Ph.D. dissertation -

**TRYING TO RELATE:**
**DISABILITY AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE**

#1: **INTRODUCTION**

Theatre, by definition, is a social art form; both the performance and the preparation for it require more than one person to be together in the same place. It is therefore, by definition, a political activity, because the making and doing of theatre necessitate the negotiation of the different experiences and attitudes that each different person brings to a theatrical performance. The civil rights movement, the feminist movement, and the similar political campaigns that have followed these in the US have sensitized artists and academics in particular to the idea that there are "good" and "bad" ways to representations influence the ways members of minority groups see themselves and are seen by others— and that there are "better" or "worse" ways to represent people who belong to those groups. Among the artists and scholars who specialize in theatrical and performed representations, what have seemed to various people at various times to be the most obviously "correct" ways to represent various kinds of politically-charged differences have often run contrary to one another, leading to passionate deadlock. For example, the infamous public debate between playwright August Wilson and theatre scholar Robert Brustein about theatrical representations of race demonstrates how passionately, and stubbornly, even accomplished "theatre people" can disagree.

This dissertation is an attempt to find a way around these passionate deadlocks, to equip contemporary theatre artists and scholars to reflect meaningfully and productively on the political implications of our own representational practices. Specifically, it is an attempt to explore the politics of representation on contemporary theatrical stages by looking at a specific political identity that, unlike race and gender, has not yet received widespread attention in theatre studies—disability. In my research here, I examine the ways some contemporary dramatists, directors, actors, and other theatre artists construct dramatic characters with disabilities, in order to explore what the political and social implications their representations might have for real people with disabilities. In mainstream theatre, the debates over the politics of representing disability have not garnered the attention and the heat as have similar debates over the politics of race— yet. In
some ways, these are ideal circumstances to theorize the politics of theatrical representation out from disability theory: there is passion but not yet deadlock. By using disability as a critical concept in an extended analysis of the processes of making theatre, I hope to open up the debate over the politics of theatrical representation from the "inside" of practice– to find theoretical tools that apply to what playwrights, actors, and directors actually do in the creation of theatrical performances, rather than looking from the "outside" of how the finished performances are received.

Some of the most commonly invoked concepts in critical debates about the politics of representation are problematic when applied to theatrical representations, particularly the ideas that representations of disability should not be "unrealistic," that casting should be "blind," that actors try to "become" their characters, and that an artist’s identity should be a factor in determining the "authority" of a particular representation. Each chapter examines one of these ideas in relation to the creative choices of playwrights, directors, actors, and other artists, with special attention to the processes whereby theatrical characters are constructed. While each of these concepts and its opposite alternative may seem to be straightforwardly applicable to theatrical representations, a closer look at how they actually circulate in the working practices of theatre artists will show that the politics of representing disability on the theatrical stage is anything but a straightforward choice for or against each of these standards. Some of the arguments for or against these particular ideas have been borrowed from film, art, or literary criticism and so overlook unique features of theatrical performance. Other relevant arguments proceed from what I believe are misconceptions about what acting is and how it works as a representational system.

In my analyses here I reject theatre’s myth of a transparent, infinitely moldable body on which any sign can be unproblematically inscribed; likewise I reject the idea that certain characters’ bodies are ever similar enough to an actor’s to make the portrayal transparent. Instead, I would like to put forth the idea that the processes of making theatre as well as the theatre itself are always processes of relating different people and different bodies to one another, and that most useful discussions about the political implications of theatrical representations of disability locate the politics of representation in the process of relating across
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Bringing real and projected experiences of disabled bodies in contact with the processes of theatrical production reveals the ways in which theatrical practice and theory works with bodies and with the politics surrounding those bodies. In this dissertation, I will continually use disability as a critical concept to mediate between the poetics and the politics of representing difference in contemporary theatre, and occasionally I will use it to open up dark corners of dusty assumptions implicit in the ways contemporary artists make and do theatre. I would like to make clear here that using disability as a critical concept is in no way intended to exploit persons with disabilities, to diminish the real experiences of persons with disabilities, or to cut persons with disabilities out of any conversation—rather, quite the opposite on all three counts. Disability studies begins and ends with the lived realities of bodies with disabilities. It starts by finding direction for its critiques in the contact between bodily impairments and the environment that surrounds them, and it works ultimately to advance the cause of people with disabilities and to increase the status of knowledge produced by people with disabilities. To claim that disability is a critical concept is not to say that bodily impairments themselves endow some bodies with special insight or permission to critique cultural phenomena. Rather, it is to say that the typically "invisible" structures of culture and history have a tendency to "become visible" through the first-hand or sympathetic second-hand experiences of impaired bodies.¹

