

Rigorous Dreaming: Curatorial Practices for Large-Scale Disability Performance

By Shay Erlich and Sarah Conn

SARAH:

My name is Sarah Conn.

SHAY:

And my name is Shay Erlich. We will be reading the article together.

SARAH:

We believe in the power of dreaming. More specifically, we love those wild, unwieldy, how-on-earth-will-this-happen dreams that flutter around the edges of artists' hearts and minds. It is so tender to dream, so vulnerable in this moment of polycrisis. Yet these dreams spark cultural change, invite audiences to fall in love with performance and with each other, and send ripples through communities. These are not casual dreams for the faint of heart, but ferocious beings often fuelled by a mix of courage, useful naivety, and—for some of us at least—a healthy dose of existential terror. We can't afford to lose these big dreams. Given the stakes of dreaming, let's ask: Who is allowed to dream big? What are the conditions necessary to dream big?

SHAY:

After decades of advocacy and labour, disabled performance is flourishing across Canada. However, it is still rare for disabled performances to be presented on larger stages and for the work to be created with the same resources as nondisabled-led performances in Canada, which limits the scale of the work that is possible. This gap is caused by systemic barriers and reinforced by the overall absence of disability-driven curatorial practice in

major performing arts presenting institutions. How can disabled artists dream big if they don't have access to larger mainstream presentation spaces as either audience members or artists?

SARAH:

There is more at stake in addressing this gap than inequity. While there is much that smaller scale performance can do to drive accessibility practices forward and utilize the power of live work toward disability storytelling and community goals, the impact of creating large-scale work is far-reaching. Dreaming and creating on a large scale allows the work to reach new audiences, open expansive aesthetic and expressive capacities, nurture rich artistic development, increase visibility and the opportunity for recognition, strengthen networks through national and international partnership opportunities, resist scarcity models, develop conditions for financial sustainability, create opportunity for career advancement, and build an artistic practice that spans across global contexts.

SHAY:

Under the best conditions, large-scale disabled performance offers the capacity to influence the broader sphere of disability arts culture as well as nondisabled performance. For example, Britain's Drag Syndrome—a collective of drag artists with Down Syndrome who have been creating, performing, and touring work since 2018—has successfully sparked broader public conversations about the inclusion of disabled people in the arts and LGBTQ+ folks with developmental disabilities (see Drag Syndrome, n.d.). The impacts of their work have rippled globally, including in Canadian contemporary performances such as the National accessArts Centre's *ICONIC+* (see *ICONIC+ 2025*; and Ranaldi 2019). Large-scale performances are artistic and community legacies that are felt long after a tour or production has wrapped.

SARAH:

For all these reasons and more, the National Arts Centre's National Creation Fund is dedicated to supporting the creation of large-scale work. And so, as two of the Creation Fund's curators, we view the lack of disability performance at scale with some urgency. We firmly believe that our investments—and the work on stages—must reflect the diversity of Canada, and that includes disabled artists. This gap is an opportunity to reimagine who creates work of scale and to challenge understandings of the

performances and conventions that belong on large stages. As a practice of care, contextualization, and relationship, curation is critically positioned to lead this reimagining, but this potential will only be met if the practice evolves. In addition to better resourcing disabled artists, we need curatorial practices that are intentionally designed for the thriving of bold, large-scale, disability-centred performances on national and international stages. Asking big questions about the relationship between dreaming, disability, and scale has allowed us to identify some starting places to shape an emergent curatorial practice that approaches access as both ethic and aesthetic, disrupting the structures that typically surround performance practice.

