

## Theatre Accessibility by Evan Warren

### **Introduction**

In the words of Jacqueline Christy, founder of Access Theater, “arts is a common language.” Everyone has a right to experience theatre. Theatre Accessibility, formerly titled “Disability Theatre”, was a 6-week research project funded by Union College and supervised by Dan Venning pursuing the various career-based and monetary-based aspects of theatre when someone has physical or mental disabilities. The original plan was divided into three parts: research theatre journals and articles for relevant works; conduct interviews with different sorts of patrons of theatre, such as audience members, directors, and operations managers; and attend shows with accommodations as a first-hand experience. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the parameters had to be altered, allowing mainly for journalistic research with a few online interviews. The goals of the project were to work with another student, Ingrid Burke, to create a publishable piece on both theatre accessibility and theatre management, and to form an action plan for Union College’s Theatre Department submitted separately. As a patron of the arts, an emerging playwright and actor, and an individual with mental disabilities, the project was personally motivating; the idea of bettering the theatre industry’s behavior towards the physically and mentally disabled population on both a global and local scale is the main objective.

### **What is accessibility?**

Accessibility can be generally defined as an object, place, practice, or idea being readily available to all groups of people, including those who are marginalized.

### **What is inclusivity?**

Inclusivity can be generally defined as the active pursuit of making an object, place, practice, or idea available to all groups of people, including those who are marginalized.

### **What are these in Theatre?**

Accessibility in theatre refers to the inclusion of marginalized people in performance, whether on or off the stage. In this project, accessibility is the goal, and the main subject of discussion. Inclusivity, or the progression towards that level of accessibility, may refer to making theater-spaces more LGBT-friendly, or open to larger age-groups. In this project, the focus was on making theatre more accessible specifically to people with physical and mental disabilities, and is therefore portrayed by possible alterations in different jobs in the theatre industry. Theatre performers need different accommodations than theatre patrons, even if they have the same disability. Moreover, if their disabilities differ, there are more specifications necessary to consider.

### **Why is accessibility in Theatre important?**

The importance of making theatre accessible to people with physical and mental disabilities extends beyond a simple explanation. Theatre is an art practice entirely centered around community and empathy, whether on or off the stage. Throughout history, the art of theatre has progressed to include different marginalized groups of people; this is a long, ongoing matter of inclusivity, and one which should include people based with physical or mental disabilities. Additionally, because of the internationally-recognized relatability of theatre, normalizing and even endorsing the experiences and work of people with disabilities, as well as the normalization of spaces that involve or accommodate for them, increases the generalized understanding and acceptance of physical and mental disabilities on a day-to-day basis. Accessibility in theatre instigates innovative takes on old shows, as well as newly written shows, thus fostering creativity. On a practical, small-scale level of significance, making theatre more accessible brings in more patrons and revenue. Furthermore, audiences who do not necessarily require accommodations, whether due to having a disability that they hide, having a largely invisible disability, or having no disability at all, could have their experiences at the theater improved by accessible accommodations. Overall, there are many reasons to promote accessibility in theatre, and very few reasons to backslide from it.

“People deserve art. Creating experiences that are accessible to the disability community benefits everyone. Inclusion only enhances art.” - Erin Banta, Administrative Assistant at Phamaly Theatre Company, during an email interview

### **What does accessibility look like for different jobs in Theatre?**

Theatre administration may refer to people in the creative process, such as playwrights and choreographers, or people in management, such as directors and stage managers. One of the major progressions towards making theatre more accessible to creators and administration within the theatre community is combating the stigma behind having a physical or mental illness. The most direct solution would be to open lines of communication between employers and employees about illness, but the pre-existing fear and subconscious bias prevents this. “The fear that others will make assumptions about one’s capacity to execute the job means there’s still a harsh stigma about disabilities within the theatre community, which can motivate theatremakers with invisible disabilities to keep their conditions secret out of concern for negative career repercussions,” Christie Honoré wrote in her article, “Pain Plus Silence: How Theatremakers Face Invisible Disabilities”. Instead, forming an accessible space for theatre administration involves a longer international process of education on the effects of individual disabilities and how to respect those who have them. This entails education, both on an individual theater-basis or widespread policy. However, the domino effect of change in this aspect is huge: a better understanding of physical and mental disabilities means more creators and managers speaking up and out about their experiences, which means more creations and job opportunities for or accommodating people with disabilities in other sectors of theatre.

