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Creating A More Inclusive Industry: A Guide to Supporting Disabled Theatre Artists in Production Disciplines

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A Guide to Supporting Disabled Theatre Artists in Production Disciplines

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Abstract

In this paper, I explore issues in contemporary American theatre which prevent true inclusivity of disabled theatre artists. By understanding the reasons for a lack of legal repercussions, support from unions, and training available, I reveal the consequences of a lack of accessibility in our industry. Furthermore, based on digital scholarship and personal interviews I conducted, I suggest a variety of ways in which theatre companies and organizations can make their practices more inclusive for their artists. Specifically, I provide examples of accommodations that can be implemented to support all disabled theatre artists and then, initiatives that will assist disabled theatre production artists specifically. Following these brief examples of accessible practices, I present three case studies on exemplary productions/organizations that have curated authentic inclusion for their disabled production artists. All three studies address productions/organizations that I have either seen or worked on, allowing me to have a thorough understanding of the successes of their accessibility initiatives. I conclude my project by sharing the implications of this data and the ways it can be beneficial to our industry.

Executive Summary

For my project, I researched issues facing disabled theatre artists and how inclusive practices can support their careers in the contemporary American theatre industry. To do so, I conducted digital research to gather data on why theatre is inaccessible to disabled artists. I began by delving into the regulations laid out in the Americans with Disabilities Act, including what the legal requirements are for theatrical employers. I also examined what it means to receive disability benefits through the Social Security Administration and how it impacts disabled artists who want to work. I also included information from the National Endowment for the Arts, specifically what obligations they have to disabled theatre artists and what they are doing additionally. From there, I moved on to investigate what industry unions, such as Actors' Equity Association and International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, are doing to support disabled union members. Unfortunately, I found little data from their union reports about disability. Since there is a large union scene in New York City due to Broadway, I took time to research what diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) initiatives these unions have enacted. In response to an industry-wide call for better treatment of people with marginalized identities, many Broadway production companies made statements, pledging their commitment to anti-racist practices. However, the corporations that run Broadway houses have given very little attention to accessibility and the importance of disability representation. From an educational standpoint, I addressed the importance of inclusive and accessible training programs for emerging disabled artists, but also shared the lack of such programs in our country. Instead, I pointed out the ways in which conservatory programs are incredibly inaccessible to disabled artists and how there are virtually no professional training programs for disabled production artists, or artists who work in theatrical management positions and design.

Drawing on interviews I had with individual artists and online research I conducted via industry journals (i.e., *American Theatre Magazine* and *HowlRound Theatre Commons*), in the second half of the paper, I describe ways that we can make our field more accessible. I start by listing general ways that theatrical organizations can support emerging artists by providing the type of education these artists are going without. I then include a few examples of ways to make specific disciplines more inclusive (i.e., lighting, scenery, and sound), before launching into three in-depth case studies. The first case study is on "How to Dance in Ohio," a Broadway musical that I worked on during its world premiere at Syracuse Stage. This production broke through so many barriers, providing accessibility for the company and the audience. Although the Broadway run was short, the presence of a production that had such disability representation set a new precedent for shows that make it to a Broadway stage. The second case study is on the performing arts department of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at Rochester Institute of Technology. After attending a performance of their dual-cast production (one signing actor and one speaking actor per role) of "In the Heights," I was desperate to learn more. I later interviewed two stage managers who have worked with NTID to understand what sort of accommodations they typically implement when working with a company of differing hearing abilities. Sophie Bravo and another student who wished to remain anonymous, shared the ways they have accommodated access needs, one being hearing and the other Deaf. The case study concludes with acknowledgement of both the company's achievements and its room for improvement. The third and final case study is on a production titled "Dark Disabled Stories," a play written by Ryan J. Haddad and co-produced by the Bushwick Starr and The Public Theatre. The play is a deep dive into disability artistry, the concept of celebrating one's disability in theatre rather than hiding it (like the ideology behind color-conscious casting as opposed to

colorblind-casting). This incredibly accessible production is one to recognize for its consideration of many different disabilities in the script, onstage, backstage, and in the house. The case study shares some of the ways that the production curated such accessibility featuring interviews from two of the production's designers, Kathy Ruvuna (sound) and Oona Curley (lights). The examination closes with my thoughts on the production, including critiques and a celebration of its success.

I conclude my research by sharing the implications of this data, which illustrate that showcasing disabled artists' work heightens representation, something that the disability community always needs. Particularly, by elevating disability representation, we can encourage more disabled kids to pursue careers in the arts by showing them that people like them are able to accomplish their dreams. Whether this data be used to make a theatre company more inclusive, a particular production more accessible, or as the basis for something larger, this project may serve as the evidence needed to change our industry.

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Acknowledgements

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Why is theatre inaccessible?

Lack of Legal Requirements

When addressing inaccessibility, many will remind complainants that a lack of legal requirements enables corporations to create exclusionary policies and not accommodate for access barriers. In some situations, a company may be required to follow certain laws, but without any sort of enforcement, they do not feel obligated to do so. Despite an industry's progressiveness, these issues persist, furthering the alienation of disabled people in our society. The performing arts world is no different when it comes to funding, which influences decisions about providing resources or accommodations. When sifting through dollars and cents, particularly in nonprofit organizations, resources that are not legally required by the government will fall by the wayside to allocate funds elsewhere. Thus, it is no surprise that a lack of legal requirements tolerates inaccessibility in the American theatrical scene. Often unions form, in response to lack of legislation, fighting together for employee rights when a corporation chooses greed (or truly has limited resources) over humanity. After the "We See You White American Theatre" document was released in June of 2020, most unions and many theatre companies made statements about their support and commitment to anti-racist practices (We See You, 2020). Although very few of these statements resulted in real action or changes, they were viewed as a move in the right direction. In fact, the inclusivity of many marginalized communities was highlighted in these documents, enabling more of a push for the importance of diversity in the arts. However, few of these unions or organizations included disability in their statements or created initiatives that supported disabled artists. When neither the law nor the leading organizations and their union counterparts emphasize the importance of accessible theatre

practices, it is unreasonable to expect disabled artists to easily get hired. If an organization genuinely wants to support artists from unrepresented backgrounds, disability must be included on such lists. Intersectional identities play a large part of this conversation, and yet claiming that intersectionality will thus bring in the disabled artists erases disability culture and identity. Victoria Ann Lewis, a disabled playwright, has spoken passionately on this issue, commenting:

> [T]he absence of disabled people from these spaces, or the invisibility, or most misinterpretation of their social roles in those spaces, establish the very rigid boundaries which separate to disable people from the arts, whether as working artists, students or audience members. (Johnston, 2016, p. 65)

To combat these issues, many organizations have been started all over the country to include disabled people in the arts. But even these groups lack diversity regarding types of disabilities, arts disciplines, and ranges of interest or experience in the arts. Predominantly, these organizations are intended for adults with intellectual disabilities who wish to perform as a hobby, most commonly by playing improvisational games. This leaves out disabled artists who want to be stage managers, designers, or producers.

To understand the lack of legal requirements for accessible theatre, one must begin by understanding the legislation that is in place. There are two important aspects to review, the Americans with Disabilities Act and a federal agency called the National Endowment for the Arts. Without taking a closer look, it can be quite confusing as to why neither this act nor this office has solved the challenges faced by disabled artists seeking employment at American theatres, but after some analysis, the reasons become clearer.

The Americans with Disabilities Act, or ADA, is a federal civil rights law signed by President George H.W. Bush on July 26th, 1990 (ADA National Network, n.d.). This law

"prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in everyday activities" like other civil rights laws that prohibit against other identities such as race, sex, nationality, or religion. One of the main aspects of the ADA, "guarantees that people with disabilities have the same opportunities as everyone else to enjoy employment opportunities, purchase goods and services, and participate in state and local government programs" (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, n.d.). The biggest issues with the ADA, however, come into play based on how they define disability and the allocation of resources to those who qualify. According to the ADA, a disabled person, "has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities," as well as a history or could be perceived by others as having such. This definition may seem simple, but between the lack of access to affordable healthcare to provide such diagnoses, and the unfair treatment towards disabled people from the medical system in this country, qualifying as disabled according to this definition can be quite difficult.

Individuals who meet this definition of disability can apply for Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI), colloquially known as "Disability" or "disability benefits," a program from the Social Security Administration (SSA). This program "provides monthly payments to people who have a disability that stops or limits their ability to work" which could include monthly paychecks and health insurance (SSA, n.d.a). However, for individuals who are hoping to return to work after time off or newly receive benefits as supplemental income/insurance to a part-time/freelance job, keeping their benefits is more complicated. Disabled individuals who try to keep both a job and their benefits often must dial back on their hours to stay under the income cap. In 2024, income for individuals receiving Disability is capped at $1,100 in the first 9 months and $1,550 per month, or $2,590 specifically for those who are blind or have low vision, in the first 3 years (SSA, n.d.b). Even with additional income from the benefits themselves, this is often

not enough for the average American to get by. This forces disabled people to either let go of their benefits so they can work more hours or to give up their jobs in the hope of receiving additional income from SSA. When letting go of benefits to work more hours, disabled individuals often end up either overworking themselves or losing their jobs if they are unable to commit to a full-time job. This may lead a disabled worker to have to choose between straining themselves and their families going hungry.

