"Ich Bin Ein Schauspieler": Making Crip Performance in Toronto with Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater*

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Abstract: This paper attends to the making of crip performance in the 2015 production of *Disabled Theater* in Toronto, where eleven performers with intellectual and physical disabilities took to the stage to perform a series of dance solos set to popular music. The performance was directed by the French choreographer Jérôme Bel and produced by the Zurich-based Theater HORA, a professional theatre company that is fully comprised of performers with disabilities. As an experienced choreographer, Bel is portrayed in the performance program as the "brains" behind *Disabled Theater.* It seems as though the performers were simply executing Bel's artistic ideas through the embodied materiality of their dance performances. As such, the performers' desire to be seen as proper artists exists amid the specter of an *ableist* ideology in "normative" culture that could potentially influence the audience members' interpretation of their dance solos. Drawing on the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Carrie Sandahl, and Robert McRuer on the intersection of disability and performance, as well as the Italian dramaturge Eugenio Barba's concept of the "pre-expressive state" of the actor's body, I argue that the inclusion of persons with disabilities who confidently describe themselves as "actors" through the German phrase, "Ich Bin Ein Schauspieler", unfolds the possibility of crip performance in *Disabled Theater*, which, unlike an ableist conception of performance, acknowledges disability as a reality that is constitutive of everyday life. Through crip performance, persons with disabilities do not need to downplay their disability in order to be publicly acknowledged as artists.

Keywords: Crip Performance; Dance Solos; Disability; Ableism; Jérôme Bel; Theater HORA

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> "Stigmatized in and by a culture that will not or cannot accommodate their presence, crip performers (in several senses of the word and in many different performance venues, from the stage to the street to the conference hall) have proudly and collectively shaped stigmaphilic alternatives in, through, and around that abjection."
> - Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, p.35.

At the March 2015 production of *Disabled Theater* at the Fleck Dance Theatre in Toronto, eleven performers with intellectual and physical disabilities took to the stage to perform a series of dance solos set to popular music. The performance was directed by the French choreographer Jérôme Bel and produced by the Zurich-based Theater HORA, a professional theatre company that is fully comprised of performers with intellectual and physical disabilities. As an experienced choreographer, Bel has little difficulty expressing his artistic vision in public, which lends credence to his position as the "brains" behind *Disabled Theater*. As such, it seems as though the performers were simply executing Bel's artistic ideas through the embodied materiality of their dance performances. This apparent divide between Bel's credibility as an established artist and the performers' relatively nascent capacities as dancers appears to be reinforced by the tension between the performers' desire to be seen as proper artists and the specter of an *ableist* ideology in "normative" culture that could potentially influence the audience members' interpretation of the dance solos.[1] On the one hand, the performers' virtuosic display of their individual talent and skills in dance may render salient certain normative assumptions about ability and disablement, especially if the audience members are familiar with Bel's choreographic style and are thereby inclined to compare the dance solos in this performance (which the performers devise on their own) with Bel's previous work. On the other hand, I would argue that

the inclusion of persons with disabilities who confidently describe themselves as "actors" through

the German phrase, "Ich Bin Ein Schauspieler", unfolds the possibility of crip performance in

Disabled Theater, which, unlike an ableist conception of performance, acknowledges disability

as a reality that is constitutive of everyday life. Through crip performance, persons with

disabilities do not need to hide or downplay their disability in order to be publicly acknowledged

as artists and performers.

Drawing on the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Carrie Sandahl, and Robert

McRuer on the intersection of disability and performance, as well as the Italian dramaturge

Eugenio Barba's concept of the "pre-expressive state" of the actor's body, I will analyze the

visual politics that complicates the audience members' perception of disabled bodies and

disability in performance. Subsequently, I will proceed to examine the ways in which the

performers in *Disabled Theater* endeavour to challenge the specter of an ableist interpretation of

their dance solos by partaking in the making of crip performance. Since its debut in 2012,

Disabled Theatre has generated much scholarly discussion, and this intellectual interest has

culminated in the publication of *Disabled Theater*, a volume of essays edited by Sandra

Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz. The book presents critical perspectives about the aesthetic and

cultural impact of HORA's *Disabled Theater*, and the thoughts of several contributors, including

Wihstutz, Yvonne Schmidt, and Scott Wallin, are especially relevant to my analysis of the

Toronto production. While the chapters in the book offer valuable insights on the performances

of *Disabled Theater* in Europe and the United States, a distinct Canadian disability theatre

perspective on the project has recently emerged. The Toronto performances of *Disabled Theater*

were part of HORA's 2015 Canadian tour across Toronto and Montreal. The Montreal

performances took place at Concordia University, where the university's Critical Disability

Studies Working Group (CDSWG) hosted Bel and the HORA performers. Three members of the

working group, Katherine Zien, Arseli Dokumaci, and Ashley McAskill, have written about the

Montreal performances for the Fall 2016 issue of *Theatre Research in Canada*. Edited by Kirsty

Johnston, this special issue investigates the intersections of disability and performance in Canada.

