling and her fellow spectators – disabled or 'ally' artists, arts-workers and professionally interested audiences – took issue with this idea. '[S]ome of the responses to Dr Gosling's complaint can only be de[s]cribed as offensive,' Wendy Haslam writes, because '[t]o replicate exclusionary traditions using the excuse of authenticity [to the Japanese/Taiwanese aesthetic] is fundamentally flawed thinking' (cited Gosling, n.d., c). Although the Edinburgh International Festival eventually said that '[i]t is clear to us that we need to improve how we operate' (cf. Westbrook, cited Gosling, n.d., c), nothing came of either the Festival's or the Gallery's comments with regards delivering research-based improvements. The correspondence, and the performative re-performance of the correspondence, went on for years, and in 2013 Gosling began turning the incident into a show (Gosling, n.d., b).

This example indicates two things. Firstly, there is a distinct lack of research into disabled audiences' actual needs and a lack of understanding of why aesthetics as much as buildings might need changing to accommodate disabled audiences. And secondly, becoming a non-conciliatory spectator is one way audiences respond to these challenges. A non-conciliatory spectator, in this context, is one who does not behave like a good cripple and simply accepts what accommodations are offered to avoid becoming burdensome. Acting this way, Gosling and her fellow disabled and disabled 'ally' audiences demand that artist and administrators engage with them. They demonstrate the problems with what administrators see as logical responses, where discussion, research and reporting delays action in a manner almost designed to quell resistance and persistence. 'Why,' as one put it, 'do people have so much trouble saying "Sorry, we got it wrong but will learn from our mistake"?' (Gus Cummins, cited Gosling, n.d., c). They show the sort of baggage a disabled spectator might bring to a show, and why they might be ready to fidget, fall asleep, talk to others, move to get a better spot to see, hear or touch, or other behaviours non-disabled spectators might see as disruptive. Making these issues public via a performative intervention in the public sphere is an attempt to show the problems of these policy based responses.<sup>1</sup>

### **Making More Accessible Theatres**

The third common sort of spectatorial response to theatre's inaccessibility for disabled audiences – more political than merely walking away, though in a different fashion to the protest action discussed above – is to move into non-mainstream practices. These are sometimes amateur, sometimes community, and sometimes supported by agencies such as Access Arts organisations, or Live Arts organisations, where alternative modes of spectating are more accommodated.

There is, in this response, a tendency to avoid mainstage drama, theatre, performance, performance art and installation practices altogether, and stay within disabled people's own communities of practice, their own venues, and their own forums for criticism. These communities can take many different forms. They can be therapeutic theatre communities of practice, tied, for instance, to a therapeutic theatre training program in which a group of people regularly participate. They can be community theatre communities of practice, tied to projects put together by an arts worker or collective of arts workers reaching out to engage disabled communities. They can also be more self-managed and professionalised live, performance or public art communities of practice. Though there are many examples of such communities around the world, a good example – and one of the most well-known, because its founder writes so often and eloquently – would be The Olimpias, a performance and performance-as-research project initiated by artist and scholar Petra Kupperts. The Olimpias operates across community theatre, performance, performance art, public space, art/life and disability culture projects, and the collective, and 'addresses its audiences directly, and engages people gently and with care, to create a more inclusive future together' (Kupperts n.d., cf. Kupperts 2009 for description of an Olimpias

project). These communities can, of course, also emerge at disability arts festivals and conferences. Though each such community differs, they share commonalities in the modes of spectating they support, enable, and celebrate. Having observed many of them, what is most striking is that they tend to share a sense of joy, community, mischievousness – and sometimes even maliciousness towards the non-disabled public sphere from which they're so often excluded - that comes out within a collective of disabled people when they finally find a form of theatre in which difference is not just tolerated, or accommodated, but celebrated via different temporalities, flows and textures to the experience. This is where disabled people's modes of spectating – not just protesting, but performing spectatorship – can really be observed, identified, and investigated.