For disabled artists who do seek a job (regardless of being on Disability), there are a few accessibility regulations in place that make employment complicated in our industry. Title I of the ADA, the employment section, "requires employers with 15 or more employees" to provide equal opportunities to current and prospective employees including fulfilling reasonable accommodations. Although theatre is a collaborative art form, there are many low-budget situations in which, on paper, there may be just under fifteen employees and thus organizations are not legally obligated to do the bare minimum for disabled artists they may work with. Regardless of the number of employees, organizations are required to provide reasonable accommodations to employees who ask for them, regardless of when in the hiring process (or length of employment). According to the ADA, a reasonable accommodation is defined as:

> [A]ny change or adjustment to a job, the work environment, or the way things usually are done that would allow you to apply for a job, perform job functions, or enjoy equal access to benefits available to other individuals in the workplace. (U.S. DOJ, 2020a)

Examples of reasonable accommodations include architectural changes, interpreters, quieter workspace/changes to reduce distractions, materials in an accessible format, and time off. As opposed to an office or retail job, however, providing these accommodations can be much more complicated in the performing arts world due to the frequency of multi-tasking, short deadlines,

and having to quickly pivot without having time to prepare. This often results in higher expenses, less availability, and generally more challenges to creating accommodations.

On the other side of the curtain, however, the performing arts are one of the industries with the largest in-person consumer base, thus requiring the following of Title III, Businesses That Are Open to the Public. Title III pertains to all "businesses and nonprofit service providers that are public accommodations, privately operated entities offering certain types of courses and examinations, privately operated transportation, and commercial facilities. Public accommodations are private entities who own, lease, lease to, or operate facilities…" (U.S. DOJ, 2020b). When renovating a building to make operations accessible to customers, it may seem obvious for a company to ensure their processes are accessible to their employees as well. However, as mentioned earlier, this is an example of how the bottom line will restrict practices that a theatre may otherwise want to employ. In addition to the legal loopholes in these situations, there is also not a compliance authority to ensure the laws that do exist are being followed. The ADA Designated Investigative Service has a variety of branches to explore different industries, but this service does not conduct investigations unless a complaint is filed (U.S. DOJ, 2017). The complaint process, although practically accessible, is a long ordeal that many choose not to pursue. This is what allows America's oldest and largest theatres, such as those on Broadway, to get away with limited accessibility for their audiences and artists.

Approaching these situations from an arts-centered perspective requires an understanding of the part the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) plays in supporting disabled artists. The NEA, established in Congress 25 years prior to the ADA's signing, "is an independent federal agency that is the largest funder of the arts and arts education in communities nationwide and a catalyst of public and private support for the arts." With the mission to create more equal

opportunities for Americans to participate in the arts, the NEA's largest initiative is grantmaking to nonprofit arts organizations (NEA, 2021). Through this funding, the NEA has committed itself to DEIA and prioritizes projects and organizations that "benefit audiences that otherwise might not have access to arts programming." In fact, as of 2022, 35% of grants went toward underserved populations including people with disabilities (NEA, 2022, p. 2). Although none of NEA's grants are specific to disability, they have several that include disability as a marginalized identity, thus validating the importance of highlighting disabled artists. Other successful initiatives include the roundtable on "Creating Opportunities for Deaf Theater Artists" and a large section of their website that is dedicated to accessibility for disabled artists. One of their most renowned projects in the disability community is the recently released "Careers in the Arts Toolkit," featuring "best practices, resources, and artist profiles" for artists, cultural workers, disabled youth, arts employers, arts educators, and arts grantmakers (NEA, n.d.a). To further support disabled artists and audiences, the NEA also emphasizes the importance of accessibility by making it a requirement for their grant recipients:

> In support of accessibility requirements and in accordance with section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all grant recipients are required to ensure that their arts programs are accessible to disabled visitors and employees. To assist grantees in their compliance with this requirement, the NEA provides this Program Evaluation Workbook designed to assist staff of Endowment grant recipients in evaluating the current state of accessibility. (NEA, n.d.b)

In some states, their individual arts councils are working to create even more specific requirements for grant recipients, including a fully fleshed out ADA plan. The New Jersey Theatre Alliance, for example, has created the Cultural Access Network Project which assists

theatres in making their programming accessible to disabled patrons. By providing easily accessible resources to arts organizations they expect all grant applicants to be prepared with an ADA plan prior to submitting for funds (New Jersey Theatre Alliance, n.d.).

Despite all these programs, disabled artists still find themselves struggling with finding and keeping employment that provides sustainable income. Artists have expressed this frustration to the National Endowment for the Arts saying:

> We need to be able to figure how much we can make and still keep our benefits, how much we need to make to be able to afford to get off our benefits. We need to have a tight handle on our healthcare and health options should we be able to afford to get off of SSI. (NEA, 2016, p.4)

Employment statistics from the Bureau of Labor Statistics only reiterate this point:

> In 2022, 21.3 percent of persons with a disability were employed, up from 19.1 percent in 2021, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported today. For persons without a disability, 65.4 percent were employed in 2022, up from 63.7 percent in the prior year. (U.S. Government Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022, p. 1)

While I was unable to find specific statistics for those in theatre, of those that are employed, only 2.2% of people with disabilities are in the arts (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022, Table 3). The ADA does offer programs to assist in raising the employment rate for disabled individuals, but these programs are often blue-collar focused and do not consider the arts as a sustainable career. Therefore, most of these programs, such as the Ticket to Work program do not offer many resources for those hoping to pursue a career in the arts. For other industries, “The Ticket to Work program helps you, free of charge, to get vocational rehabilitation, training, job referrals, and other employment support services” (SSA, 2020, p. 2), however if you search for arts

resources on their site directly, you won't find anything. On their partner sites, such as Getting Hired, IMDiversity, Apprenticeship USA, and DisabledPerson.com, arts and entertainment will populate in search results, but most of these jobs are not actually for the performing arts, but more so movie theatre attendants and home theatre technicians, largely blue-collar jobs.

Lack of Support from Unions or Broadway

Outside of federal laws and initiatives, large organizations like unions, corporations running Broadway venues, and producing companies are not doing much to assist disabled artists in getting hired. Without specific hiring or recruitment programs, disabled artists are going to continue to face inequitable wage differences if not general unemployment in the industry.

Major unions like Actors Equity Association and International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees have not shown proactive (or reactive) measures to combat issues facing their disabled members. For performers and stage managers in the industry, the "Theatre at a Crossroads, Hiring Bias & Wage Gaps in 2020" report was released by AEA in 2022. This report declared that only 1.023% of union members identified as having a disability out of 13.30% that responded to the question (AEA, 2022, p. 18). From these statistics, "those who are disabled and have identified themselves to the union as such consistently make less than average" (AEA, 2022, p. 18). On average, when broken down by contractual salaries, disabled stage managers made $45 less than nondisabled stage managers, totaling at $904 per week (AEA, 2022, p. 19). The diversity report released previously (data from 2016-2019) examined similar statistics, broken down by the number of contracts, or productions, taken on by union members over the years. In this report, 945 contracts were taken by those who self-identified as disabled, which equated to 1.01% of total contracts (AEA, 2020, Appendix 1). These statistics are unavailable for IATSE union members since the union has not surveyed their members on disability status. After

much anticipation, IATSE conducted their first union census in 2022 stating their commitment to "equality of opportunity and to eliminating all forms of discrimination," (Robb, 2021, para. 6), but the union decided to only ask its members to self-identify regarding gender, sexual orientation, and race (United Scenic Artists, Local 829, IATSE, 2022). What is more, out of the union's membership, only 44.7% filled out the census survey (United Scenic Artists, Local 829, IATSE, 2022, p. 1). Considering the confusion and rigidity around income caps and disability definitions to become eligible for disability benefits, it is unsurprising that many disabled artists would refuse to identify as disabled in such census forms. However, leaving a marginalized identity off these forms altogether is a subtle, yet often unconscious, comment on how our society regards disability and the ways it is ignored, especially in intense labor-filled fields.

When it comes to Broadway theatres, most of the organizations I reached out to did not respond. Out of the few that did, they responded stating that they did not want to be quoted or they did not have any sort of disability employment statistics since they do not ask their employees about disability status in any regard. They also did not have any specific statement about accessibility (for audiences or otherwise) notwithstanding the long-regarded inaccessibility of America's century-old Broadway theatres. Thus, it is not surprising that producers cannot do much to make accessibility a priority for individual productions. For example, accessibility teams and consultants are new to the Broadway world, with the producers of "How to Dance in Ohio" being the first to bring the idea to fruition in a Broadway production, and only due to the nature of the project itself (more on this later). A more popular role around Broadway productions is that of a DASL, or Director of Artistic Sign Language. In addition to sign language interpreters who have frequented Broadway stages for years, the introduction of DASL's has enabled a "deaf-centered experience, grounded in the deaf perspective," (Kaufman,

S. L., 2019, para. 13). Rather than the interpretations provided by hearing interpreters who, more often than not, may not be as immersed in Deaf culture, DASL's work with interpreters to artistically convey metaphoric language as it is used amongst Deaf communities. Like many initiatives for better inclusivity and diversity, DASL's have been around for decades, but are only being incorporated in Broadway productions as of late. Betty Siegel, the Director of Accessibility at The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, "began teaming up her sign-language interpreters with deaf "sign masters" — the term of art before DASL" at Arena Stage more than 20 years ago (Kaufman, S. L., 2019, para. 14).