Reflecting on their experience with *Disabled Theatre* in Montreal, Zien, Dokumaci, and

McAskill provide perceptive analyses of the project with a Canadian disability theatre

perspective. Building on their work, as well as the insights of other disability and performance

scholars, I hope to contribute to this conversation through my analysis of the Toronto production.

But first, let us explore the artistic objectives of *Disability Theater* before turning our attention to

the audience's first encounter with the HORA performers in Toronto.

From Zurich to Toronto

Jérôme Bel is an award-winning choreographer whose dance projects have appeared at

numerous venues across the world. As one of the world's leading practitioners of a physically

and mentally demanding art form (contemporary dance), Bel is a non-disabled artist who seems

eager to express his artistic vision in interviews and post-show dialogues, thus lending credence

to his position as the "brains" behind Theatre HORA's performance of *Disabled Theater*. Formed

in 1993 in Zurich, HORA is Switzerland's only professional theatre company that is fully

comprised of performers with intellectual disabilities. A few of the performers also possess

physical disabilities that influence their deportment and gait. Under the stewardship of its artistic

director Michael Elber, the company seeks, as the program for the Toronto performance states,

"to promote the artistic development of people with learning difficulties, and to give them the

opportunity to exhibit their extraordinary abilities to a wide audience, at a professional level"

(2015: 3). While the language deployed in the program may appear inclusive at first glance, it

also emphasizes the "benevolent" quality of Elber and the company's collaborative relationship

with disabled performers.

Casting the company's performers as "beneficiaries" of a "benevolent" philosophy can be

problematic in terms of how it seems to diminish – or at least divert our attention from – the

agency of persons with disabilities in artistic production and organization; the assumption being

that non-disabled individuals like Elber would have to offer persons with disabilities with a

platform on which to hone their artistic talents. Adding to the complication surrounding the

"message of benevolence" in the program is the use of the phrase "extraordinary abilities" to

describe the attributes that the company's performers are said to possess. This is significant on

two levels.

First, the adjective "extraordinary" has two principal meanings, where it can mean either

"special" or "strange". Both meanings seem to reiterate the normative perspective of persons with

physical or mental disabilities as different, if not deviant, from the supposedly *normate*

population in society. The normate, according to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who coined this

important term in Disability Studies, describes the "social figure through which people can

represent themselves as definitive human beings" (1996: 8). On a social level, the normate

operates as a "constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural

capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them"

(1996: 8). Garland-Thomson's definition of the normate elucidates the power dynamics that

structure the interrelations among social identities that tend to be attached to physical differences.

In this way, the normate locates a definitive social subject who is endowed with physical and

cultural capital that affords a dominant position in society. As such, anyone who is deemed

different or deviant from the normate would likely be relegated to the margins of social and

cultural otherness. The second level of significance in the use of the phrase "extraordinary

abilities" to characterize HORA's performers pertains to the company's stated objectives. By claiming to offer persons with learning difficulties a chance to showcase their "extraordinary abilities", the deployment of the phrase as a descriptor for the company's goals places considerable focus on the performers' capacity to publicly express their exceptional artistic abilities through physical performance.[2] But in light of the overt emphasis on physical ability in *Disabled Theater*, as embodied by the performers' role as dancers, the set design for the production is relatively simple.