The National Creation Fund's Curatorial Framework

At the 2016 launch of the National Creation Fund, the late Peter A. Herrndorf, former president and CEO of the NAC, spoke to the initial inspiration: "We want to change the ecosystem of creation in this country so that performing artists can create new work that achieves its potential, resonates with audiences, and can be presented widely beyond its premiere. We want to help our performing artists create brilliant new work that will triumph on the national and international stage." Since then, we have made over one hundred transformative investments in the creation of bold new music, dance, theatre, and interdisciplinary performances, infusing more than \$14.8 million into Canadian performing arts. We are an incubator devoted to developing the conditions, both financial and otherwise, that are necessary to create incredible work. When artists are stretching within their practice, and experimenting with new scales and modes of creation, a holistic approach to support is required. Non-financial conditions that support the development of such work include a well-curated creative team, thoughtful collaborative practices and creative process design, rigorous producing strategies (not least of all, the hiring of a producer), access to specialized expertise, well-aligned partnerships, the participation of outside eyes and work-in-progress audiences, and an understanding of the broader cultural context. Our research into the conditions for great work is ongoing, and it is informed and guided by the many wonderful artists the National Creation Fund has had the privilege of supporting. Our bespoke investment practices are how we put this research into practice, in collaboration with the artists we support. At the centre of our work is a conviction in the power of creation as a means of evolving culture, sparking innovation, and shaping our world.

SHAY:

We make investment decisions through a two-phase curatorial process led by Sarah, in her role as the Creation Fund's artistic producer. Artists first submit an expression of interest, which is reviewed by a curatorial team assembled in response to the disciplines, social contexts, and cultures of the proposed project. Each curatorial team includes members of the NAC's artistic leadership, as well as external curators from across the country.¹ We look for projects that are led by Canadian creators, that have a strong artistic team, committed producing and presenting partners, and that have the potential for meaningful long-term national and international impact, including through touring. We look for work that is unique: art that propels culture forward and that challenges what Canadian society collectively imagines as possible.

SARAH:

In our work, we understand curation as a process-based practice that weaves connective tissue between what artist and curator Paul O'Neill called a "constellation of creative ideas," the audience, and the contexts, including geographic and cultural (2016, 1). While curation is often understood as part of presenting rather than investment or funding, we are convinced that its relational structure has much to offer these fields (see Conn 2023). Ultimately, this practice allows the Creation Fund to curate seasons of artistic creation: a series of bold and ambitious experiments across the country featuring courageous artists taking big risks in search of the alchemy of artistic creation.

SHAY:

These experiments can take many forms. For example, *Artistic Fraud's I Forgive You* tells the true story of a homophobic attack that left co-writer and performer Scott Jones paralyzed from the waist down (see *I Forgive You* 2023). The attack received international attention, both due to its brutality and Scott's decision to forgive the attacker. During the performance, Scott is onstage with his back to the audience as he directs a live children's choir while two actors tell his story. At the end, Scott turns to the audience for the

¹ Footnote: A full list of our current curatorial team can be found on our website: <https://nac-cna.ca/en/creationfund/about>.

first time and speaks unscripted as to whether he—in that exact moment—forgives his attacker. The performance is a raw and vulnerable experiment in the deep complexities of forgiveness, held gracefully within a formal experiment into the intersection of theatre and choral performance. The latter experiment is driven by Scott’s real-life work as a choir director. Each layer of experimentation is carefully rooted in Scott’s lived experience and present-day needs as a human and artist.

SARAH:

We also supported Sick + Twisted Theatre’s *Antigone*, developed in partnership with AA Battery and The Mariachi Ghost (see *Antigone* 2022). Created and performed by an integrated cast of Deaf, disabled, and nondisabled artists, the production reimaged Anne Carson’s translation of Sophocles’ tragedy. Following a run in Winnipeg, the production conducted a digital tour, an experiment in new ways of touring disabled-led work to ensure greater access for both artists and audiences, and to imagine more sustainable touring practices. In *Antigone*, access was a core artistic principle, driving key artistic choices, including the types of materials used in the set, and the performance styles through the casting of a Deaf performer in the lead role.

SHAY:

During our first few years of operation, we identified several gaps in who was applying to the Creation Fund. Notably, we were receiving few submissions from disabled artists, and even fewer submissions from disabled artists proposing work at scale. Seeking to understand and address this absence, we engaged Shay as an accessibility consultant. We are now in the third year of our collaboration, which is dedicated to infusing understandings of accessibility and disability in all aspects of the Creation Fund’s work, including our curatorial practices.