Lack of Training Available

Another factor in the lack of disabled artists working professionally is the limited amount of training available. The most common route for theatre artists today is attending a four-year university program, often a conservatory or conservatory-style, before entering the "real world." However, higher education has been historically inaccessible to disabled students, limiting the amount of disabled young adults who pursue a college career. Whether it be because a high school counselor set unnecessarily low goals for transitioning out of school, the cost of tuition, or the architectural barriers on a college campus, many disabled high school students do not even consider attending higher education. According to the Disability Statistics Compendium released in 2023, close to 20% of 25 to 34-year-old disabled Americans possess a bachelor's degree (or higher) in comparison to 41% of nondisabled Americans in the same age group (Institute on Disability, 2023, para. 1). For those disabled students who are able to attend college, it is likely that they are not accessing an inclusive environment on campus. A 2022 peer-reviewed study showed that out of fifty well-funded undergraduate collegiate programs, 60% received a close to

failing grade when “measuring accessibility, accommodations, and reputation for inclusion.” In comparison, only 6% received an A (Campanile et al., 2022, para. 4).

Outside of the routine accessibility barriers in educational environments, such as the need for materials in alternate formats, extra time on exams, interpreters, etc., disabled arts students face an additional set of difficulties learning in their classrooms. Conservatory(-style) programs have a history of being not only incredibly intense academically, but also strenuous to the point of unhealthy exertion (Bateman, 2020, para. 4). Many have a history or current practice of being a “cut-program,” meaning that once a year students will be dismissed from the program if they are not keeping up with the curriculum or advancing their skill at what is deemed an appropriate rate (College Majors - Musical Theater Major [CaMom13], 2020). The pressure of losing their spot in their program has led to students putting up with horrendous working conditions and letting go of everything in their lives for the sake of their craft. Many students with disabilities cannot even imagine committing themselves to a career under such pressure. Even with fewer cut-programs today, the competition that fills these programs can be cut-throat and can lead to dangerous consequences if disabled students push themselves past their thresholds to get ahead. In 2016, the NEA partnered with the National Arts and Disability Center (NADC) and the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Disability Employment Policy (ODEP) to host a roundtable event for artists and administrators across the US to discuss ways to increase accessibility in the arts, “Artists described … how the expectation of the ‘overworked artist’ made it very difficult for artists with disabilities to create their art in a way that worked for them” (2016, p. 2), demonstrating how this problem is a systemic issue in our industry even past graduation.

For students who do seek out accommodations to assist in their studies, many arts programs do not know what they can do to support them (Lauffer, 2018, para 17). There are

plenty of disability-centered theatre companies that are willing to help larger universities with developing adaptations for their training, but many of these resources remain untapped. John Clinton Eisner, former Artistic Director at The Lark, asked:

> What does it take to get ten leaders of those programs together to figure out how they can be funded in big universities, to actively engage in this community, this conversation, early enough in their training that they will continue the work in their professional lives? [...] Existing training programs such as Deaf West, National Theatre of the Deaf, and Gallaudet offer core expertise to be tapped. (NEA, 2016, p. 25)

Despite the record-breaking achievements in inclusive education and accessibility in the City of Syracuse school district and at Syracuse University, these problems persist in our performing arts programs as well. In the Department of Drama, for example, there are many areas in our buildings that are inaccessible to wheelchair users and others who cannot climb stairs. In many situations at SU and other campuses, accommodations can be made to bring whatever materials are needed from the inaccessible floor to a place where the disabled student or employee can access. However, just because an architectural barrier may no longer be in the way, the exclusion of the disabled person often remains. One situation that comes to mind is a chronic issue that I experience occasionally due to my disability. In the SU Drama design studio, the upperclassmen have a studio to themselves that is up a flight of stairs. Due to the mixed-match architecture of the studio, we have an accessible, newer side of the building that is connected to an older, inaccessible house. For this reason, without doing serious construction, there is no “reasonable” way to transport disabled students upstairs (i.e., elevator or lift). On days where I have flare-ups, making it painful or simply impossible to climb the flight of stairs, I cannot work in the upstairs studio and instead work on the lower level. I am fortunate that many of my friends will decide to

come downstairs to join me, but this is not always a possibility. If someone is working on a project that could be easily moved such as painting sketches that are taped to a table, I would still hate to ask them to stop their work, move all their materials and resituate themselves downstairs just for me. Thus, I lose the social nature and collaborative environment of working in a studio. It could be rationalized that all the resources needed to work in the studio could be moved downstairs so I would still have access to everything I would need physically. Yet, the emotional consequences of such would be neglected in doing so, an often byproduct of inaccessibility.

For students who do not pursue college attendance but still wish to have a career in the arts, they may turn to community services for training. One of the most popular methods that disabled artists discover is creative arts therapy or theatre clubs. Creative arts therapy, also referred to as art therapy, is "the use of artistic methods to treat psychological disorders and enhance mental health. Art therapy is a technique rooted in the idea that creative expression can foster healing and mental well-being" (Cherry, 2023, para. 1). Drama therapy is a branch of creative arts therapy that, "offers a forum to try on new roles, learn new ways of relating, and express how you feel" (Rudlin, 2023, para. 1). One of the biggest issues with creative arts therapy is that it is often what is first suggested when disabled people express interest in pursuing the arts professionally. Theatre clubs offered by community centers (and sometimes even professional theatre companies) may seem passionate about teaching disabled adults, but upon deeper inspection they often have statements about how their programs are intended to teach participants communication skills. These same clubs are often only intended for adults with intellectual disabilities, despite claiming to be welcome to anyone. In their sessions, everyone says they are going to be a community of actors, but it quickly leads to an infantilizing session of

solely improvisational games. For disabled artists who are interested in pursuing theatre professionally, these clubs are not only unhelpful, but can be quite demeaning.

Fortunately, there are organizations that offer sincere and rigorous classes for disabled adults to learn about various performance techniques. As opposed to long days with tense competition, these classes happen once or twice a week in a relaxed environment with small groups of varying skill levels. Some of these organizations offer their programming for free whereas others charge a small fee, generally able to come out of one's disability benefits. One leading nonprofit conducting this work is EPIC Players, a neuro-inclusive theatre company based in Brooklyn that serves all five boroughs of New York City (and has recently expanded to LA). In less than eight years, EPIC has continuously delivered on their mission of:

> [C]reating professional performing arts opportunities and supportive social communities in the arts for Neurodivergent and Disabled artists. Via inclusive mainstage productions, musical cabarets, original showcases, skills-based classes and career resources, we hope to increase critical employment opportunities, pioneer increased inclusion in the arts, and break down social stigmas surrounding neuro-diverse communities. (EPIC Players, n.d.a)

They strongly believe in changing the statistics on the number of disabled artists working professionally, including the number of disabled actors performing in the roles of disabled characters (currently at 2%). To do so, they not only offer tiered courses in a variety of performance techniques, but they also pay their performers for acting in the shows that they produce (EPIC Players, n.d.b). Unfortunately, however, to continue their strong successes in the performance arena, EPIC is unable to offer courses or many production opportunities in production disciplines. Like many of their sort, EPIC focuses on the scarcity of professional disabled performers, therefore, is unable to support disabled artists in production disciplines

seeking professional training opportunities. There are very few organizations which offer development opportunities for both sides of the table, let alone solely in production, management, and design.

With limited training opportunities available outside of the collegiate environment, which itself is mostly inaccessible, disabled artists are not being set up for success. They may turn to the law to help in finding a job that will be accessible to them, but the government's employment resources do not sincerely acknowledge the arts as a profession. If they can secure a job without these resources, they may still have to go through the painstaking process of advocacy, regardless of loopholes enabling organizations to avoid making necessary changes. Those who remain employed must ensure they are not getting paid enough to hit the income cap and lose their benefits. Assuming they can do so, if they wish to work at a certain level in the industry they are expected to join a union, most of which are not doing much to advocate for them either. One must be passionate about their artform to make it that far and still want to continue working in it after all of that.

When disabled artists are not being included in the industry, their perspectives are not being shown. This leads to more inaccessible productions as well as the spread of ableist ideology (stereotypes that promote "discrimination or prejudice against individuals with disabilities" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), whether intentional or not. To have disability artistry shown on stage, disability must be made visible within the industry first, and that means being included. 30 years after the ADA was signed, artists are still fighting to get in the room to be considered for the job. Without such minimal progress, there is little hope that the next generation of disabled artists will be able to advance this work toward legitimate disability

artistry. To change the way disability in the arts is seen by the nondisabled public, drastic changes need to be made inside our theatres.