### **Distinctive Modes and Strategies of Spectatorship**

As I noted at the outset of this article, though these communities of practice have been the subject of scholarship, there has been less direct discussion of the modes of spectating that prevail in these contexts. There is, in other words, little direct discussion of the attitudes, actions and behaviours of disabled audiences. What does exist are mainly industry reports (advocating increased service provision), training initiatives (advising on service provision), and information on access services that individual theatres provide for patrons. In the industry reports, 'behaviour' refers to behaviour in a marketing sense – purchasing, attending, attending again, taking advantage of value adds around a show, etc. – rather than behaviour in a perception, interpretation and meaning-making sense (see, for example, Shape 2013, Accessible Arts n.d.; Access Arts n.d.). There are a couple of articles that speak to the idea that disability access has the potential to do good – innovative, interesting, new – things for theatre and theatre aesthetics, from artist scholars such as Jo Verrent (2011) and Carrie Sandahl (2002), and from bloggers (see for example, Anonymous 2014; Gabb 2014; Wright 2014; Lovett 2013). Though highlighting disabled artists, and the aesthetics of disabled artists and companies, more so than the practices of disabled audiences, Sandahl's and Verrent's articles come closest to capturing and discussing the modes of spectating I have been observing in my own research in this area – that is, to describing the modes of perceiving, interpreting and meaning-making that prevail in disability contexts.

The first, most critical point to make about these modes of spectating in disability contexts is that they come out of the physicality, phenomenological intentionality, and perspectives that disabled people deploy in their day-to-day lives. As Sandahl (2002:18) says, disability is a phenomenology, a perspective, and disabled people use that perspective to produce art. Accordingly, I would add, disabled people also use that perspective to perceive, interpret and make meaning of art. In most cases disabled people need to be closer to things, further from things, see things, touch things, translate things into different formats, to perceive and interpret their worlds. Naturally, this carries across to perceiving and interpreting performances, in theatre spaces, or in alternate theatrical spaces. In a disability theatre context, just as speaking and visual symbols are no longer the sole or

dominant signifiatory strategies (Sandahl 2002:25), speaking and seeing are no longer the sole or dominant spectatorial strategies. This means a disability inclusive spectatorial space, and mode of spectating, is inherently multi-discursive, multi-disciplinary, multi-perspective or multi-channel, as screens, devices, captions, translators and translating periods, transform the aesthetics, the space, and the relationships in the space, to make sure all participants can be part of what is happening. Space is arranged, as Sandahl says, for ‘continuous bodies’ (2002:26) linked in a web, not for a single dominant body, position, or perspective. In disability theatre contexts, as in disability social, political, sporting or other contexts, there’s usually a need to negotiate what Sandahl calls ‘competing accommodations’ (2002:26) – potentially conflicting perceptual and interpretative strategies of different people. Because one person cannot see, one cannot hear, one cannot read, one cannot sit, one cannot stand, and so on, there is usually a period of negotiating amongst the multi-modal means of access available, so that nobody will be ‘kicked out of the room’ by the absence of a means that suits them, as disabled people often put it. In disability contexts – unlike in mainstage contexts where disruption isn’t even tolerated, let alone celebrated – most people accept the need to negotiate, even if not always resolve, different modes of spectating. The spectators get used to meta-theatrical moments in which modes of spectating are debated, delays, gaps, temporal differences, and so forth, as negotiations unfold and perceptual preferences are implemented. In this context, then, the phenomenology, practice, and varied modes of perception come together to create a type of theatre, and a type of theatre spectatorship, where meta-reflection on spectatorship, and on both our own and fellow spectators’ modes of spectatorship – the very thing many scholars of theatre spectatorship appreciate most in the postmodern, participatory practices they discuss (cf. Bennett 1997) – is always already present as a matter of course.

