

Title:

An Examination into the Aesthetic Potential of Disability Theatre using Kaite O'Reilly's
peeling

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Under the UK Equality Act 2010, ‘if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities’, you are disabled.¹ The World Health Organisation, meanwhile, speaks to the universality of disability, ‘almost everyone will temporarily or permanently experience disability at some point in their life.’² To speak of disability is thus to navigate medical, political and social considerations all at once, pointing to the elusive nature of a fully comprehensive definition of the term. Disability theatre, as a self-conscious artistic movement in which creators and practitioners of disability culture have created theatrical works as ‘multifaceted as the community from which it emerges’, is a space which allows for exploration of the positioning of disabled and non-disabled people in our society.³ This theatre has seen the implementation of access initiatives and the creation of production companies dedicated to providing a platform and making space for the disabled community to produce theatre. My overarching concern in this essay is to do with the way in which disability theatre has creative potential in the realm of aesthetics. Just as there are multiple manifestations of disability, the aesthetic potential of this theatre can also be wide ranging. As such, I will be focusing my analysis on two modes of aesthetics, one related to an aesthetic of difference and the other an aesthetics of access, both of which illustrate areas where I think disability theatre aesthetics can be transformative in performance. It is worth noting here that while I recognise the individual and non-homogenous nature of spectatorship, for the purposes of illustrating my points within the scope of this essay, it is necessary to speak in general terms of the position of spectator and performer. Through an analysis of the aesthetic implications of the disabled

¹ gov.uk, ‘Definition of disability under the Equality Act 2010’, <https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>

² World Health Organisation, ‘Disability’, https://www.who.int/health-topics/disability#tab=tab_1

³ Ann M. Fox and Joan Lipkin. "Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theater Through Disability Theater: Selections from the DisAbility Project" in *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 14: No. 3 (2002): p. 81. muse.jhu.edu/article/37969.

performer, I will argue that while transformative for the encounter between disabled performer and non-disabled spectator, an aesthetic of difference fails to produce such an effect for the disabled spectator. Following this, I will examine a different aesthetic mode that I believe does produce exciting possibilities for disabled spectatorship. I contend that access aesthetics has the potential to transform the spectatorial experience for both disabled and non-disabled audience members by utilising access not just as a functional mechanism but by employing it creatively in the theatrical text. Kaite O'Reilly's *peeling* will be used as a case study to demonstrate both arguments.⁴ Ultimately, my claim is that in performance these aesthetic modes invite reflection on the nature of spectatorship, perception and disability itself.

Given the basis of aesthetics lies in human sense perception, that is how we sensorily experience and perceive the world, the experience of disability and the range of corporeal existences that the term encompasses, can shift normative modes of perception when placed in a performance context. By normative modes of perception, I refer to the way in which historically 'people with disabilities have attracted a predominately medicalised or fearful gaze' from non-disabled people.⁵ The presence of the disabled performer thus not only has political significance on the level of representation but also produces questions of aesthetics. In the theatrical encounter of disabled performer and non-disabled audience, the nature of this

⁴ Kaite O'Reilly, "peeling" in *Atypical Plays for Atypical Actors* (London: Oberon Books, 2016), ebook, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/st-andrews/reader.action?docID=4464624&ppg=14>. All future references to this text are from this edition and will be via citation.

⁵ Matthew Reason, "Ways of Watching: Five Aesthetics of Learning Disability Theatre" in *Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture and Media Studies* (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), ebook, p. 2
[https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/4468/4/Matthew%20Reason Ways%20of%20Watching%20accepted%20document%20%281%29.pdf](https://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/4468/4/Matthew%20Reason%20Ways%20of%20Watching%20accepted%20document%20%281%29.pdf). All future references to this text are from this edition and will be via citation.

‘medicalised or fearful’ gaze is changed. Richard Tomlinson, co-founder of one of the most prominent disability theatre companies in the UK, *Graeae*, contends that ‘performance gives the performer power’.⁶ In Tomlinson’s view, the very acknowledgment and recognition of a performance on the part of the audience results in attention being focused on the performer. The disabled person as performer can perhaps achieve status and meaning over the non-disabled spectator through the ability to direct the spectator’s look. This aesthetic is thus reliant on the recognition of difference between disabled performer and non-disabled spectator, hence an aesthetic of difference. It is worth noting that this acknowledgement of difference does not seek to distinguish on discriminatory grounds but rather is necessary to ensure that the real inequalities to which disabled people are subject to is not concealed behind a universalisation of human experience. As such, ‘disability theatre represents one of the few spaces, even within contemporary society, where individuals with... disabilities are actively regarded at all... (literally given an ‘audience’) within the public sphere.’ (Matthew Reason, p. 2). As performer, the disabled person can be empowered through the transformation of the non-disabled person’s spectatorial gaze. This transformation occurs in the subversion of those aforementioned normative modes of perception which imply a desire to distance or withdraw from looking, to a way of looking that is active and directed.