Combatting Inaccessibility

Considering all of the barriers preventing production artists from getting into the professional theatre world, it is understandable why many may not ask for accommodations upon being hired in the industry. For individuals with noticeable physical disabilities, advocating can be slightly less of an ask than those with invisible disabilities, and more of pointing out the obvious, e.g., someone in a wheelchair needing to access a space not by means of stairs. In many circumstances, finding solutions for access barriers can be tricky, especially when they are created via inaccessible architecture. However, in an arts world, creative problem-solving is less of an oddity and more of the expectation according to Michael Maag, a wheelchair-user and lighting designer:

> An inventive attitude is the definition of theatre. We've been stealing from other industries and using their innovations since the beginning of time. That's the disabled mindset: coming up with creative solutions when we have an impediment or an obstacle. We've found that when we include others, things get better for all, and the art gets better too. (Loeppky, 2021, para 27)

This "inventive attitude" is a fantastic outlook to have on changing the American theatre industry, but one of the biggest issues is that it is often not addressed until accessibility is thrown on as an afterthought during tech. To create a better work environment for our production artists, these practices need to be brought on from the start of the process, if not already written into the production (more on this later). Actor Alexandria Wailes was "invited to talk with [The Public Theater's] staff to figure out the best way to navigate the rehearsal process with interpreters in the room," months before rehearsals for the 2019 revival of Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* began (Loeppky, 2021, paras. 15-16).

This brings us to the larger issue of disabled artists having to work as educators, advocates, and artists while not being given the same grace and adaptive attitude in their endeavors. Thus, disabled production artists must be proactive and reach out to companies regarding the accessibility of their buildings, practices, etc. rather than the other way around. Although the ingenuity disabled artists bring to the room is remarkable, this inventiveness could be welcomed earlier in the process so that it can be planned out ahead of time.

Accommodation Examples

In the hope of creating a more accessible industry, below I have compiled a list of ways to support disabled artists in a variety of production disciplines. The list begins with ways that theatre companies, industry professionals, and educational environments can broadly assist disabled artists. Then, I list a few exemplary accommodations that are specific to individual production disciplines. With the publication of this paper, it is my intention that those seeking access barrier solutions will discover this list, and the following case studies, and will be able to consider implementing these practices in their theatres/productions. Due to the lack of training available to disabled theatre artists, creating opportunities for career development is a fantastic medium of allyship. As mentioned previously, policies included in the SSA and Ticket to Work program demonstrate a belief that the arts are not a sustainable career path for disabled people. Combatting this stigma by creating mentorship and training programs for up-and-coming disabled artists is one way that arts organizations can support these artists in making theatre a career. At the previously mentioned 2016 NEA roundtable event, participants responded to the prompt, “What ideas do you have to increase the career preparation and employment of people with disabilities in the arts?” and several key findings emerged (p. 1).

An initial response to the prompt stressed the importance of, “Offer[ing] mentorship opportunities and networks for artists with disabilities to assist in determining artistic goals, creating project plans, and connecting with resources” (NEA, 2016, p. 3). Rather than simply adding “for people with disabilities” to a title of a program, participants gave suggestions for how a training program could be the most accessible to disabled artists. Before even starting the program, there are barriers to access regarding applications and discovering information. Programming created for artists of all underrepresented and/or marginalized identities is a great way to be inclusive of many types of people, but often vague umbrella phrases can be deterring. Instead, the brief recommends, “Specifically include “disability” in the list of diversities welcome to apply (beyond gender, race, etc.) for grants and participate in programs” (NEA, 2016, p. 3) to ensure that artists know that an opportunity can be available to them. Another initial barrier to these programs is finances. When offering programs of this sort, it is best for tuition to remain as low as possible, as well as providing scholarships, to start artists off on a stable track to success. If an artist does not have the money to afford a certain program, they may dismiss the idea altogether.

Whether a program be in-person or remote, keeping access barriers to a minimum will enable success for all parties involved. One recommendation that many state arts organizations have been following for years is the compliance with federal accessibility regulations for grant recipients to receive funds. Requesting an organization’s ADA plan or having them fill out an accessibility survey can filter out groups that are not operating inclusively. Another access barrier to consider is the general attitude around disability amongst institutions. In the world of arts education, one recommendation included in the brief asked educators to, “Recognize that there are different ways of creating and performing art. Express a willingness to work with

individuals of varying abilities. Adapt courses and arts opportunities to include artists with disabilities" (NEA, 2016, p. 3). It can be difficult for individuals to change their work processes, especially after decades of doing things the same way. However, educators being willing to alter their syllabi and lesson plans to allow for multiple pathways to the same learning objective is a powerful way to emphasize support for disabled students. By remembering all these areas when working on your organization's accessibility, not only are you opening yourself up to a larger audience, but the possibility of additional funds as well.

In addition to hosting specific classes and 1:1 mentorships for disabled artists, there are a variety of other low-cost ways that organizations can support local emerging artists. A frequently suggested example listed in the brief is creating opportunities to showcase artwork via an organization's physical or virtual premises (NEA, 2016, p. 4). Rather than funding an entire training program, paying for a few hooks or a frame to hang art on the wall of your office or front of house lobby is a small budget way to promote a new artist. Moreover, if space is available and programming is not a large expense, another wonderful way to promote art is by hosting a subpage on your organization's website. With this resource, both your organization and the artist can share their work on social media, advertising for both entities in one post. This is another way to support artists in their networking, as social media marketing can easily reach large audiences at little to no cost.

Discipline-Specific Accommodations

Prior to delving into the details of specific case studies, I want to take an opportunity to list a few discipline-specific accommodations. These examples are by no means exhaustive and are instead intended to serve as highlights of the unlimited possibilities for creative accommodations in the theatrical production industry.

In response to the 30th anniversary of the ADA being signed, John Loeppky wrote an article for *American Theatre Magazine* titled, "Taking ADA From the Page to the Stage" (2021). This article interviewed several disabled theatre practitioners about their experiences in the industry over the years, specifically regarding accommodations and attitudes about them. One of the industry professionals interviewed was Michael K. Maag, the wheelchair-user and lighting designer mentioned previously, who is the resident lighting designer at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. Maag was already a successful lighting designer prior to becoming a wheelchair user in 2003, thus giving him a distinct perspective than other disabled artists who are starting their career with a disabled identity. Working at OSF, Maag has been outspoken about his access needs and after some time, "'I was able to instigate work patterns for tech, where they removed some seats from the middle of the house so I can get to the lighting grid,' said Maag" (Loeppky, 2021, para. 23). Such an accommodation is not necessarily a "typical" request from a disabled artist, but by approaching access barriers with a creative mindset, challenges like this one can be met with solutions. Unfortunately, there are still some spaces at OSF he is unable to access, such as a few of the lighting booths, as their operations are housed in older building, but by working from the attitude of "what can we do" rather than "we've never done that before" allows for new discoveries that can be applied anywhere.

Another perspective to consider is that of designers who begin their career disabled. In contrast to those who have successful careers prior to acquiring a disability, emerging disabled artists have a large disadvantage in contrast to their nondisabled peers. For starters, young designers often begin their careers working in shops (carpentry, electrics, costumes, etc.) before they are given the opportunity to start designing. This can be incredibly beneficial to their careers as learning the inner workings of a shop and how a design is built or assembled can make them

better designers. However, when these shops are not accessible environments to disabled artists, they miss these experiences, delaying their progress into the field. If they can begin their career via assisting, working as an associate, or being a lead designer, the smaller theatres that they will start out at frequently have severe access barriers as well. Maag addresses this in his co-written essay, “The Importance of Including the Disabled Designer” with Mallory Kay Nelson:

> When working with smaller companies or at underfunded jobs, the designer is also expected to hang and focus lights and projectors, run cables, load weights, and more. Even if the expectations do not include the lighting technician aspects of the job, the long hours and short breaks require extensive planning for someone with a disability. (Nelson, M. K. & Maag, M., 2019, para. 11)

This can easily be translated to other disciplines such as a scenic designer being tasked with constructing and painting their own set, or costume designers having to pull pieces from stock or make their own alterations. Whether or not the designer is informed of these additional tasks beforehand, not being able to meet a company’s expectations can lead to dismissal and a falsely represented poor reputation.

When addressing access needs, a concept often referred to is how accessibility benefits everyone. It is a backhanded way of getting nondisabled individuals to pay attention to the disability community's concerns by saying “even though this may seem irrelevant and be inconvenient for you, this can make your life easier too.” This concept is described as Universal Design, “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability” (National Disability Authority Ireland, n.d.a). Universal Design was originally coined by the architecture industry in the hopes of creating a world where, universally, all housing is

designed to be accessible to all people, rather than being the exception (National Disability Authority Ireland, n.d.b). Since then, it has been applied to a variety of fields, including education, which has further developed the ideology into the Universal Design for Learning, improving education to be accessible to all students (CAST, n.d.). Implementing universal design in an educational setting can be especially fruitful for areas frequented by inexperienced students. When interviewing a technical advisor at a collegiate scene shop for performing arts groups (who has asked to remain anonymous) they shared several ways in which they have made their shop more accessible that are notable examples of universal design for learning. Additions they made to their shop include:

> A large decibel meter on the wall as a visual representation of when to wear hearing protection. We have a large print/digital tape measure that also speaks the measurement. We have fidget toys, legos, and coloring sheets on our "front" work table for anyone who wants them. All of our furniture is labeled with a colored dot, and is put in a corresponding colored location with the color name also written out in text form. Our tool bins have pictures of the tool and a label of what the tool is on it. (Anonymous personal communication, September 13, 2023a)

In a collegiate environment, there are often students working in the shop who are inexperienced or not working there very often, so having measures in place to remember where things belong or reminders for safety protocols are helpful for all. For neurodivergent individuals as well as those who deal with brain fog, these measures make finding materials (as well as putting them away) a more accessible experience. For those who are D/deaf or hard of hearing, having a decibel meter as a visual for hearing protection can also be of benefit. By having all these accommodations already in place, a considerable success for students in the shop is being able to

work independently, rather than having to ask others for help or communicate with others when something is inaccessible.