The different, multi-channel and sometimes conflicting modes of spectating that characterise disability theatre contexts, and the spatial, temporal and symbolic disjunctions they cause, mean it is impossible to maintain the ‘body disappearing in the dark’ mode of spectatorship on which so much Western theatre in recent centuries is premised. Except, of course, things like live and performance art, which is why there is more disability presence in those forms (cf. Live Art Development Agency 2012; cf. Hadley 2014). In a disability theatre context, there is a clear move away from these distanced, scopic, singular modes of spectating, and towards more textured, tactile, haptic, multi-modal modes of spectatorship. These, like many of the encounters in which people with disabilities figure in daily life, tend to call attention to what Shildrick (2009:33-35) has called the somatic, intersubjective and relational elements of human experience. The emphasis is highlighted in the very names of some of the theatre makers, companies, collectives and communities – for instance, the name of Alex Bulmer’s Sniff (Sensory Narrative in Full Form) Inc – and the fact that they do lean more towards the collective, collaborative and participatory than to traditional player-spectator relationships.

There is, as I say, a sense of community, but also at times a sense of tension, conflict, or lack of consensus in these disability theatre contexts. There can be reflection, humour,

and harrowing revelations about being a disabled person, as well as about the bad behaviours of non-disabled people. There can be debate about different types, definitions and politics of disability as part of the aesthetics, interactivity and politics of the work. There can be other potentially non-politically correct actions – for example, at the recent Accessible Arts Conference in Sydney, Australia, in 2012, I attended a session to find the presenter suggesting she abandon the paper and turn this into a planning meeting for political action, and, more problematically, that those non-disabled allies not providing translation assistance leave, effectively ‘outing’ everyone as either disabled or non-disabled whether they wanted it or not. These features can be empowering, in the sense that they build community amongst disabled people. They can also be divisive, and thus potentially disempowering, in the sense that they create or perpetuate splits between different members of the disabled audience – those favouring conciliatory approaches to politics vs. those that favouring non-conciliatory approaches to politics; those who value non-disabled allies’ intervention vs. those who view this as problematic, etc. There can also be more fundamental, personal tensions, particularly when people suffering mental health issues become part of disability communities. In some cases, political or emotional content can be responded to with displays of momentary breakdown, panic, or paranoia, or even just the exhaustion that can come with participation in these activities.

The most interesting aspect of these modes of spectating is the fact that they emphasise relations between spectator and fellow spectator as much as relations between spectator and stage. They emphasise the meta-conscious, meta-reflective dimension in which a spectator necessarily becomes aware of how their fellow spectators are perceiving, interpreting and making meaning of the work. The negotiations that occur in a disability-inclusive space mean that spectators are conscious of other spectators’ approach to perceiving, interpreting, and meaning-making, along with the fact that these may or may not match up with their own. They are aware of this in a way that may be less possible in a silent, dark space designed to create the illusion of being alone in thought. There is an engagement with each other’s potentially non-compliant perspectives that comes from personal pain, suffering, pleasure, political positioning or any other baggage they bring to the encounter, and that is almost taken for granted amongst disabled audiences. Which, potentially, provides impetus for new modes of spectating as well as new theorisations in the mainstream of spectatorship studies, where there is a strong desire to understand audiences as individuals, and groups of individuals, rather than as undifferentiated masses. This, then, is where more attention to the spectatorial strategies deployed by people with disabilities has potential to speak to spectatorship studies more broadly.

### **Appreciating Alternate Modes of Spectatorship**

In this article, I have drawn observations of audiences together with information gathered from conversations, expert commentary in the press, non-expert commentary in online platforms, as well as reviews, industry reports and theory, to present a preliminary discussion of what might be considered distinctive in the modes of spectating commonly

deployed by people with disabilities. Naturally, I do not mean to suggest that these modes of spectating are more natural, normal or neutral than any other modes of spectating. Indeed, many of the distinctive aspects emerge from culturally-constructed problems, perceptual technologies, and points of view, that for people with disabilities become habitual over the course of a lifetime.