Two of the various models of disability strongly shape the concept of disability as it appears in this dissertation: the social (or social-construction) model and the political model. The social model of disability typically stands in opposition to the medical model of disability, which presumes that disabilities are essentially "defects" located in individual bodies. The social model insists that disabilities are "constructed" by the built and social environment, which meets

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the needs of some bodies while increasing the difficulty for other bodies. For example, proponents of the social-constructionist model of disability recognize that if most human beings moved around in a seated position (like a wheelchair user), then door handles, light switches, and tabletops would be built to enable wheelchair users, and those few people who stood upright might well be disabled by that kind of an environment. The political model of disability draws together persons with a wide range of impairments for the purposes of political clout as an oppressed minority population, much like the feminist and civil rights advocates politicized the categories of "gender" and "race." Indeed, despite some key differences between the notions of gender and race on the one hand and disability on the other, the political model of disability borrows much from its historical antecedents.

Lived experiences of disability of course exceed the social, political, and medical models of disability, as well as other models such as the deviance or business models of disability; the term "corporeality" has sometimes been used in disability studies to refer to the fact that any one of these models taken alone defines bodies and disabilities only partially. A few key concepts, however, run in some form through all the various models of disability; for example, the ideas that disabilities and impairments are always defined in opposition to a "normal" body, and that "normal" bodies are only "normal" insofar as they are similar to the majority of other (human) bodies out there. The concept of normality thus erases the many differences among bodies within the accepted range of similarity, while bodies outside that range are branded as different, despite the fact that all bodies everywhere are essentially different.

Another concept common to different ways of thinking about disability asserts that one of the key differences between disability and other politicized bodily identities like race or gender is its relative flexibility and transience. To gloss a comment made by a colleague in a disability studies seminar: no celebrity is going to fall off a horse and suddenly "become black"—but Christopher Reeves’s riding accident and his subsequent affiliation with the label "disabled" marks an importantly unique feature of disability as a basis for political identification. As advances in medical science continue to increase the life expectancy of residents of developed countries, the chances that any one person will experience a life-changing impairment at some point in their life also rises. Many individuals who acquire impairments later in life will never
My use of the lowercase “deafness” is intentional here, as I refer to the physiological condition of being unable to hear. Throughout this dissertation I will follow the convention of using the capitalized term “Deaf” to refer to individuals and institutions affiliated with the community of deaf persons, reserving the lowercase “deaf” for the physical condition and its parameters.

Questions about what "counts" as disability– and what doesn’t– have critical impact on the life experiences of people who do not consider themselves disabled as well as those who do. Legal protection for people with disabilities depends on legal recognition of what exactly a disability is or is not. The differences among the medical, social-construction, political, and business models of disability suggest how complicated this matter can be. Many disabled individuals and their allies, institutional policy-makers, and legislative and judicial bodies routinely contest what disability is and what it means: Does any impairment that carries a stigma constitute a disability? To what extent and in what context must a stigma be operational? Is deafness in fact an impairment? To what extent should chronic illness be considered a disability? Does mental illness "count" as disability? Does obesity? In the US, both federal and privately administered benefits for people with disabilities depend on some medical certification that the impairment exists, that it impacts a person’s ability to work in specific ways, and that it will likely continue to impact that person’s ability for a specific length of time. In other words, it is not enough to consider yourself disabled, you must have someone else consider you disabled– and second-person certification usually operates on the medical model of disability, regardless of how the individual prefers to define disability. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, only certain kinds of impairments in certain contexts are "counted," and therefore protected, as disabilities.

