

## The Politicized Disabled Body

Kaite O'Reilly

Theatre could be defined as the study of what it is to be human. For millennia we have come to sit communally—a group of human beings watching another group of human beings pretending to be other human beings. We are endlessly fascinated with each other, yet a place purported to be about the range of human possibility has for too long been circumscribed and limited, especially towards a large proportion of the population.

As I have discussed at length elsewhere (O'Reilly 2017a, 2017b), for millennia in the Western theatrical canon, the atypical body has been used to scare, warn, explain and explore human frailty, mortality, and the human condition. Disability has been a metaphor for the non-disabled to explore their fears and embedded societal values. Although disabled characters appear in thousands of plays, seldom has the playwright been disabled, or written from that embodied, or political perspective. The vast majority of disabled characters in Western theatrical tradition are tropes, reifying the notions of “normalcy.” Some strange untruths have therefore been created and recycled in our dramas for stage and screen: the rich, rewarding reality of our lives replaced with problematic representations which work to keep us different, “special,” and apart. This “othering” of difference (which also includes gender, sexual preference, belief system, cultural heritage, and so on) provides a “useful” slide-rule against which notions of “being normal” and “fitting in” can be measured. These distorted ideas in our entertainment media legitimize the negative attitudes that can lead to discrimination and hate crime.

As a multi-award-winning playwright and dramaturg who identifies culturally and politically as disabled, I have been exploring this territory for several decades, informed by the Social model of disability, working across and between so-called “mainstream” culture and what I coin “crip” culture. I consider disability a social construct—I am a woman with a mild sensory and a degenerative physical impairment, but it is society’s attitudinal and physical barriers which are the disabling factors, not the idiosyncrasies of my body.

In my work I am interested in creating new protagonists, with different narratives, and with different endings, and in challenging and expanding the actual theatre languages at play in live performance through my engagement with the aesthetics of access. I believe re-imagining disability opens up possibilities in content, representation, aesthetics and form—changing the stories we tell, how they are told, and by whom.

Paul Darke (1997, 2003) and other disability performance scholars such as Carrie Sandahl (2005) have written at length about the limited plot lines for the disabled character. Often, as seen again with the 2016 film version of JoJo Moyes’ *Me Before You*, it is emphatically “better dead than

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disabled.” In films and plays stereotypes rule—the blind wise “seer,” the evil and twisted mastermind, the hero who overcomes her impairments to “pass” as non-disabled. From Tiny Tim to Richard III to Oedipus, we have been the personification of uselessness, or evil incarnate. These stories and characters are so prevalent, Paul Darke claims the audience believes they understand and know disabled experience, even though it is through a filter that isolates, individualizes, medicalizes or finally normalizes the character. What the audience is experiencing are not the “truths” of our lives, but the long cultural and linguistic practice of ascribing meaning to the atypical body. We are metaphors—something the disabled and Deaf actor-characters in my metatheatrical play *peeling* (2002) deconstruct, subvert, and ultimately rebel against.

As a playwright, I try to present different protagonists and different stories, often challenging contemporary representations of disability. The survivors of TBI (traumatic brain injury) in my 2008 play *The Almond and the Seaborse* subvert notions of brain injury splashed across the media and question who the real “victims” are—if indeed there are any. Protagonists, their journeys and outcomes can be subverted and changed, offering more possibilities and rich, engrossing drama that avoids stereotypes.

This reconsideration of narrative and “protagonist” is just one element in what I coined “Alternative dramaturgies informed by a D/deaf and disability perspective” while Arts and Humanities Research Council Creative fellow at Exeter University’s drama department (2003–06), and latterly while affiliated with Freie Universität’s International Research Centre “Interweaving Performance Cultures” (2012–18). “Alternative” to what? To the mainstream, ableist, hearing perspective. By “alternative dramaturgies” I mean the content, processes, structures and forms that reinvent, subvert, or critique “traditional” or “conventional” representations and routes.

A further example would be the “aesthetics of access”: using access “tools” creatively, and from the start of the process rather than as an “add-on” for a particular stratum of the audience, identified through impairment (“audio description and touch tours provided for the visually impaired...”). I’m interested in a holistic experience, where the entire audience engages with the theatre languages at play through their individual modes of communication: embedded audio description; bilingual work in visual and spoken/projected languages; creative captioning integrated into the scenography design as a central element of the set.

These devices make the work more accessible, but most importantly they challenge the ingrained assumptions and hierarchies in contemporary theatre and culture. When we change the bodies who perform, design, direct, create, and commission the work in our pleasure palaces, when we change the theatre languages used, the processes and practice are inherently changed as well. We can then truly be a place that celebrates all the possibilities of human variety, challenging notions of “difference” and revoking the old stories and their predictable endings.

Change is coming, with more disabled and Deaf artists coming to the fore across artforms. This is partly owing to the fruits of the UK and US disability civil rights movements, out of which disability arts and culture grew, and the disability arts forums, organizations, and festivals that supported and still encourage this growth. In the UK it is also down to initiatives such as Unlimited,<sup>1</sup> keen to promote, commission, and embed the work of disabled and Deaf artists in the so-called “mainstream” cultural sector on a level never experienced before.

*Inclusivity* and *diversity* are currently buzz-words internationally, and although I applaud initiatives that aim to integrate more Deaf, disabled and neuro-diverse practitioners into theatre productions, I have a caveat: the atypical body is not neutral, and placing a disabled figure on stage is not necessarily a radical act in itself. Much relies on the framing, and the controlling artistic perspective, for the atypical body can be used dramaturgically by the director/choreographer to express content and meaning beyond the actuality of the body—and sometimes without the actor's awareness or participation. My Unlimited/National Theatre Wales production, *In Water I'm Weightless*, part of the official Cultural Olympiad celebrating the 2012 Olympics and Paralympics, is a case in point. Featuring six of the UK's leading Deaf and disabled performers, and directed by John E. McGrath, the actors chose the content they performed from my authored collection of monologues and also controlled how they were placed and represented on stage. Several of them had had bad experiences of previously being used as a dramaturgical tool to express subtext or create additional material and meaning beyond the content of the performance text.

For me, this is central: having a politicized disability perspective informed by the Social model of disability brings a broadening in attitude, in values, and enables an avoidance of narrow definitions of “normality.” This perspective, when disability-led, encourages impairments not to be viewed as something to be cured or overcome. Rather, it embraces diversity and multiple modes of communication, used artistically.

Perhaps in the aesthetics of access we can begin changing the experience of theatre along with its languages, and start escaping the tyranny of normalcy.

## Note

1. Unlimited is an arts commissioning program that enables new work by disabled artists to reach UK and international audiences. See <https://weareunlimited.org.uk>.

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