SARAH:

Guided by the belief that accessibility is a creative practice that makes performance better for everyone, we are developing an emergent and ever-evolving curatorial approach for large-scale work by disabled artists in relationship with a team of disabled curators, including Syrus Marcus Ware and Erin Clark. The approach manifests through four key facets that are

designed to centre disability knowledge-generating practices and offer imaginative space for disabled artists to dream bigger about their artistic and production practices.

SHAY:

Facet 1: Disability-Informed Curatorial Critique is Actually Sense-Making

As we began our work together, we asked ourselves: How do we execute curatorial decision-making in a way that meets disability performance where it is at? Recognizing that disabled artists may not always be offered the respect of informed critique, how can our curatorial response be a generative community-building contribution? And how can we do that in consideration of the complex ways disability performance often challenges Western-colonial performance aesthetics?

At the heart of our curatorial approach is an understanding of the need for intentional critique—whether aesthetic, dramaturgical, or ethical—that goes beyond simplistic attempts to define what “good” disability performance is. In addition to requests for the usual budget, timeline, and support material, the second phase of our submission process features a series of questions, including how the creative team will approach collaborating together, what the decision-making process is, and what their producing approach and strategies are. Inspired by our conversations with Dr. Kelsie Acton about her research on accessibility in dance (see Acton 2021), we talk about how creative decisions will be made, and what processes are in place to manage disagreements. In short, we seek to understand not only the ambition of the artistic vision and its feasibility, but also the ambitions of the relationships that are in place to sustain the artistic vision.

This approach of curatorial curiosity, a practice that blurs the line between dramaturgy and curation, supports us in making sense of the responses and information we’re receiving from the artists. The exchanges form a critical container in which we can truly meet the artist, their work, and their intended audience. We move carefully into the inside of the work and witness the dynamics birthing it. The conversations that drive our decisions are not about whether a specific proposal is good or bad, or innovative on a scale of 1 to 5. We don’t use matrices or rubrics, and we don’t have deadlines, so we don’t have cohorts of proposals to discuss comparatively. We look at each

proposal on its own merit, and forefront the artists' ambitions for the project and our analysis of whether we are the best ones to meet them. Our curatorial decisions are based on how we collectively understand and make sense of the proposed work. Therefore, we practise curation as a relational sense-making system that is necessarily responsive to the needs of all who interact with it.

SARAH:

Facet 2: There Is a Difference Between Rigour and Aesthetics

Our curatorial approach is driven by the understanding that it is essential to differentiate between rigour and Western-colonial definitions of professional aesthetics. Disability aesthetics often directly contradict Western-colonial aesthetics, while being equally rigorous.

There is no singular disability aesthetic, but rather a multiplicity of flourishing aesthetics that respond to the needs, fascinations, and desires of disabled artists and audiences. Disability studies scholar Tobin Siebers offers a definition of disability aesthetics as "a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation" and refuses to see the abled body and its visual manifestation as the definition of aesthetic value (2006). Disabled dramaturg and teacher Madeline Charne pushes this further, noting, "The field of disability aesthetics embraces the beauty in that which seems (by traditional, ableist standards) to be broken and considers those things more, not less, beautiful as a result of that 'brokenness'" (2019). Differentiating between rigour and aesthetics allows disability-informed definitions to converge within the discipline and be perceived. It empowers disabled artists to lean into the grotesque and away from sanitized narratives of disability that are often preferred in mainstream disability representation. Therefore, at the Creation Fund, we have begun to intentionally develop ways to talk about qualities of disability art without imposing an aesthetic.