In terms of forging a political alliance, however, Marian Corker and Carol Thomas point out in a dialogic essay about disability that "social systems that are exclusively built on systems of classification. . . are generally undemocratic, oppressive, and exclusionary." The notion of

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disability as a means of political alliance is predicated on the idea that small minorities of people might bind together on account of the similarities among their differences (relative to a mainstream population). To base the social system of disability politics in a clear definition of what is and what is not disability is to violate the principle that people can be similar in that they are different from the mainstream, if only because they are treated as different by the general public.

Indeed, the politicization of the label "disability" can obscure just how different are the differences it includes, and one of the foremost complications of working within disability studies is the tendency to treat disability itself as a homogenous, stable category. A useful discussion about the politics of representing disability on the stage must begin with the acknowledgment that disabled bodies are all unique in their abilities, forms, and lived experiences— that a blind woman’s embodied experience is hardly comparable to that of a paraplegic, that indeed one wheelchair user’s embodied experience is quite distinct from that of another. In this dissertation I will discuss at some length plays with disabled characters who have very little in common besides the fact that they are all characters with some kind of impairment with a stigma: physical deformity, blindness, and clinical depression. In addition, I will make reference to other plays with characters who have a range of other disabilities, and I will use examples of still other disabilities to illustrate various arguments. In drawing together many different kinds of people and bodies under the label disability, I make use of what I believe is one of the most important gestures of disability studies as a political and academic field– the assertion that differences among bodies are a more viable means of alliance than are illusory presumptions of sameness.

It is tempting to broaden this fundamental presumption of difference and take on all the various differences in bodies that get attention in contemporary theatre: race, gender, age, body size. In fact, I will at times make reference to these issues to supplement the arguments I discuss, and I would like very much to see this work employed as a tool for negotiating the politics of representing all kinds of different bodies on the stage. For the most part, however, my theories are grounded in the extensive critical insights into the politics, aesthetics, and ethics of disability representation offered by current work in disability studies, and so my focus here will continually
return to the intersection of disability, theatrical practice, and the politics of representation.

**PROJECT OVERVIEW**

Representations of disability are by no means new to Western drama, as characters with various disabilities have had a role in dramas throughout history since antiquity. Critical concerns about the political implications of these representations, on the other hand, are quite new to both scholars of drama and practicing theatre artists, in part because the political dimensions of disability as an identity have only gained prominence since the second half of the twentieth century. In **Chapter #2: Representations & Realities**, I lay out some of the key research by humanities scholars on disability representation in an effort to explore what kinds of tools are available— or need to be developed— for theatre artists and scholars who need or wish to engage with the political implications of the representations of disability they create.

Since the 1990s, an increasing number of scholars in the emerging field of disability studies have begun to explore how fictional representations of disability in literature, visual art, and even film, connect to the lives of real persons with disabilities. Dramatic literature is often cited alongside other kinds of fiction to make the case that disability has served as a representational trope for characters who are unusually evil, child-like and innocent, endowed with mystical power, able to "compensate" with extraordinary intelligence, or simply one-dimensional. When disabled characters appeared in drama prior to the 20th century, their disabilities typically served a symbolic or metaphorical purpose. Since the politicization of disability identities in the mid-20th century, dramatic representations of disability have shifted in important ways. The period of history since the emergence of disability as a political identity has been concurrent with the historical period of postmodernism, and English-language plays written since about 1960 have been indelibly influenced by a postmodernist world-view, if not in terms of their stylistic features, then in terms of the subjects they address and the attitudes they depict. Particularly interesting for disability representation has been the development of what I call a "post-Realist" strategy of theatrical representation, which combines topics and subjects that are real in the world with overtly theatrical performance techniques that defy the conventions of dramatic Realism.

In the second half of this chapter, I take a close look at three "post-Realist" plays about
disability: Peter Nichols’s 1964 play *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, Brian Friel’s 1994 play *Molly Sweeney*, and Sarah Kane’s 1999 play *4.48 Psychosis*. Each of these playwrights departs from formal dramatic Realism to varying degrees in the interest of making some real aspect of disability experience more accessible to the audience. This strategy is not entirely unproblematic from a political point of view for a couple of reasons, but it nevertheless calls for a critical response that is more nuanced and sophisticated than a simple judgment as to whether a playwright has represented a dramatic character with a disability "realistically" or "unrealistically."