Silent Encounters, One at a Time

In contrast to the fancy styles in which contemporary dance performances have been rendered in recent years, where elaborate set designs and complex lighting sequences tend to obscure the creativity of individual performers, there are no distracting backdrops or colourful lights to shroud the stage in iridescent splendour. Instead, eleven black chairs are arranged in a semicircle on a bare stage. In addition, a worktable and a microphone fixed to its stand can be seen at the far end of the stage-left area. As the houselights fade, a man dressed in black enters the stage and takes a seat behind the worktable. Introducing himself as Chris Weinheimer, the man informs the audience members that he has been hired as a technical assistant and a translator for the performance. "The actors," he goes on to explain, can "speak only Swiss German, and Jérôme Bel does not". But not only does Weinheimer serve as a linguistic intermediary between the French choreographer and the Swiss cast members, he also mediates the language barrier between the performers on the stage and the audience members, particularly when the piece is performed outside of German-speaking countries such as Canada. Speaking in English, he reports that Bel has asked the performers to enter the stage, one at a time (I should add that Bel does not appear at any point throughout the show). Standing in front of the semicircular assembly of

chairs, each performer has to face the audience members for one minute without speaking. Weinheimer then repeats the instruction in Swiss German in order to cue the performers at the backstage area to prepare for their entrance.

Several seconds come to pass before the first performer, Sara Hess, enters the scene from the upstage area of the right wing and walks to the centre of the downstage section. Dressed in a pair of lime-green carpenter pants and a black T-shirt with a wolf's head printed on the front, Hess appears to be a young woman in her 20s. She fixes her eyes on the audience members, turning her head from left to right to look at each and every person seated in the theatre. Hess's piercing gaze unsettles some audience members who seem puzzled by the sudden shift in mood from the casual tone of preshow conversations to the sombre atmosphere that envelopes her presence on the stage. The minute feels especially long. But as the audience members struggle to make sense of Hess's behaviour, the performer turns around and exits the stage. A few seconds later, another performer, Remo Beuggert, enters the scene from the same part of the upstage area that Hess uses to exit the stage. Beuggert is a tall man with an imposing physique and long curly hair. He dons a black cap, a grey T-shirt topped with a black cargo vest, and a pair of blue denim pants. Unlike Hess, Beuggert does not establish eye contact with the audience members. Instead, with his hands tucked in his pockets, he focuses his gaze at a point above their heads, which makes his time on stage feel even longer. When the minute is up, he turns to the right and leaves.

Over the course of the next few minutes, the rest of the performers take turns to enter the stage and face the audience. This sequence continues until all the eleven cast members have presented themselves to the audience. Some of them stand for the full minute, while others appear for only a few seconds before hurrying back to the backstage area. A few performers turn their gaze towards the floor or the ceiling of the theatre, as other members of the cast stare at the audience members who remain silent throughout the encounter. One performer, Nikolai Gralak, a

thirty-year-old performer who walks with a slight limp, looks at his watch for the entire minute, which triggers a bout of nervous laughter among some members of the audience. By the time the final performer enters the scene, everyone in the theatre has a rough impression of the unique personality that each cast member possesses. As an audience member, I felt uneasy about the silent encounters with the cast members. On the one hand, it seemed as though I was getting to know the actors, albeit without establishing personal contact with them. On the other hand, the visual experience reeked of a voyeuristic impetus that complicates the relationship between performers and audience members. Scott Wallin contends that this voyeuristic scene indicates a power imbalance through which "the audience would hold primary power of reference and interpretation of what was to unfold onstage" (2015: 66). As a result, there exists a distance between the actors and the audience who might feel implicated in a voyeuristic gaze of the actors' disabilities, which could then limit the actors' agency to represent and interpret their own performance. Without the intervention of elaborate set designs and special lighting effects, the presentation of eleven performers who do not say or do anything while standing on the stage for one minute leaves the audience members with a conundrum: How should they respond to the parade of persons with intellectual and physical disabilities? Should they turn their gaze away from the performers and focus on something else on the stage?

The "Pre-expressive State" of "Vulnerable" Bodies

In her study of the visual representations of disability in contemporary culture, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson distinguishes between the visual modes of gazing and staring at a person with a disability. She argues that while the act of gazing at a body (such as the patriarchal male view of the female body) typically involves the objectification and appropriation of that body, the gaze does account for the body in its entirety (2001: 347). However, as Garland-

Thomson points out, "staring at disability […] intensely telescopes looking toward the physical signifier for disability" (2001: 347). As the performers in *Disabled Theater* take turns to enter the stage and face the audience, they are subjecting their bodies, willingly or otherwise, to the scrutiny of the spectators in the theatre. Even without doing or saying anything, the performers' silent presence on the stage is sufficient to trigger a sense of fascination among the audience members who may be curious about the visible "anomalies" on the actors' bodies. Although every cast member has been introduced in the performance program as having a form of intellectual disability, some of them also possess physical disabilities. The bodily and behavioural differences that the actors manifest would make it challenging for them to adopt what Carrie Sandahl refers to as the "neutral" position (2005: 260).