When approaching a lesson that is inherently inaccessible to individuals with specific disabilities, many educators may be uncertain what to do for that student to meet their learning objectives. Outside of a “typical” lecture and textbook-style class, meeting students' accommodations can be more challenging as accommodations are not set up to anticipate a technical theatre education. Similarly to the technical advisor, a high school technical theatre teacher who also asked to remain anonymous, approached their student individually to check-in regarding a sound lesson they had been planning. They taught this lesson for many years before, but this was the first time they had a student enrolled who had hearing loss. By meeting with the student separately to ensure their lesson would be accessible to them, they were able to prepare a class that would not call attention to the student’s disability during the lesson and allow them to participate alongside their classmates:

> I adapted my sound lesson plan to accommodate their hearing range – we used the “frequency visualizer” on Behringer x32 sound boards to help them with EQ (equalization), and had great discussions about what they could hear and how they could learn during that lesson. (Anonymous personal communication, September 13, 2023b)

By planning ahead and keeping students’ access needs in mind, this educator was able to create a solution that benefited one student while also providing new content that assisted everyone.

Case Studies

Similarly, the following case studies are intended to spark ideas about how productions can be made more accessible for their disabled artists. There have been great strides made to make theatre more accessible to audiences, especially in commercial and other big-budget

settings, but there is still much to do to improve internal accessibility. As mentioned previously, initiatives to reduce barriers for performers have gotten the most attention and are often the most prioritized, but this paper is meant to focus on production disciplines. Therefore, the subsequent analyses offer insight into successful solutions to meeting access needs for general production staff, technicians backstage and stage managers, and designers.

The first examination is into the new musical, “How to Dance in Ohio,” a production I worked on during its world premiere at Syracuse Stage in the fall of 2022. As the community engagement intern on the production, I worked as a liaison between Syracuse Stage, the “Ohio” company and producing team, and the general Syracuse University campus. Through my roles in disability advocacy groups and involvement in the community at SU, I was able to connect these three entities to one another for collaborations and sharing of resources. Unfortunately, the run of this production was cut short due to a COVID-19 outbreak in the company, but this did not stop the show from being wildly successful, leading to its recent Broadway run this past winter. Still being on campus, I did not have the opportunity to work on the Broadway production, but I am lucky to say that my work from the run at Stage was part of the work transferred to Broadway, especially as much of the team moved with the show. In the case study of this musical, I will reiterate the glass ceilings shattered by this production getting to Broadway and how its accessible practices benefited all company members.

The second evaluation is that of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, in residence at the Rochester Institute of Technology. I have been fortunate enough to visit the RIT campus and watch one of NTID’s performances of “In the Heights” during the spring of 2022. This production in particular was one of NTID’s many dual cast productions where D/deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing actors performed on stage together. This was the first production I had

seen in this style and I absolutely loved how the signing and speaking actors worked together to create the characters of such an incredible show. Another fantastic element of this production was the front of house lobby display that the company created for audience members to interact with. In addition to all the accessibility measures taken for audiences (i.e., open caption, audio description, and pro-tactile interpreting), the company curated a display featuring several characters' costumes and a 3D model of the set that audience members could pick up and touch. This company is no stranger to making accommodations for their artists as well and this survey interviewing two of the NTID stage managers exemplifies that.

The final case study dives into the world of "Dark Disabled Stories," a new play written by Ryan J. Haddad that was co-produced by The Bushwick Starr and The Public Theater last spring. Haddad is a rising disabled playwright and performer for television and the stage. He is also a 2020 recipient of the Ford Foundation's Disability Futures Fellowship, an opportunity created to:

> [S]hed light on the dearth of visibility of disabled creatives and position them as leaders for accessibility, language, and care. Our hope is to spur additional attention, engagement, and support for disability-led content, productions, and projects in the years to come. (Ford Foundation, 2022, para. 4)

In addition to being featured on the Ford Foundation website and subsequent press releases, each fellow is given a $50,000 grant to be used to advance the artist's career. Over the course of the three cohorts planned for this fellowship, one every two years, the Ford Foundation in collaboration with The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has committed $3 million to the future of disabled artists (Ford Foundation, n.d., para. 10). Despite his outstanding success and thus busy schedule, Haddad was kind enough to speak with me after I saw a performance of the

production, thus leading to its inclusion in this project. Via a brief introduction to the autobiographical play and excerpts from interviews with two of the production's designers, this audit will illuminate ways in which this production incorporated accessibility from the beginning of the project, including the design process.

"How to Dance in Ohio"

Based on the true story as showcased in the HBO documentary of the same name, "How to Dance in Ohio" is a new musical that "explores the universal need to connect and the courage it takes to step out into the world" (How to Dance in Ohio, n.d.a). The story follows a group of autistic young adults and their families as they navigate change and prepare for a spring formal dance planned by their group counselor, Dr. Emilio Amigo. The formal is intended to be both a celebration of their progress and a way for each person to challenge themselves, "A new experience to help us advance / all together, we will learn how to dance / in Ohio!" Amigo sings at the beginning of the show (Melocik & Yandura, 2022, pp. 28-29). After several years of workshopping, "Ohio" finally made it to the Belasco stage in the fall of 2023 and was met with rave reviews (How to Dance in Ohio, n.d.b). Its very presence on Broadway was groundbreaking for the representation of seven autistic characters and the seven performers playing them. It was also the first Broadway production to have a dedicated Access Team focused on reducing barriers for the company and their audiences. Instead of only offering a few TDF sensory friendly performances, the Access Team worked with the rest of the production team to ensure that all performances were accessible, thus making the TDF performances a special night to celebrate autism on Broadway with minimal changes to the actual production. A few ways that the Access Team curated broad accessibility throughout the run included the building of cool-down spaces in multiple areas of the theatre, availability of sensory packs (headphones, ear

plugs, fidgets, etc.), and making resources clear and easy to access. The latter was done via a pamphlet put in programs nightly that listed a few accessibility reminders (such as informing audiences of the cool-down spaces and sensory packs) and featured QR codes to a frequently asked questions page, an online dictionary of disability terms, and a list of additional resources for the disability community in New York. All these initiatives made “Ohio” an exemplary case of how to make Broadway more accessible for disabled audience members, and yet these examples are only a small percentage of how they made the production accessible as a whole.

One of the key members of the Access Team for initiatives internally was Autistic Creative Consultant Ava Xiao-Lin Rigelhaupt, the first to have that title on Broadway. At the beginning of the process, most of her work concentrated on being a script consultant, in an interview with New York Theatre Guide she said, "I'm on the autism spectrum, so I was brought on, with my history of script consulting, to help create authentic autistic characters," Rigelhaupt said. "I'm here to help the team understand autism and to think about access from the forefront, instead of access as an afterthought" (Russo, 2023, para. 4). Becky Leifman, the Director of Community Engagement on the production, also strongly believed that access needed to be at the forefront and thus hired Rigelhaupt at the beginning of the process. By doing so, Leifman and Rigelhaupt were able to start collaborating early on, thus including an autistic perspective as part of the production team. A fruitful result of such was an access survey that Leifman and Rigelhaupt were able to send out to the entire company prior to rehearsals starting. This survey included questions such as, “What makes you feel supported in a rehearsal room?” and “How can we make costumes and costume fittings comfortable for you?” (How to Dance in Ohio Access Team, 2022). Responses to the survey were kept confidential and recipients were encouraged to honestly share accommodations that would benefit them. The results were

incredibly beneficial both preparing for the beginning of the process and throughout the production as it enabled everyone on the team to be aware of ways they could support one another, regardless of disability. Examples of accommodations requested were things like avoiding the use of certain fabrics, asking individuals to not wear scented perfume in the rehearsal room, and receiving a large print script (How to Dance in Ohio Access Team, 2022).

Outside of the cast, having autistic production team members and others with disabilities in the room also created great community amongst the company. Liz Weber, who calls themselves, "an excellent stage manager who happens to be an autistic person," (Snook, 2023, para. 7) was a Production Assistant on the project and was grateful to be able to share knowledge from both their professional and personal experiences. In an interview with the Theatre Development Fund (TDF), Liz commented:

> I was backstage for a lot of the creation and in the room during the Broadway process, and there were things that I would look at with autistic intuition that I would translate to the allistic [non-autistic] people in the room. Everything is a learning and teaching experience. There was so much knowledge to be shared and distributed across all the departments, tiny things, huge things, so many things you can't even see. We're reinventing theatre in every facet possible. (Snook, 2023, para. 7)

Such intuition is essential to the success of a production like this one and thus had a significant impact on the company. Seeing themselves represented amongst the theatre, the cast was able to keep their community going throughout the project, not only just in the rehearsal room. Once in tech rehearsals, having disabled people in the house experiencing the show was also of great benefit to the production team. Assistant Music Director and Script Consultant, Nicole D'Angelo was able to advocate for both performers onstage as well as future neurodivergent audience

members when experiencing cues that did not necessarily feel accessible. When reflecting on the technical process they commented, “I was also sitting there experiencing lighting and sound cues over and over, and I thought, maybe I can go to the designers and give them some feedback if we're going to make this an inherently sensory-friendly show” (Snook, 2023, para. 3). By having disabled artists in multiple areas of production, D’Angelo was able to further support the process by giving feedback to the team when Rigelhaupt and Leifman were off working on other accessibility measures.