There are, however, several concerns which emerge from this figuration of watching. As object of the gaze, the disabled performer could be at risk of voyeuristic attention from the non-disabled spectator as bearer of the look. This type of attention ascribes what Laura Mulvey would describe as a ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’, turning the disabled performer into a

⁶ Richard Tomlinson, *Disability, Theatre and Education* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1984) ebook, p. 10.
<https://archive.org/details/disabilitytheatr00rich/page/n7/mode/1up?view=theater>

spectacle and thus reinforcing non-disabled hegemony.⁷ If this is the potential dynamic of the look emergent from the encounter between disabled performer and non-disabled spectator, the necessity to develop what Kaite O'Reilly describes as an 'alternative dramaturgy', becomes crucial for disability theatre.⁸ O'Reilly's work seeks to provide an alternative to 'the mainstream, hearing, non-disabled perspective' and involves creating 'processes, structures, content and form which reinvent, subvert or critique "traditional" or "conventional" representations and routes' (Kaite O'Reilly, p. 32). For her, traditional or conventional modes are those which relate to non-disabled perspectives and exclude disabled perspectives. Her play, *peeling*, suggests an alternative dramaturgy which subverts the non-disabled spectatorial gaze through the employment of metatheatrical devices. The play follows three disabled women who form the chorus of a production of *The Trojan Women – Then and Now*. It is a play about and within a play and so naturally prompts reflections on the broader theatrical experience and the nature of spectatorship. The centrality of disabled performers ensures that none of the actors serve an iconic function as symbolically representative of disability in general. Rather by producing them all as performers, O'Reilly allows for reflection on the dynamic between spectacle and spectator. Take for instance the following speech by Coral:

“I watch them – the audience – their heads sleek in the dark – furtive – secretive, with their little habits, tics, inappropriate coughs, gaze. I watch them – but it's transgressive – I'm to be stared at, not them. But I look and I want to ask who are you? Why are you here? What do you think of me? As you sit there in your rows in

⁷ Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, second ed. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2009), p. 19. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/st-andrews/reader.action?docID=6583424&ppg=30>.

⁸ Kaite O'Reilly, “A playwright reflects on 'alternative dramaturgies'” in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 14: No. 1 (2009): p. 32. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569780802655749>. All future references to this text are from this edition and will be via citation.

the dark, rubbing shoulders with strangers, looking, listening – what do you think of me? Am I just another performer?” (Kaite O’Reilly, p. 44)

The metatheatrical device of the direct address has the effect of turning the non-disabled spectator’s gaze back on itself. In so doing, the disabled performer overturns their position as object of the gaze to the gaze holder. This alternative dramaturgy thus topples the hierarchies of looking which come to the surface through an aesthetic of difference, giving power and control to the disabled performer rather than the non-disabled spectator. Coral powerfully proclaims at the end of her speech, “I am watching you” (Kaite O’Reilly, p. 44).

Analysis up to this point has been centred on the encounter between disabled performer and non-disabled spectator as the site of creative meaning-making. Focusing attention purely on this specific encounter however risks ascribing aesthetic value only through the spectatorship of non-disabled people and negates the value of disabled spectatorship. As such, I will now move onto a consideration of access aesthetics, an aesthetic mode which has the potential to provide new spectatorial experiences for all spectators, disabled and non-disabled. Access aesthetics ‘situates accessibility as a core dramaturgical component of performance’, combining the political and aesthetic concerns of disability theatre.⁹ It relates to the creative employment of features or devices which enhance the accessibility of a performance into the theatrical text. To better understand the effect of this, I will return to the example of *peeling*. In *peeling*, the formal incorporation of sign language and audio description, while having the practical function of making dialogue accessible, creates another alternative dramaturgy through an aesthetics of access. As a hearing non-British-Sign-Language-using spectator, the

⁹ Megan A. Johnson. “Balancing Form and Function: The Politics of Access Aesthetics” in *Public*, Vol. 33: No. 66 (2022): p. 24. https://doi.org/10.1386/public_00114_1

incorporation of these access devices in *peeling* made me conscious of my own inability to fully understand the play's content. For example, in an early scene where Coral and Beaty start teasing Alfa by relating her signing to disco dancing, Alfa's rage is communicated largely through BSL, while the other two women purposefully mistranslate her signing to continue their teasing:

“CORAL: (A.D.) – Beaty and Coral try to translate.

ALFA's following speech is presented in BSL/visual language only, with no voice.

Simultaneously, CORAL and BEATY try to translate what ALFA is signing.

ALFA: Fuck off. Fuck right off the pair of you. Cows. Moo. Go away and milk yourselves. Squeeze yourself dry of that cynicism and ignorance. Prats. Christ knows how I manage, stuck here with you two. I won't do it again.