A key part of this conversation is acknowledging access as aesthetic. Within disability performance, access and aesthetics are inseparable. One of the primary ways disabled aesthetics manifest is through the design of access features and forms that include and centre the needs of disabled artists, cultural workers, and audiences in intentional ways. Disabled choreographer

and dancer Alice Sheppard offers her perspective: “We’re thinking about access as an ethic, as an aesthetic, as a practice, as a promise, as a relationship with the audience” (Fuhrer 2022). Similarly, in our early conversations, Debbie Patterson, artistic director of Sick + Twisted Theatre, shared that their creative process for *Antigone* would weave access into the aesthetic of the performance, so that it would not only avoid compromising the aesthetic excellence of the work but it would also actually enhance it. Debbie wrote to Sarah:

By using the disruptions our disabilities provide as opportunities rather than obstacles, we counter these harmful narratives and create a vision of a new way to live extravagantly in the flawed and imperfect bodies we all inhabit. We give our audience the opportunity to glimpse the liberation that’s possible when we stop assessing our worth based on our productivity or our proximity to perfection (Patterson 2022).

The perspective of access as aesthetic impacts how we analyze the access features offered in proposals as both aesthetic and practical propositions, and how we understand the emphasis on access within creative descriptions often seen in submissions from disabled artists.

SHAY:

Facet 3: We Operate from a Disability-Informed Definition of Rigour

Historically, disability-led performance art has not been considered using a disability-informed definition of rigour. Even within contemporary presentations of disability art, critique often consists of questioning if there is something of value gained by witnessing disabled bodies, stories or ways of working on a stage, and the access measures required for them to participate in theatre. There is often an unstated expectation that disabled artists and disability arts productions ought to strive to look as close to mainstream theatre productions as possible, and make access features as unobtrusive, small, and quiet as possible in order to maintain traditional theatre conventions; and that while it may be okay to make performances that address disability themes, doing so as a disabled person, who appears disabled and works outside of conventional ways of doing, ought to be avoided at all costs.

Therefore, we began developing a disability-informed definition of rigour. Our definition resists the historical understandings of rigour, in which the word became synonymous with colonial understandings of discipline, intolerance, harshness, and punishment. We excavated what we see as the core of rigour—relationship and consideration—and placed it within understandings of disability justice. We decided to view rigour as a curatorial understanding of how process, people—including artists, the audience, and the broader community—aesthetics, and access intersect in the resulting performance. Here, rigour is evidence of consideration for each element and how they intersect with the work. In this way, rigour becomes a process which continues to be active and intentional as artists present their work to new audiences. As a relational practice, this sense-making should ideally be done in partnership with the communities that are represented and impacted within the work.

The following are a few places we search for rigour when curatorially engaging with a work.

Internal Consistency

Are the aims of the performance operationalized in every aspect of its process and presentation? Can we see evidence of this throughout the schedule, working practices, creative considerations, budget, and choice of team? For example, one of the central elements that the Creation Fund's investment facilitated for Sick + Twisted Theatre was extra time beyond the standard theatre production timeline to account for the extra work needed to harmonize the various needs of multiple disabled performers and access measures. Other internal consistency issues within a production could include ensuring multiple marginalized disabled people are prioritized as artists, production staff, and audiences, budget allocations for access, the choice of a performance format that matches the access measures selected, and the correlation of scope and resources in which the design of a timeline and team matches the ambitions of the project. We hope to see this consistency throughout the application and all conversations with the artistic team, to ensure that the team has clarity not only about their goals but also about the time, financial, human, and knowledge resources necessary to accomplish them.

Audience Relationship

Do the artists share an understanding of who the audience for their work is? Is this audience and the support (artistic or otherwise) that they might need being considered in the creation of the performance? The answers to these questions were quite clear with Sick + Twisted Theatre, who were actively seeking to attract both disabled and nondisabled audience members. With a Deaf artist in a lead role, utilizing Visual Vernacular (a sign language that has been adapted to be legible to nonfluent signers), there was significant thought put into how everyone in the audience would experience the performance. We also look for space for learning and reworking, based on an understanding that each presentation is a resting place, and an opportunity to place the work in conversation with its audience.