Together, Rigelhaupt, Leifman, Weber, D’Angelo, and Associate Producer Jeremy Wein made up the company’s Access Team, demonstrating that even a few extra people dedicated to focusing on these challenges can make a substantial impact. Wein, an emerging producer in New York City, is hopeful that other Broadway shows will learn from “Ohio’s” achievements and create their own Access Teams. If not, he hopes that at least more time is spent on making productions accessible in the Broadway sphere:

> A lot of shows in the last couple of years have brought people on to consult on specific aspects of a production,’ Wein says. ‘Don't just bring somebody on because you only want to hear their voice about one part of the show. You need to be open to hearing their voice across every aspect of your production. (Snook, 2023, para. 11)

In addition to dozen other disabled artists working on the project in a variety of disciplines, “Ohio’s” Access Team is doing just that.

National Technical Institute for the Deaf - Performing Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), a private university in Rochester, New York, is most lauded for its activity in doctoral research and STEM programs (RIT, n.d.b). Less recognized by the public, however, is its large D/deaf and hard of hearing community brought in

by the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) [“Deaf” for those who consider their Deafness a large part of their identity and “deaf” for those who aren’t as immersed in Deaf culture] (Roberts, 2023, paras. 3-5). Originally in competition with eight other universities for its placement, “NTID began operations in 1968 to provide deaf and hard-of-hearing students with outstanding technical and professional education programs” (RIT, n.d.a). Benefited by their supplementary liberal arts curriculum, it was no surprise when Dr. Robert Panara founded a student drama club the following year, which became an important element of the general NTID community. In less than five years, the university began adding more programs for students to minor and gain certificates in, which was eventually named the Department of Performing Arts. Since then, additional organizations have come to foundation including Sunshine 2.0 (originally Sunshine Too), a program “touring nationally and internationally to present programs about Deaf awareness, social issues and the environment” (RIT, n.d.c). Today, NTID Department of Performing Arts produces roughly five productions per season in collaboration with the College of Liberal Arts’ School of Performing Arts:

> [W]hile also maintaining NTID’s long tradition of Deaf-centered theatre and dance. All of our productions are accessible to Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing audiences, whether [backstage], onstage, or in the house. We are also committed to offering accessible performances for audiences with visual and other disabilities. (RIT, n.d.c)

In comparison to the professional industry’s lack of inclusion in the performing arts for D/deaf and hard of hearing artists, NTID Performing Arts has developed a robust program for students to learn about all areas of theatre.

For my analysis of NTID’s theatre program, I interviewed two stage managers, one hearing and one Deaf, on their experiences working on shows in the department. As expected, I

received two different perspectives on the realities of the communication mediums in place amongst the community. Depending on the demographics of who was working on each show, circumstances changed, but the challenges of a communication barrier persisted. I initially spoke with Sophie Bravo, who has worked on stage management teams at NTID, by talking about "typical" technical theatre conventions, such as turning all lights off backstage during the run of a show. Minimal light is used via clip lights or reading lights for assistant stage managers and run crew to read their scripts/run sheets or for actors to see where they are going. However, Bravo shared with me how at NTID, overhead lights remain lit backstage throughout the show, at a low level with gels to darken their color (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023). This is commonly the technique used for clip lights, one light bulb with a blue gel on them to lessen the harshness of their light. This is an important accommodation so that actors and crew can communicate to one another via signing and lip reading, something they wouldn't be able to do if they were in total darkness. For stage managers specifically, Bravo shared that in addition to the typical wireless headsets that assistant stage managers wear backstage, there was also a video system installed for stage managers to sign to one another. When describing the setup she said:

> It's sorta like [Z]oom or a security camera system? There were 4 cameras stationed throughout - light booth, each wing, etc. You can go up to the camera and wave to get attention and then the other person can sign. The cameras have no audio. (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023)

For smaller communication needs, stage managers would also text one another, but that can be tricky when actively calling a show. Thus, if for whatever reason the camera system could not be

used, people would have to be sent up to the lighting booth with messages for the stage manager (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023).

I also asked Bravo about the use of captioning in the department, which she explained was not a practical solution. Although in the classroom there are plenty of captionists for lectures and discussion groups, there is a lot more moving around in the theatre (i.e., dancing, moving scenery, assisting with quick changes, etc.) and so captioning would be more challenging than beneficial. Instead signing was the primary mode of communication amongst the company (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023). For Bravo, this was a new experience, since at the beginning of her first show at NTID, she did not know any sign language. By the end, however, she says she was able to hold a conversation:

> [A] huge portion of deaf theatre is celebrating sign language, and most of the people there are good signers (or like me, you learned as you go. It's quite intuitive and easy to pick up). [...] by the time tech week rolls around, most people know enough signs to communicate what they need with the cast. (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023)

Per usual, learning sign language was also beneficial for communication amongst hearing people in the company. Bravo recollected a time when she needed to speak with someone in the lighting booth while she was on the stage but had just recovered from a cold and did not want to yell up to the booth. Running off stage to the camera system would have taken too much time, so instead she signed to them and the two were able to efficiently exchange information before moving onto their next tasks (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023).

For those who did not know sign, or had just started learning, there were also between two to four interpreters in the room at a time. Yet, on a big musical like "In the Heights," which

in this case was twice its typical size since it was double cast, having two interpreters is nowhere near enough for efficient communication. A Deaf stage manager, who asked to remain anonymous, found it difficult to converse with their designers and crew since all but one were hearing. Subsequently, they always needed an interpreter:

> It was challenging, I spent most of my time struggling to find a way to communicate. [...] Interpreters were there, yes but not enough! The interpreters were struggling trying to interpret what I was saying, and also the cast members 'cause I didn't have my own interpreter which would've [made] things a lot easier and smoother. (Anonymous personal communication, March 16, 2024)

In a collegiate setting, it is understandable for a small club or student-run unaffiliated group to not always have all the necessary resources for success, especially when it comes to a discipline as underfunded as the arts. However, this is a well-established program with a large D/deaf and hard of hearing community, and yet administrators would still make excuses, "I would say [requesting accommodations was] presented as a bother[!] Their answer to it is 'What more can we do?' And it's only so much they can do […] RIT/NTID makes a fortune so no excuse…" (Anonymous personal communication, March 26, 2024). Although they were in constant need of conveying information during a high stress process, this Deaf stage manager went without.

A common challenge for many stage managers, especially those just starting out, is quickly gathering or getting the attention of all their performers. Once let loose into a theatre, there is so much more space to cover and places for people to be "hiding." This is when a PA system or microphone is particularly helpful as you can reach everyone by having your announcement played on all the speakers in the house, the dressing rooms, backstage, and in the lobby. However, when someone in your company will not be able to hear an announcement, this

is not as effective of a strategy. Bravo recalled many times in which she had to chase someone down when needed for a cue if they had not seen that they were needed somewhere:

> As stage manager, if deaf actors disappear and they're gonna miss your cue, you have to go find them and communicate to them. They don't really have the privilege of zoning out, walking away, and listening and hoping they come back at the right time. (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023)

Another strategy implemented to reduce the amount of times stage management would have to go searching for roaming performers is the inclusion of an additional silent monitor on the camera system. On these monitors, one on either side of the stage and another in the green room (which had audio), there was a live feed to a camera facing the stage. This feed is often set up for a stage manager to have a closer and unobstructed view of the stage for calling cues. By setting the feed up to also be available for the entire company to have access to, performers and crew could watch what was happening on the stage when they would not otherwise be able to see (S. Bravo, personal communication, November 21, 2023). This is another example of an accommodation that was beneficial for all members of the company since it allowed performers who may have long breaks between scenes to go to the green room and wait until their next scene. Having a place to rest until they see a visual and/or audible cue on the monitor that their scene is coming up also enables more space backstage since it would not be as crowded.