For performers, there is no shortage of actors or dancers with disabilities, invisible or otherwise. Instead, the issue lies in many performances not originally accounting for performers with disabilities, most particularly with mobility. This presents the accommodative process of either new works about or accounting for actors with physical and mental disabilities or open-minded casting to existing works. For the former, the piece “The Cultural Apartheid of Disability” by John Killacky and Judith Smith describes a group of dancers titled the AXIS Dance Company who have reached fame from their beautiful choreography and talents; some dancers have mobility-related or other types of disabilities, but are selected and commended based off of their talent alone. This company, originally more of an experiment by Thais Mazur, showcased the ability to create new work casting disabled actors - or, in this case, dancers - without romanticizing or ignoring their disabilities. Another example is the up-and-coming *Lesbian Pirates!* which is written to specifically cast people with “missing limbs or senses” without highlighting them in an uncomfortable manner. As Natasha Sutton Williams explained to Colin Hambrook in his article, “Lesbian Pirates! A Historical Look at Disability and Queerness”: “Injuries and accidents were part of everyday life aboard a pirate ship. Those with missing limbs or senses were not seen as disabled. Accommodations in their environment were made to enable them to work alongside their colleagues. Each individual pirate was treated as an equal, regardless of their impairment. We want to weave this social model idea into our narrative and our physical setting on stage.” The project involves people with disabilities without making those disabilities the focus of their characters, and shows them as “typical” members of not only the story, but of the performance itself, expressing their capabilities as actors. On the other hand, alterations to existing, even classic works, are an option for creating more accessible spaces in the acting community. The MacMurray College English and Drama Department produced a particular showing of *West Side Story* which starred both deaf- and hearing-actors; similarly, Ali Stroker performed in *Oklahoma!* on Broadway as Ado Annie, becoming, as Russel Dembin noted in his article “Everything Going His Way: My Dad’s ‘Oklahoma!’ Accessibility Journey”, “the first wheelchair user to win an acting Tony.” Whether a local production or a large-scale one, there is a place for disabled actors on stage, only requiring innovative minds and adjustments to a normally able-bodied and neurotypical art practice.

When discussing the process of making a theater more accessible, audiences are typically the first group of people considered. Accommodations for theatregoers with physical and mental disabilities include a vast amount of methods. The following includes some examples based on the type of accommodation each is.

#### Structural:

- Wheelchair-accessible entrances, exits, hallways, and bathrooms

- Elevator access
- Wheelchair, transfer, and dynamic seating
- Designated quiet spaces

#### Individual Shows:

- Tactile tours
- American Sign Language interpreters
- Closed captioning and audio descriptions
- American Sign Language performances
- Sensory-friendly performances
- Lowered volume and lighting

#### Policies:

- American Sign Language interpreters

#### Handouts:

- Sensory guides
- Large print and braille programs
- Hearing devices
- Earplugs
- Wearable audio vests
- Fidgets and weighted lap pads

#### Most importantly:

- Regular informative updates on what accessible options are available.

In a Zoom interview, Jacqueline Christy, founder of Access Theater, explained that the bulk of advice she had received on making her theater more accessible to marginalized groups of people with disabilities from the New York Deaf Theatre preceding, during, and following their performance was to listen to those with disabilities and be open and honest about a theater's capabilities. Communication is most important when faced with implementing accommodations; the process requires that theaters explain what they can and cannot do, and performers and audience members need. Between this open connection, theaters can progressively be inclusive to members of the theatre community that have physical and mental disabilities at a pace that best fits all parties.