One of our ongoing conversations is how visible the artist's intentions for a work should be to an audience. If we embrace a dramaturgically driven definition of rigour as a curatorial understanding of how different elements come together in the performance, how conscious does the audience need to be of that understanding? Does the audience need to be equipped with resources so they feel prepared to venture into the work? And what might those resources look like or contain? Especially when engaging with aesthetics we might not have encountered before, it's easy to argue that a rigorous performance is one where the audience feels well prepared and understands the parameters in which the work is operating. Yet a performance where the aims of the piece are explicit and we're well resourced to find our way through can be, well, boring.

We continue to be interested in the relationship between rigour and mystery, and rigour and agency. Can rigour not necessarily equate to work that is more legible, but still be felt by those who engage with the piece? Could it be an experience of reciprocal and individual sense-making, in which the audience feels agency to make their own sense of it, and find their own way through it? Is it possible for any piece to address the full multiplicity of experiences and identities that may witness a performance and the unique sense-making filter each individual brings to the work?

SARAH:

Artistic Intentionality

Similarly, artistic rigour is about intentionality. Are creative decisions being made toward a core creative vision or investigation? Is everyone on the team clear about the core vision, and is that reflected in all elements of development? Is the creative process being designed to offer the depth, thoroughness, and robustness that the artistic vision requires? Have the ideas been tested and refined, or is this a first draft? We look for a sense that the artistic process is rooted in the richness of the artists' practices, and this is a piece that could only be created by these particular artists together.

SHAY:

Rigour of Critique

We also apply our understanding of rigour to ourselves and our curatorial practice, reflecting on how each of the elements we bring to a curatorial review intersect with the proposed project. We set boundaries on what should or shouldn't be fair game in critical conversations about disabled performance. For example, we look at functional accessibility as exactly that—functional: A performance with hearing ASL interpreters interpreting on the side stage is a functional adaptation of a performance to allow Deaf patrons to access the text, rather than the creative and artistic embodiment that a Deaf shadow cast would bring to a performance. Therefore, we don't include elements of functional accessibility in our creative conversations about a performance. Too often, critical analysis of accessible performance focuses on the presence of access features, viewing them as distractions or cool tools. This interpretation is particularly problematic when these features are not the tools the person offering the analysis uses to access the work, and so they cannot truly comment on their effectiveness for their target audience. This example highlights the importance of institutions engaging directly with the disability community in curatorial conversations, decision-making, and planning to ensure that those who can comment on their effectiveness as artistic and functional tools are considered within the curatorial process.

SARAH:

Facet 4: Accessibility Is a Creative Practice That Is Everyone's Responsibility

One of our first learnings together was that in addition to being intentional in our curatorial approach for disabled artists, there is significant value in using the same approach as a framework for nondisabled artists as well. Put simply, a critical way to increase the number of disabled artists working at scale is to ensure that disabled artists have access to large-scale performance as audience members and as members of creative teams. To encourage the creation of more accessible large-scale performances, we decided that accessibility and disability should be key lenses in all our decision-making, regardless of whether a proposal involved a disabled artist or not.

Here's what that looks like. We make decisions through a two-phase submission process with a low-barrier entry point that allows us to deepen our relationship with the artist and our understanding of their work and practice over time. We offer application assistance, including financial support to pay someone to help with the submission in whatever language the artist feels comfortable to best represent their project. Our initial proposal form invites all artists to consider accessibility in both their creation process and final production and to send us any questions they may have about incorporating accessibility.

For clarity, we interpret accessibility broadly to include all barriers people may face when accessing performance. We centre disability needs but are also mindful of broader access needs, including financial, geographic, linguistic, aesthetic, and relational access. Disabled people often face barriers to employment on creative teams and frequently cannot attend productions due to access barriers. When attendance is possible, there is often little attention paid to the quality of experience offered to disabled people. Placing curatorial attention on the access equity—the equality of an experience between disabled and nondisabled people—within the creation, production, and audience experience is a way to highlight and address the immense invisibilized labour that disabled people take on to participate as audience members, artists, and cultural workers.