It should be noted that the term "neutral", as it is applied to theatre performance, is not Sandahl's. Rather, Sandahl's discussion of "neutral" as a key feature of Western actor training describes the *ableist* ideologies that inform the historical and current use of the term in theatre practice. According to Sandahl's pioneering analysis of the exclusionary effects of the "neutral" concept, the distinctive attributes of the actor's body are reconditioned through rigorous training in order to express the neutral position on which a character is built. This is because "a character," as Sandahl elucidates, "cannot be built from a position of physical difference" (2005: 262). The actor's body has to be capable of expressing a neutral state that is visually suitable for the construction of multiple characters, thus excluding actors with physical disabilities. Sandahl characterizes this exclusionary practice as "Tyranny of Neutral". In turn, the foregrounding of the performers' physical disabilities at the very start of *Disabled Theater* complicates the theatrical convention by which actors are trained to elicit the spectators' interest on the basis of their physical attractiveness. Even before the performance of an action or the utterance of a word, the actor's presence on the stage should be sufficient to draw the audience members' attention

towards his or her body. This is what the Italian dramaturge Eugenio Barba calls the "pre-expressive state" of the body in performance.[3]

The "pre-expressive state" of the body refers to the ways in which the performer's technique facilitates the creation of a believable presence on the stage. What Barba means by "pre-expressivity" is "[t]he level which deals with how to render the actor's energy scenically alive, that is, with how the actor can become a presence which immediately attracts the spectator's attention" (1991: 188). Like Sandahl's concept of neutral, Barba's notion of the pre-expressive state asserts that the actor does not present his or her body as it is seen in daily life. Rather, he or she has to learn how to initiate contact with the audience through his or her physical presence on the stage. This is what Barba calls "the pre-expressive scenic behaviour", which is generated through disciplined training. Standing silently before the audience, the performers in *Disabled Theater* appear to make use of their bodies to fashion this pre-expressive scenic behaviour. However, in doing so, they avail themselves to the possibility that the audience might elect to focus on the points of disablement on their bodies.

As Garland-Thomson explains in *Extraordinary Bodies*, the physically disabled body is "constructed as the embodiment of corporeal insufficiency and deviance" and as such, it becomes "a repository for social anxieties about such troubling concerns as vulnerability, control, and identity" (1996: 6). In a performance context, the appearance of the physically and visibly disabled body on the stage tends to be framed within the normative gaze that embraces what Allen Thiher describes as the Hippocratic view of "the body as a unified entity set against the psyche" (2009: 15).[4] Indeed, the Ancient-Greek treatment of the human body as a "unified entity" implies that any disruption of its structural and conceptual coherence could serve to amplify those social anxieties about vulnerability, control, and identity to which Garland-Thomson alludes. Perhaps one way that the amplification of these social anxieties might unravel

is through what Iris Marion Young calls "the ideal of community" that "denies and represses social difference" in order to articulate "a desire for the fusion of subjects with one another" (1990: 227). The "ideal community" rides on a homogenizing impetus that threatens to erase and exclude individual differences in the name of a collective identity. In the case of *Disabled Theatre*, this collective identity seems to be underscored by the use of the adjective "disabled" to describe the type of theatrical performance that is being delivered – a performance that is not only "disabled" from the outset but also vulnerable and out of control.

But the vulnerability of the performers is not solely contingent on their physical disabilities, which some of the cast members do not appear to possess. Every actor in HORA is susceptible to being judged by the audience members as physically and/or mentally deviant. Immediately after the silent presentation of the performers, the translator Chris Weinheimer informs the audience that Jérôme Bel has asked the cast members to enter the stage, one at a time, and report their name, age, and profession. The actors adhere to this instruction by taking turns to reveal their identity. This time, however, the actors do not return to the backstage area. Instead, each of them takes a seat in the semicircular assembly of chairs. The performers, we are told, are aged between 20 and 45 years, and every one of them identifies his or her profession as *schauspieler* or *schauspielerin*, which are the German words for actor and actress.