#### **Is accessibility financially feasible? Profitable?**

In creating accessible audience spaces, the short answer to either question is yes. As listed in the many methods of accessibility, cost of implementation can range greatly. Buying and handing out fidgets, for example, is an extremely low-cost way to enforce accessibility: Amazon's choice fidget cube costs only seven dollars, and cheaper versions exist in stores, such as Five Below. This small price may help patrons who have trouble sitting still become more focused, or simply provide greater enjoyment to all patrons, even those who do not need the accommodation. On the

other hand, a type of upgrade more costly than fidgets that a theater can make to become more accessible is to implement elevators. Elevator installations can cost anywhere between 25,000 dollars to 40,000 dollars, depending on materials and labor. However, similar to the fidgets, this one-time cost could assist all patrons and be an overall structural improvement to the building. There are also alternative routes to provide well-known, costly accommodations. Integrating large-scale closed captioning on a performance, a method somewhat common to larger opera theaters such as the Atlanta Opera for translations of Italian works to English, can be difficult for smaller theaters or unsuspecting architectural structures. Apps such as GalaPro, however, can be downloaded by individual patrons; the theater simply needs to upload the script so that Galapro can show patrons the script as captioning, and designate audience areas for phone usage. For all accommodations, smaller routine work may be necessary, such as storage, cleaning, and advertisement. However, none of this work stands out from the typical necessities of a theatre without accommodations; especially during a pandemic, cleaning the theatre itself is an existing requirement.

As for profitability, creating more accessible theatre experiences means more people can attend. More potential patrons means more ticket sales and greater revenue. Not only would people with a physical or mental disability now be able to come, but, as Jessica Thom explained in Eliza Bent's article, "Relaxing the Rules for Theatregoers Who've Gotta Move", "a disabled person will often bring friends and attend performances in a group, so 'it's not just one ticket, it's five or six or seven tickets.'" Accommodating for one person has a greater turnout that offsets the possible loss of finances in integrating the accommodation. Furthermore, representing marginalized groups in specific performances will draw in audiences associated with that experience, and bring them back for later performances. For instance, when New York Deaf Theatre rented Access Theater's space for a performance, the audience expanded to patrons who are hard of hearing and would normally not attend. By implementing strategies which accommodate hard of hearing audience members could easily keep those patrons hooked. Alternatively, showcasing the talent of a wheelchair user in the Broadway revival of *Oklahoma!* introduced many patrons with mobility issues to theatre. Creating accessibility in theatre, no matter in which part, is a manner of widening the available audiences and creating a better experience for all patrons and a greater revenue for the theater.

"Say there is a new theatre and the front entrance is being designed. There are options here, you could build only a set of stairs, only a ramp, or both. Are there not times when everyone in the library could benefit from a ramp, not only people with mobility disabilities? What about for grandmothers and small children and other groups that prefer ramps? What happens when you have to load in a piano for a show? Accessibility is not some separate idea for a separate group of people. If we intend to serve our community, we must make adjustments and considerations every day from the very beginning that

will benefit everyone.” - Erin Banta, Administrative Assistant at Phamaly Theatre Company, during an email interview

### **COVID-19...**

The Coronavirus pandemic has both hurt and helped theatre accessibility in surprising ways. The sudden loss of major revenue sources means that many theaters have had to furlough or fire employees, including directors of outreach programming and accommodative services. Actors with disabilities, just like those without, have also faced hard times in making profits off of shows. However, the pandemic has also forced theaters worldwide to alter how they approach performances and performative practices, both in creation and in viewing. Viewing a show from home is an easy way to accommodate many types of disabilities, allowing the patron to move and speak freely similar to a relaxed performance, use already owned fidgets, or alter their own showing's volume, for example. Additionally, issues with mobility are removed because programs are accessible in one's own home. Prior to the pandemic, many theatre makers were adamantly opposed to the idea of online theatre, believing it to be heavily removed from the core principles of the art form; however, theaters have come together to introduce these new concepts. Hopefully the online aspects of theatre will remain relevant after the immediate effects of the virus have faded out, as well as consistently updating forms of accommodations.

### **Conclusion**

Making theatre more accessible to those with physical and mental disabilities is a progression for the creative minds behind the process and the patrons of the art. All it takes is an open line of communication, and, at times, ten dollars. Maybe a little more, but the reward is consistently high and the risk is remarkably low.