"Dark Disabled Stories"

A common complaint when discussing the addition of open-captions and ASL interpreters for the performances of a run is that they are distracting and remove the viewer from the world of the play. Typical open-caption screens, when not using projections or television monitors, are frequently described as ugly or dated with their pixel boards lit by orange or red

retro letters. Some directors or designers may argue enough for the removal of their usage or at least get them placed somewhere else that is not as visually accessible to those in need. If a production is staged in-the-round or thrust, there may not be a place where screens and interpreters would be seen from all seats in the house. Thus, rather than telling a disabled audience member that sitting in one area of the house will give them the best line of sight for the accommodation, box office employees resort to saying that only a certain area of the house is accessible. In response to these complaints, as well as others claiming a lack of cohesiveness or creativity in disability theatre, Tyrone Giordano, a multi-faceted theatermaker calls for accessibility to be viewed as a design challenge, the same way you would for obstructive theatre architecture or tricky technical needs:

> A lot of what we call access, accessibility, is [...] not seamlessly integrated into the show. It's so apparent; it's outside and stuck onto the existing show. Accessibility shouldn't be an access problem, it should not be a service problem, it should be a design problem. How can we lure access into a show, how can we integrate it? That starts with the original design meetings." (NEA, 2016, p. 21)

By having disabled designers and directors in the room, we can avoid accommodations being a last-minute addition during tech and instead look for ways to make a production accessible from the start. In doing so, access influences the world of the play and works with the text to build what some disabled artists call "disability artistry." Instead of simply calling for representation on the stage (disability visibility), disability artistry calls for disabled artists to be creating meaningful work. Work that embraces their disability and disability culture rather than hiding it for the nondisabled gaze. Morgan Skolnik, a writer for *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, writes:

> [H]ow do we move from disability visibility to disability artistry, and what comes after that? [...] it invites disabled people to take ourselves seriously as artists. Whereas disability visibility can be shallow or tokenizing, disability artistry says we are already here, we are already making exciting work, and the world of theatre will be made better by engaging deeply with that work. I want to delve into both disability visibility and disability artistry, and I want to go further to dream about what disability makes possible on our stages and beyond. (2022, paras. 3-5)

By moving into a world where disability artistry is instead the goal, we reinforce the idea that accessible design is simply good design. Implementation of universal design, for example, is a great way to put this into practice. Yet, since we are still stuck in a world of aiming for general inclusion, universal design is not a popular approach in the arts, despite its necessity. Thus, when creatives come together to develop a piece of art that is inherently, through-and-through accessible, it deserves recognition.

Enter "Dark Disabled Stories," an autobiographical play written by Ryan J. Haddad featuring "a series of unforgiving vignettes about the strangers he encounters while navigating a city (and a world) not built for his walker and cerebral palsy" (The Public Theater, 2023). 75 minutes worth of hard-hitting stories and a whole bunch of laughter, this piece exemplifies disability artistry. At the end of the first scene, Haddad shares how he was stranded across a bar without his walker as just one more unfortunate end to a strange evening he had. But before audiences can process this, Haddad anticipates their pity and asks nondisabled audiences to change their perspective. Quickly transitioning out of the anecdote, he brings attention to the expectations of meeting the nondisabled gaze and his refusal to do that with this piece. Starting the second scene, "Accessible to Us," Haddad says:

> I try to make disability funny so that [nondisabled] people can understand it, and open themselves to it, and realize that it's not so scary, so dark. And make it more accessible for them. Not tonight. I don't feel like it. I'm not saying I won't make you laugh at all. I'll probably make you laugh a lot. I'm a naturally comedic person, but … not everything is accessible to us, so why should we try to make our experiences accessible to you?" (Haddad, 2023, pp. 66-67)

In addition to the entirety of the cast being disabled and Haddad also serving as the playwright, the company also included a Director of Artistic Sign Language (Andrew Morrill), an Access Dramaturg (Alison Kopit), and a group of ASL interpreters throughout the rehearsal process. An Access Dramaturg, a role Alison Kopit has co-developed with fellow artist Maggie Bridger, is "similar to a traditional dramaturg when working on a script and content related to access and disability; an access dramaturg is a shapeshifter, finding places to infuse access where it may have not existed before" (Kopit, 2023). In an interview discussing "Dark Disabled Stories" for *American Theatre Magazine*, Haddad explained the importance and versatility of Kopit's role on the production saying:

> We started to realize, she's doing way more for the soul of the play than just access for the audience. She changed and heightened the caliber of the storytelling through her disability inclusion lens, and also just disability politics that I don't always bring to everything. (Ijames, 2023, para. 5)

By including a DASL and Access Dramaturg on this production from the start, Haddad and the rest of the creative team emphasized the importance of accessibility within the rehearsal room, within the text, and its outward facing presence.

The design of the play furthers this accessibility dramatically from the costumes featuring each character's name across the chest (designed by dots), to captions that have been designed as projections content (Kameron Neal). Other exciting accessible design components included purposeful space for audio descriptions to be captioned and projected (and a light that went on when they were occurring) and a touch table in the lobby that featured samples of materials from the set and costumes. This table enabled blind and low-vision audience members to feel the materials that made up the designs that they may have not been able to see on the stage. Kopit affirms these initiatives in her dramaturgy note in the production's program which she calls, "On Access: A Love Note." She writes, "We have engaged with a range of embodiments of disability and access needs in the process, in the audience, and on the stage. We have landed on an expression of access that is integrated and smooth, but also transparent and present and loud. Access is not an add-on to the show—it is the show" (Kopit, 2023, p. 3).

Similar to "How to Dance in Ohio," accessibility for audiences is just one way in which inclusion was emphasized on this production. When speaking with the lighting designer, Oona Curley, I learned of ways in which the lighting team worked with stage management during technical rehearsals to ensure everyone in the room would know what was happening regarding cues and holds. One instance of this was cue lights that were installed throughout the set and the back of the house for Dickie Hearts, the Deaf actor signing as Ryan, to know when to start and stop. Since Dickie and Ryan performed simultaneously, the cue lights told Dickie when to begin a line or pause for a cue, particularly for when he was not facing Ryan and thus did not know whether he was speaking (O. Curley, personal communication, March 14, 2024). Cue lights are a commonly used method in live theatre for performers or stage crew to know when to enter a scene or conduct a shift change if they cannot see a visual cue. Thus, using them in this context

is not that far out of the ordinary. Another collaboration between stage management and the lighting team was the use of a special whenever a hold was needed. In addition to the typical verbal “Hold, please” from the stage manager, a red light in Dickie’s sightline would turn on so that he, and any other D/deaf or hard of hearing people in the room, would know they were in a hold (O. Curley, personal communication, March 14, 2024). This accommodation can be incredibly beneficial for others in the room as well, especially when calling a hold during a sound cue or a musical number. I have been in multiple technical rehearsal processes for musicals where the performers and/or band cannot hear the stage manager calling a hold since the music is very loud. By using this method instead, those who may not hear the hold will still be informed via the light, even if the sound in that moment is otherwise too loud. This is another example of a simple, creative solution that communicates the necessary information in a way that benefits everyone in the room. Kathy Ruvuna, the production’s sound designer, shared that supplemental general accommodations included changing the cable run for speakers from pathways to non-obstructive layouts and meeting individual accommodations requests from access survey results, like those mentioned for “How to Dance in Ohio” (K. Ruvuna, personal communication, March 12, 2024). One such accommodation was the implementation of monitors in dressing rooms (and the house during tech) that displayed captions for any announcements over the PA system (K. Ruvuna, personal communication, March 12, 2024).

When speaking with Ruvuna and Curley about their experiences working in accessible theatrical design, I began by asking what background they had prior to working on “Dark Disabled Stories.” To my surprise, this was the first project that included accessibility so purposefully from the beginning of the process for both. Additionally, even though both designers had formal education in theatrical design, including graduate school, neither had

learned much about creating accessible design. The little they did learn was knowledge shared by their peers and most of their education in this realm is things they have learned from other designers in the industry since graduating. When it comes to accessible lighting design, Curley shared how the one aspect of diversity that they were briefly taught about in school was acknowledging different skin tones onstage. However, Curley shared that like the language used in the world of Universal Design, their faculty had stated that the ability to inclusively light actors was simply good lighting design. The only other lesson they had to share was to consider the light used on a production's ASL interpreters as part of the lighting design. In addition to making sure it is in focus (and on), Curley suggests ensuring that it fits the world of the play, whether that be including a gel or brightening/dimming it during particularly bright/dark scenes (O. Curley, personal communication, March 14, 2024). Similarly, Ruvuna had little to share regarding accessible sound design teachings from school. Due to my lack of experience in sound design, I had begun our conversation by asking about their input in the audio description cues. In "Dark Disabled Stories," the audio description is not only written into the script but is also played aloud for all audience members to hear, not just those using assistive listening devices (ALD). However, Ruvuna explained that for both this production and all others she has worked on, the sound designer has very minimal, if any, say over the audio description. Rather, an ALD company comes in and sets the connections up on top of your sound design, often at the end of tech when your design is practically complete. Attention to the ALD practice is often forgotten until the end of tech when a designer is informed that it will be happening and thus, they are never expected to contribute to it. Therefore, if a sound designer wants to listen to the feed to ensure it fits nicely within the soundscape they have created, they frequently cannot until previews begin. Consequently, this results in audio descriptions that are simply interjections to

the story and sound levels that are not mixed properly between the two feeds. Additionally, unless a professional audio describer is hired to conduct them, descriptions are typically provided in-house by those with little experience, and so they may very well interrupt or speak over lines and other sound cues. To apply greater accessibility to their work, Ruvuna emphasized the importance of sound designers checking the ALD feeds and miking actors whenever possible (K. Ruvuna, personal communication, March 12, 2024).

By interviewing Curley and Ruvuna over a year after the production opened at The Public, I was in the unique position to ask them about their takeaways from the show and how they have been able to apply these lessons in their work since. Curley had much to share in this regard, centered around listening to different perspectives and not making assumptions. Larger than presuming competence in one's colleagues, not making assumptions also includes design decisions and their practicality in a specific environment. For example, Curley had assumed that strobe lights were off the table, but still spoke with the team to learn what else may not be accessible to implement in their lighting design. In doing so, they approached the challenge from an exploratory attitude, affirming the finding of solutions with a positive perspective, rather than a disdain for additional restrictions or complications. From this conversation, they also learned about the importance of not going into blackouts as it restricted access between those amongst the company who rely on sign language to communicate. Instead, they worked with Hearts, Morrill, and the interpreters to ensure lighting was always adequate, even if a scene was intended to be dark or only lit by projections.