One of the things that sets dramatic literature apart from other types of literature is the fact that dramatic literature is written to be performed. In contemporary theatre, a stage director nearly always heads the process of readying a play for public performance. Most theatre directors are considered to have a good deal of creative freedom in, and therefore responsibility for, the construction of dramatic representations— as much or even more than the playwright does. In Chapter #3: "Blind" Casting?, I use my own experience directing a student production of *Molly Sweeney* at the University of Michigan in October of 2002 to examine how the choices a director makes in terms of production practices are implicated in the politics of representing disability in theatre. A significant part of a director’s work centers on the development and realization of a "production concept" that guides all the rest of the choices made by designers, actors, and other artistic staff to create a unified production. Although the production concept is typically considered an artistic element, its execution inevitably involves making decisions that exceed artistic considerations and impact real people with real material, financial, and political concerns.

A director’s choices about who and how to cast actors in particular roles, for example, always entail some degree of compromise between the director’s aesthetic goals and the socio-political realities of the company, production, and audience. Both traditional and blind approaches to casting have been suggested as relatively straightforward methods to address the politics of theatrical representation and theatrical production, for very different reasons— but both fall short when applied to characters and actors with disabilities. Though communities of disabled individuals are (very) slowly gaining a degree of political subjectivity, there has been no
discussion about the portrayal of disabled characters comparable to the passionate debate about cross-racial casting. It is standard practice for all or most disabled characters to be played by actors without disabilities, especially in mainstream commercial theatre and film. Moreover, people with disabilities have historically had extremely limited access to the processes by which theatrical representations are made, even when those representations are of people with disabilities.

Much of the debate over the politics of casting presumes that directors and artistic staff must make a choice between either a traditional or a blind approach, but there are many casting strategies in use on contemporary stages that are neither traditional nor blind. These alternative casting strategies are also compromises, and these too have their political repercussions, which I explore in the second half of this chapter. In general, the choices made about how to cast are more important to discussing the politics of representation than are the choices made about who is cast in a specific instance. Individual decisions about which person to cast in a particular role occur in the very limited circumstances of an audition and a director’s evaluation. The choices directors make about how to cast a particular production, on the other hand, set the stage for the kinds of relationships those dramatic representations will have with the realities of the theatrical experience– how the actors will relate to their characters, how audiences will relate to the play and its characters, and how the community will relate to the production practices of the theatre company.

Although the director’s choices in many ways establish the parameters for the kinds of relationships theatrical representations will have with the realities of lived experiences, one of the distinctive features of theatre as a representational system is that more than one artist is almost always involved in the process of constructing representations. In Chapter #4: An Actor Relates, I examine what relationships and responsibilities are involved in the work an actor does to develop and perform a character, particularly a character with a disability. It is notoriously difficult to gain access to the specifics of research and preparation that an actor does outside of the formal rehearsal process for a particular production, but Antony Sher’s Year of the King offers a detailed first-person account of the year leading up to his 1984 portrayal of the hunchbacked king in Shakespeare’s Richard III with the Royal Shakespeare Company in
Stratford-upon-Avon. Using Sher’s diary as a case study, I explore how the actor’s preparation was fundamentally a process of relating his own body and experiences to the very different body and experiences ascribed to his character, in such a way that he was eventually able to imagine himself in the character’s place.

Constructing a performed representation of a character is essentially a sustained, multidimensional act of imagination that requires special training, practice, and research on the part of an actor. Sher draws from his own experiences of a disabling injury to consider some of the practical, artistic, and social elements of performing Shakespeare’s disabled version of King Richard, but he also seeks out opportunities to observe real people with various disabilities as part of his preparatory research– and expresses some discomfort with the interactions that result. It is useful, I argue, for both theatre artists and critics to consider an actor’s research as a kind of ethnography, an effort to observe, understand, and respect a different body’s experiences and knowledge and then re-present it to an audience. The conceptual and practical guidelines being developed by anthropological ethnographers to make the study of other cultures more humanizing and less imperialist can also help actors who are interested in researching other people’s experiences and perspectives to make their characters more lifelike and less superficial.