CORAL: (*'Translating' simultaneously.*) Slap hands... slap hands together

BEATY: (*Simultaneously.*) Fuck... fuck-fucking” (Kaite O'Reilly, p. 24)

My understanding of this scene was governed by the communicative devices which I could access, dialogue and audio description but not BSL. On one hand, this emphasised the limitations of my own embodiment as a non-BSL user, allowing for a self-reflexive consideration of my own positioning as a certain type of spectator. The play's access aesthetics put me in a position to experience what Jozefina Komporaly describes as 'a form of temporary disability', providing insight into the lived experiences of people when there is a lack of access provisions to support their corporeal differences.¹⁰ All spectators' experience

¹⁰ Jozefina Komporaly. *Staging motherhood: British women playwrights, 1956 to the present*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2006), ebook. p. 146 <https://epdf.tips/staging-motherhood-british-women-playwrights-1956-to-the-present.html>

of the play, disabled or non-disabled, hearing or deaf, is governed by their bodily reality and the measures put in place to enable access.

The effect of incorporated access devices thus differs depending on the type of body that is spectating, and this is where the aesthetic power lies. In such a way, Colette Conroy claims that ‘the play and its meanings are marked and mediated by the expectation that the audience will have different sensory experiences.’¹¹ That is to say, access aesthetics does not rely on an ideal spectator, in the way the aesthetics of difference relies on non-disabled spectatorship, but rather anticipates different experiences of embodiment on the part of the spectator.

peeling facilitated a new spectatorial experience for me, showing me a new perception that limited my ability to access the theatrical text. By subverting the dynamics of access, the privilege which has traditionally been afforded to the bodies of non-disabled hearing spectators such as myself, compared to those of disabled and/or deaf spectators, was made glaringly evident. This aesthetic thus brought attention to the need for work which dismantles non-disabled privilege and instead increases access for all bodies, and the theatre as a site where this equalising work can occur.

Now, if this was the only effect produced by access aesthetics, at its worst ‘it becomes a form of introspective therapy for the non-disabled spectator’ (Matthew Reason, p. 8). However, this aesthetic also has the potential to transform modes of perception for deaf and BSL-using spectators. The embeddedness of sign language and audio description privileges deaf and BSL-using spectators by enabling them to consume elements of the play that will evade the non-BSL user. This privileging has the effect of ‘overturning nondisabled hegemony and the

¹¹ Colette Conroy. *Theatre & the Body* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), ebook, p. 56. <https://ereader.perlego.com/1/book/2990594/85>

hierarchy of theatre audiences that is based on said hegemony' that I mentioned previously.¹² The deaf or BSL-user spectator is able to experience the privileged perspective that is usually afforded to non-disabled hearing spectators. By providing different access points for different types of spectators to consume the play, O'Reilly enables spectators to see in ways distinct from their respective corporeal realities and acknowledge human variety. Access aesthetics, in subverting the traditional (as O'Reilly understands them) ways narratives are communicated, thus presents the opportunity for both disabled and non-disabled spectators to experience modes of perception different from their norm. This aesthetic mode of disability theatre therefore allows for an engagement with the understanding of disability as a social construction which makes distinctions between people's bodies through 'matters of appearance and spectatorial relation rather than of any kind of intrinsic reality.'¹³ That is, it draws attention to disability as a matter of perception and perspective regarding the way we, as a society, see bodies, rather than some absolute truth. As a site of spectatorship, theatre is a place in which we can see these perceptions and the mechanisms behind them. In such a way, disability theatre has generative potential as 'a vantage point, a perspective, a way of experiencing the world', drawing attention to the fact that disability itself is 'an aesthetic value.'^{14 15}

¹² Nina Muehlemann. "Interrogating wholeness through access aesthetics: Kaite O'Reilly's In Water I'm Weightless." in *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Vol. 23 (2018): p. 459. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2018.1474092>

¹³ Theron Schmidt. "Acting, Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance" in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013) ebook. <https://www.perlego.com/book/874945/postdramatic-theatre-and-the-political-international-perspectives-on-contemporary-performance-pdf>

¹⁴ Carrie Sandahl. "Considering Disability: Disability Phenomenology's Role in Revolutionizing Theatrical Space." in *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism XVI*, Vol. 2 (2002): p. 18. <https://journals.ku.edu/jdtc/article/view/3394/3323>

¹⁵ Tobin Siebers. "Introducing Disability Aesthetics" in *Disability Aesthetics* (University of Michigan Press, 2010) p. 20. <https://www.press.umich.edu/pdf/9780472071005-ch1.pdf>

This analysis does not claim to be an expansive exploration into the aesthetic potential of disability theatre but I hope that, through the provided examples, I have demonstrated some of the exciting creative and generative avenues of this theatre in the aesthetic realm, particularly in the area of spectatorship. The aesthetic of difference, when taken into account in the development of alternative dramaturgies, can subvert the spectatorial dynamic between disabled and non-disabled people, and give disabled performers control of the gaze. An aesthetics of access meanwhile can facilitate spectatorial experiences that allow for a self-reflexivity which makes visible, and overturns, the hierarchy of non-disabled spectators. The ability of these aesthetic modes to have such transformative effects on spectatorship, speaks to the way in which disability itself is a matter of perception. Disability exists only when a society's way of looking at different bodies doesn't allow for human variation and disability theatre can draw attention to this.

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