What this preliminary analysis shows is that people with disabilities are not necessarily content with conciliatory, politically correct spectatorship that complies with dominant ideas about 'reasonable' accommodations of difference. In fact, politically correct spectatorship can perpetuate problematic ideas about disabled people's place in the world that politicised people with disabilities would challenge. In this sense, while mimicking non-disabled audiences as much as is prosthetically, technologically, and industrially possible might be seen as politically correct, there are plenty of politicised people who are not satisfied with this being their only mode of access to theatre, drama, performance or installation. This dissatisfaction seems to become more prevalent with greater access to disability theatre communities, in which other modes of spectating are made knowable. These are not necessarily 'better' modes of spectating, and can be rife with tension, conflict, confusion, contrary points of view, mistaken attempts at making political points, and so forth. But they are apparent, and apparently fulfilling a need, in the sense that people are participating.

What is most interesting about this preliminary analysis is how these modes of spectatorships are characterised by attention to communication, confrontation and negotiation of conflicting needs and desired points of view – not just between spectator and stage, but between spectator and fellow spectators. In disability contexts, there's a necessary encounter not just with the show itself, but with both one's own and others' meaning-making processes. It is awareness of the similarities and differences between these ways of perceiving that can prompt spectators to reflect on what they think, what they believe, and the way they behave, and thus in a sense provide a sort of commentary on the work within the work. Though in this case prompted by the physical, perceptual, and perspectival differences amongst disabled people – and though at times awkward or anger-inducing – this awareness of other people's ways of perceiving things is, in my observations, a valued aspect of spectatorship in disability contexts. There is a sense in which, having been excluded from political debates for so long, taking part is something people with disabilities value, even if resolving different perspectives and opinions is impossible. This is also something that could become a more valued aspect of spectatorship in mainstream contexts. For instance, even when they don't need to start with negotiations between a number of different spectators' needs and desires in the same way as with disability theatre, many other live art, performance art and political art traditions appear to be trying to prompt among their spectators a more self-revealing, self-reflexive mode of spectatorship. This is where disability discourse-influenced modes begin: with an ability, a necessity, and oftentimes a desire to negotiate differences in perception in such a way that

we maintain a relationship with the other, and the other's point of view. This could be useful to all those interested in spectatorship as a part of theatre practice.

Naturally, these ideas are not 'news' to disabled artists, arts workers or professionally interested audiences. The rise in review sites like Disability Arts Online, and in support services like Access Arts organisations, both of which offer their audiences information on trends in disability theatre, mean that most people are conscious of these patterns amongst disabled audiences. The phenomena are, however, happening under the radar. The challenge for disabled artists, arts workers, professionally interested audiences, and even just lay audiences at large, when looking to increase access to mainstage theatre is that singular protests, or singular performance communities, can be overlooked by the theatre industry's power holders. In this sense, people with disabilities need greater support and better strategies to make sure their confrontational and creative modes of spectating are considered in both disabled and non-disabled theatre communities. They need support to build community – both in the sense of bonds between disabled people, and bridges between disabled and non-disabled people – in order to build pathways into a greater presence within mainstage theatre audiences.

### **Biographical Note:**

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## Note:

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, Gosling is not the only practitioner to use performance to protest the inaccessibility of so much theatre performance. In her book on disability theatre, in Canada, Kirsty Johnson writes of a production of the *Book of Judith* by Alex Bulmer's Sniff (Sensory Narrative in Full Form) Inc. where the piece was performed in a 'revival-style tent' on the lawn of a mental health centre to 'protest

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pervasive problems of inaccessibility in Toronto's professional theatre' (2012: 24), More recently, in an interview with Will Wellington, theatre maker and scholar Judith Thompson describes a directive where she asked her workshop of disabled performers to 'stairbomb' a production of her own play, *Watching Glory Die*, when she discovered it was being presented in an inaccessible venue – a 'stairbomb' being a practice developed by disabled artist Jeff Preston where disabled people tape off stairs in a theatre, university or other public building to give a sense of what inaccessibility is actually like (Wellington 2014; Preston 2011). For these artists – and, no doubt, for many others too – protesting theatre's inaccessibility through theatre, and through performances of non-PC, non-compliant and non-conciliatory spectatorship of the plays, institutions and systems that dominant the theatre industry, is sometimes a necessity to provoke change.