Of course, it is not enough for an actor to research a character, no matter how complete, respectful, and humanizing that research is. An actor must find a way to select ideas that are relevant and then synthesize them into an embodied representation in performance. Sher’s diary includes a number of freehand sketches that the actor drew as part of his personal process of developing the character. In part because Sher’s sketches are works of art in themselves, they highlight the kinds of intentional, invested, and always biased choices actors make in the process of coming to understand their characters and then imagining themselves as those characters. Conventional ways of thinking about acting as a representational system tend to obscure both the actor herself and her agency in the process; on the other hand, debates about the politics of theatrical representation that are anchored in the idea that acting is an intentional, embodied process of interpretation and re-presentation affirm the agency– and therefore, the responsibility– of the actor in a collaborative process.

Rehearsal is both the place and the means whereby a good deal of the collaboration of
contemporary theatre-making occurs. In the rehearsal room, a director brings together the individual preparatory and creative work of the actors with that of the other artistic staff in order to move from the playwright’s text to the actual production the company will make of it. In Chapter #5: A Problem With Authority, I explore how a professional company negotiates issues of an author’s disability, authority, and authorization as they rehearse Sarah Kane’s 1999 play about mental illness, *4.48 Psychosis*. The text of *4.48 Psychosis* attempts to reproduce—with a fragmented voice, unidentified characters, and sharp changes between styles and scenes—the experience of clinical depression from the point of view of the depressed individual, mimicking the loss of self-identity, the lack of linear causality, the inability to concentrate, the dismantling of boundaries between self and other, and the dissociation of mind from body. Kane herself committed suicide shortly after the play’s completion, and the fact that she experienced the mental illness she was depicting firsthand strongly influenced perceptions of her authority to write about it. For some critics, however, Kane’s identity as a mentally ill person—and her authority to speak as one through her plays—superceded her authority as a playwright experimenting with dramatic form.

Throughout the two weeks of development rehearsals, the company’s use of dramaturgical and biographical information about Sarah Kane was particularly interesting in that they tended to consider, evaluate, and often resist the “easy” interpretations of *4.48 Psychosis* that Kane’s life and death offers. Instead, the director encouraged the actors to balance a respect for Kane’s artistic process as a playwright like any other with an awareness of her unique access to the feelings and sensations attendant to the mental illness at the center of the drama—in other words, to let her speak as both a writer and as a disabled person. In the process, the director’s style during these two weeks was heavily dramaturgical, which positioned him with the authority to speak *for* Kane in her absence, although he was not apparently disabled himself. As they prepared for performance, the actors experimented with various interpretations and styles of vocal delivery as they attempted to speak *with* the language of Kane’s dialogue and the perspective of Kane’s characters.

For this company of actors, then, issues of authority spread out across the questions of speaking as, speaking for, and speaking with. Each of these different framings of authority
carries with it political implications and responsibilities. Conventional notions of authority are usually framed in terms of who is authorized to speak as a member of a particular community, or who is authorized to speak for (on behalf of) that community. In theatrical performance, though, the act of speaking implicates at least three different "bodies"—the writer, the actor, and the character, all of whom speak the lines of the play in alignment. Following the idea raised earlier in this dissertation of acting as relating different bodies to one another, I conclude by exploring the idea that the authority of (and therefore, the responsibility for) theatrical performance is located not in the single body of the playwright, but in the process of "speaking with," of bringing different voices into conversation and, eventually, temporary alignment.

While critical examinations of literary and visual representations of disabled bodies have proliferated in the last twenty years, there has been rather less analysis of performed representations of disability. As the past fifty years in both theatre practice and disability advocacy have shown, the politics of representation are hard to define and even harder to negotiate, but this project is an attempt to put together a "theoretical toolbox" for critical consideration of representing disability in theatrical performance. By paying attention to what theatre artists actually do in the process of making theatre, and by rethinking notions of what acting is and how it works as a representational system, I hope to move towards a theoretical framework for analyzing mimetic performance that takes into account literary and visual strategies, performance techniques and practices, and societal and cultural influences. Only by working through such a framework will we who practice and study theatre be able to have meaningful disagreements about the relative success and "responsible-ness" of our dramatic representations of all kinds of bodies.