In some instances, this led to disagreement amongst the creative team as there was difficulty finding resolutions that were both accessible and achieved the artistic vision. Some members of the team approached the accessibility of the design conservatively, but director

Jordan Fein used that same exploratory attitude to find ways to achieve their goals without interrupting access. Curley encouraged this saying:

> Just because something is accessible, doesn't mean it has to be boring or safe, [you] don't have to sand the edges off of everything, [... you] can still make beautiful light cues, design can be whatever you want it to be. (O. Curley, personal communication, March 14, 2024)

Ruvuna encountered similar issues, resulting in an important discussion around balancing accommodations for different disabilities. One example that she dealt with in this production was the choice to highlight or diminish heavy bass sounds (K. Ruvuna, personal communication, March 12, 2024). Being able to "feel the bass that is booming through the speakers and vibrating the floor that you are standing on" provides additional information for D/deaf and hard of hearing audience members, thus giving them a more accessible experience of the production (Elaine, 2017, para. 19). However, these same sounds can be very overwhelming for others, such as those with auditory sensitivity, which is common for autistic individuals (Griffin Occupational Therapy, n.d., para. 2). Finding a middle ground between these access barriers can be challenging and depending on the production, one may be prioritized over another. In the case of "Dark Disabled Stories," it seems as though heavy bass sounds were more leaned into, perhaps for the benefit of Dickie Hearts and the D/deaf community in attendance.

Despite all my love and gratitude for this play and this production, my biggest complaint is the lack of open disability representation in the production roles. From my research, there are few people in production roles (specifically design and management) that openly identify as disabled on this project. Of course, there is no obligation for individuals to self-identify, but on a project such as this one, that has such disability pride and artistry, one would hope that any

disabled artists involved would want to make themselves known. This goes back to the issue of disability visibility in the industry and its relation to representation of other marginalized communities. A polarizing issue in pop culture as of late is the performance of queer characters when the actors themselves have not come out as queer. In the hope of seeing more queer representation in the media, many have gone to social media and contributed to cancel culture towards these actors as they would prefer to see queer performers playing queer characters. However, there have been increased instances over the past few years where young actors in particular fall victim to this harassment and end up coming out online, risking their safety or support from their loved ones (Ermac, 2022). It is most definitely a complex issue that boils down to the way our society treats diversity. Nonetheless, it is important to note that without the open representation of underrepresented identities in these roles, not only do we not know where the industry stands in terms of inclusion, but disabled kids are also not seeing people like them pursuing their dreams. Mallory Kay Nelson, a disabled costume designer and disability justice advocate in the arts, has written extensively on the importance of disabled artists in production disciplines. Her thesis, "Inclusion of the Disabled Theatre Artist" explores the inaccessibility of theatre for artists of all disciplines and demonstrates how theatre can be used as a medium toward inclusion for all disabled people (Nelson, 2010). As a role model of mine, my hope is that this thesis furthers her work, adding to the writing she has since published on prioritizing disabled production artists. In 2019, she and Michael Maag collaborated on a *HowlRound Theatre Commons* article specifically about disabled designers where she wrote:

> 'Nothing about us without us' has been our culture's battle cry for justice throughout the disability rights era. We want to collaborate with other designers with disabilities to make our designs better. We want to be present when an actor with a disability is taking the

> stage to support them and pull the best performance out of them. That same ambition applies to all of us who call ourselves theatre practitioners. We can all be better artists with inclusivity. (para. 17)

My one hope for when this play is next produced, along with all other pieces by Haddad and playwrights like him, is that disabled designers and other production artists are invited to the artistry as well.

Conclusion

The state of accessibility and inclusion for disabled production artists in the United States is not an encouraging one. Other than the original landmarks of the ADA and small aspects of more recent legislation, the government is doing little to support emerging disabled artists. In areas where the government is lacking, other entities, such as industry unions, well-renowned corporations, or long-established organizations could make a positive impact. Yet these organizations are currently doing very little, if anything, to advocate for the meaningful inclusion of disabled artists. Together, all one can do is have hope for the next generation, blooming in educational environments, ready to revolutionize this broken system. However, when universities exhibit ableist attitudes or practices and a lack of care for disabled students' needs, students are not passionate about attending, leading them to leave higher education, if they were ever welcomed to begin with. This is where my work comes in as part of the next generation of disabled artists who have had the privilege to access resources from higher education, to bring radical ideas about acceptance forward into the workplace. With even the slightest assistance from the generations in residence above us, the industry could have a massive overhaul, to benefit us all.

One limitation to my study is the lack of perspectives directly from disabled production artists. Although I am grateful for the opportunity to have gone to Access LEAD in Boston this past August, I was disappointed to discover a lot more nondisabled, or not openly disabled, administrators there than disabled artists (or administrators) themselves. I had really been hoping to speak with more disabled artists and include their feedback in my research, but I do not believe I met a single openly disabled production artist while I was there.

Thus, if I am to continue this research, I will most definitely be prioritizing accounts directly from individual disabled artists. By going online, I am only discovering artists that are promoting themselves on the internet, which eliminates any disabled artists who do not have access to the internet or are being denied access to literacy. Further, for those who do have access to the necessary skills to participate online, they must be aware of the value of posting their work. If they are only posting to Instagram or Facebook, but they are not using hashtags on their posts or their account is private, I am unable to find their content. Conversely, if they are posting their work on a digital portfolio that has poor search engine optimization or is locked behind a passcode, I am also not going to be able to access it. This also prevents disabled artists from getting hired, in turn resulting in not having any work to share. How am I supposed to find disabled artists who are being denied access to resources that can develop their career? Unless they are hired by a theatre big enough to be getting press releases on BroadwayWorld, their art is inaccessible to the public and their perspectives are not being shared. This will most definitely continue to be a struggle for my research and any others interested in learning more from individuals who are being sidelined from the industry. I am not sure how I can combat this limitation moving forward.

I also feel as though I did not learn much more about training opportunities available for disabled production artists through the research for this paper. Perhaps that is simply the truth, that there are so very few developed advantages for disabled production artists to succeed in the American theatre industry. I am glad to have discovered more disabled theatre companies and theatres that have strong commitments to accessibility, but overall, there are minimal options for disabled production artists specifically to receive training, mentorship, or grants. When I first began this project, I had originally been planning to split it up into 25% research and 75% a

business plan for an organization to support disabled artists, particularly those in production disciplines. This organization would offer similar resources to that of EPIC Players; discipline-focused classes, paired mentorships, career development workshops/events, and offer production opportunities. However, as my interests changed, I decided that conducting a more developed analysis of the state of the industry would be more beneficial to myself and to others. One lesson I remember very keenly from a business class I took at Syracuse was the importance of determining your audience and having a deep understanding of your market. If someday I decide to create said business plan, I will have this research as a starting place for what my audience needs and the state of the market with which I will be working.

Regardless of my decisions about a career as an administrator in the nonprofit world, this research is incredibly important for the future of our industry. Following the calls to action across the country after the death of George Floyd in 2020, conversations around diversity, equity, and inclusion have never been the same. And yet accessibility still falls off the list, is ignored, forgotten, or grouped with inclusion to never be discussed. To change the statistics of disabled actors playing disabled characters, professional training programs must continue their work supporting rising disabled performers. Meanwhile, production disciplines need to start getting statistics on the page to begin with. Another limitation of my study was the lack of research that has been conducted on the inclusivity of the industry. Granted, there are laws against requiring employees to disclose a disability and thus we will never reach a 100% accurate statistic. However, more research on the careers of disabled people in the arts can be of great benefit. I have shown in this paper that there are not enough of us in the industry, and I have explained why. I have also explained numerous ways that we can change our practices to make our work more inclusive to diverse identities and make our environments more welcoming

to disabled artists. The next step is for administrators to implement these practices. We need more accessible training and mentorship programs available to our emerging disabled artists and support from our unions once they are ready to join the workforce. Once we get to the point in which we have disabled production artists being hired in theatres regularly, not as the exception, we must continue to promote an exploration of disability artistry, not just visibility. This representation makes a major difference for disabled kids who want to work in the arts when they are older. Unless someone tells them that they can do it too, there is no way for them to know that the theatre is a place where they will be welcomed.

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Appendix

Theatre Companies with/for/by Disabled Theatre Artists

Arizona

Detour Company Theatre

Theater360

California

Deaf West Theatre

Colorado

Phamaly Theatre

Maryland

Barrier-Free

Missouri

That Uppity Theatre Company

Minnesota

Mixed Blood Theatre

Interact Center

New York

EPIC Players

CO/LAB Theatre Group

ActionPlay

Theatre Breaking Through Barriers

The Apothetae

Identity Theater Company

All Abilities Productions

North Carolina

Theatre for All

Rhode Island

Spectrum Theatre Ensemble (stensemble.org)

Washington, D.C.

The National Theatre of the Deaf

Wisconsin

Loud & Unchained Theater Company