Having a mandatory question about accessibility for all productions was instigated through conversations with Erin Clark, one of our disabled curators, who flagged that disabled artists were at a disadvantage because they have to direct significant financial and human resources toward the access needs of themselves and their collaborators, which shortchanges their creation and production budgets. There was also a sense that disabled artists are held to a higher standard in their accessibility offerings, while nondisabled artists are often allowed to offer nothing or minimal access accommodations. Noting this unevenness, and acknowledging the inseparable loop between disabled audiences being able to access performance and disabled artists creating performances, this question is designed to be invitational and relational. Simply asking the question has revealed that most people are genuinely curious about how the accessibility standards of public performance are shifting and are open to taking up the question as an important element to consider.

We recognize that it takes time to develop an artistic relationship to accessibility, and that it is an artistic skill that we all—disabled or not—have to figure out through exploration. There is no expectation of perfection or even confidence in what a project proposes, but they do need to be engaged and curious. Ensuring performances are accessible is a shared responsibility between artists and curators, and it is critical for our entire sector. Given that estimates of disability in the western population sit around 30 percent, considering a production’s accessibility at all stages must move into regular curatorial practice (Statistics Canada 2023).

Erin’s observations also informed our decision to have disability curators participate in all our initial proposal reviews. They offer curatorial responses that draw from their lived experience as disabled artists, their intersectional identities, and their understandings of frameworks including disability justice. Currently our disabled curators include Erin Clark, Syrus Marcus Ware, and Shay. Each curator offers a rich set of expertise, resulting in thorough conversations and robust curatorial responses that destabilize curation’s traditional gatekeeping role.

SHAY:

We Have Big Questions

The Creation Fund's specific vantage point offers a view of how various elements of the cultural ecosystem collide. After several years of implementing a curatorial practice that considers accessibility as a decision-making metric, we have started to ask questions to make sense of what we have seen and talked about. This sense-making is a direct consequence of the curation model that we use. For example:

How do disabled artists develop touring connections if venues aren't equipped to present their work, and showcase opportunities often bring the work to curators and presenters who aren't equipped to make sense of the work?

SARAH:

Who has access to creative teams with the knowledge, skills, and experience necessary to bring a large-scale work to life?

SHAY:

Who is permitted to make mistakes in the process, recover, and try something new? For whom does a mistake mean a failed career?

SARAH:

These questions have allowed us to identify ways we can encourage artistic rigour and challenge the structures that surround typical artmaking practices.

SHAY:

We are enamoured with how these big questions will help us unpack and make sense of what is and is not considered rigorous disability art in the future. The more we attempt to unpack and sense-make our way through creative accessibility and disability arts aesthetics, the more new big questions about disability art arise that we cannot easily answer. These include: Should disabled creatives who develop integrated access features for shows be considered core team members or outside consultants? Given that the classification of productions as disability art is often based on the disability status/identification of the writer/director, will new understandings

of creative access measures as spaces for profound artistry shift the lines between disability art and nondisabled art, with creative access features to allow for more works to be within the banner of disability arts?

SARAH:

Ambitious Future–Dreaming

We have ambitious dreams for the future of disability performance creation, presentation, and curation.

SHAY:

We dream of a world where disabled artists are regularly integral core creative team members on productions, generating richly creative, integrated accessibility that allows us all to imagine performance as our entertainment, inspiration, escape, and home; where disabled artists being free to create the performances they desire free from commentary about the appropriateness of their bodies, disability needs, and access measures; where we are encouraged to dream of filling the world’s largest stages with packed audiences of our own communities who can joyously and raucously experience performances that will stay with them for a lifetime; where we can change the hearts and minds of our communities and ourselves again and again, and truly see ourselves reflected in the stories we tell, the people who make the works, perform the works, and witness the magic of artistic creation.

SARAH:

Can curation heal the world of ableism entirely? No. But the more we can do to welcome different abilities in all of their beautiful and varied facets, render them visible, and build frameworks for rigorous accessibility on our stages and beyond, the more we set the public standards and discourse that allow us to collectively see a future beyond our current limitations.

SHAY:

For that, we will all be better off.

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