Katherine Zien describes the uniformity of the actors' statements as a "communal utterance", even though she wonders if "Bel simply wrote their answers into the script," and were the actors "tempted to report any other occupations" (2016: 177). For Benjamin Wihstutz, the co-editor of *Disability Theatre*, a collection of essays on *Disabled Theater*, the cast members' willingness to publicly identify themselves as professional "actors" represents an "emancipatory speech act" (2015: 39). Wihstutz's characterization of the performers' collective speech act as emancipatory implies an idealized impression of individual freedom that could potentially

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obscure the precarious social, economic, and political conditions that people with disabilities

continue to contend with on a daily basis. At the same time, Wihstutz also acknowledges that this

sense of emancipation for the actors is primarily theatre-based (2015: 38). As Scott Wallin notes,

the cast members' declarations of their profession "repeatedly challenge the audience's

traditional expectations that professional theater requires virtuosic skill and normative personal

appearance," thus compelling them to "reconsider their understanding of theater and how we

should include disability in the profession" (2015: 68). If the aim of having the performers assert

their profession as actors is to subvert theatrical norms and the audience's expectations in order to

foster an understanding of theatre that *includes* disability, then perhaps the collective speech act

is not so much an emancipatory gesture than the foregrounding of, as Zien describes it, "the

copious talents and rigorous labour of the actors as *workers*" (2016: 178, emphasis in the

original). Zien's reference to the HORA performers as "workers" draws attention to the collective

labour involved in performance creation and production. However, this is also an artistic labour

that acknowledges the performers' individual talents while also inviting public scrutiny of their

disabilities. The paradoxical situation in which the actors find themselves is rendered salient in

the next part of the performance, where they are asked to name their disabilities before delivering

their dance solos.

Once all eleven actors have entered the stage and are seated in a semi-circular formation,

Weinheimer, the translator, informs the audience members that Bel has asked the performers to

identify their "handicap". He then proceeds to address each performer by name and requests that

he or she steps up to the microphone to reveal his or her condition. Some of them describe their

disability using such diagnostic terms as "genetic disorder", "Down syndrome", and "autism".

Other performers, such as Damien Bright, choose to present an alternative reading of their

disability. While informing the audience that he has Down syndrome, Bright goes on to explain

that the condition is "called as well Trisomy-21. That means I have one chromosome more than you in the audience". Bright's elucidation of his disability is striking. On the one hand, by providing the medico-scientific name and explanation of his condition, he seems to be reminding the audience members' of his facility with language and expression. On the other hand, Bright's proclamation that he has one chromosome more than the audience members rides on the assumption that all of them are part of a neurotypical and non-disabled population in society. I should emphasize that I am not blaming Bright for holding such a view, for he would not have known if anyone in the audience has Down syndrome or any other form of disability. More importantly, he does not need to be embarrassed about the biological basis of his disability. However, it is worth noting that Bright's explanation of what having Down syndrome means on the biological level occurs within the context of normative culture and with it, a normative perspective of genetic difference and the implied superiority of those who perceive themselves to have so-called "normal" genes. The frankness of Bright's discussion of Down syndrome represents a direct challenge against the medical view of disability as a condition that avails itself to being scrutinized, managed, or even eradicated. The rationalizing impetus of the medical view of disability that enacts a matrix of "normalcy" and "disability" that tends to be predicated upon genetic difference is further subverted by Bright's fellow performer, Tiziana Pagliaro, who responds to Bel's request to name her "handicap" by saying, "I don't know". The juxtaposition between Bright's candid discussion of the medico-scientific interpretation of his disability and Pagliaro's apparent refusal to subscribe to the categorizing impetus of the medical establishment becomes even more significant as all eleven performers present their respective dance solos in the remaining part of the performance.

Making Crip Performance

The dance segment in *Disabled Theater* features eleven solo performances set to contemporary pop music. The members of the audience are told that the actors were directly responsible for choreographing their own dance solos, albeit with the professional guidance of dance master, Jérôme Bel. As the dance segment unfolds, Weinheimer, the translator for the show, reveals that Bel has requested each actor to choreograph a dance solo that complements a piece of music of their choice. Being the first actor to present her dance, Pagliaro makes full use of the performance space as she moves her hands and legs in concert with the flowing melody of the Italian pop ballad, "Niente". At the same time, the other performers seated behind her can be seen swaying their bodies in synchrony with the moderate tempo of the song. Rather than simply watching their fellow actor perform, the seated cast members are active participants in Pagliaro's performance, as they mouth the lyrics to the song and imitate the movements of a guitar player or a drummer. For her part, Pagliaro offers her own interpretation of how a dance solo should look like by running across the length of the stage and delivering a sequence of leaps on each end. As such, her performance more closely resembles a gymnastics routine than a contemporary dance solo. But as we have seen from her response to Bel's request to name her disability, Pagliaro is not one who readily submits to conventional ideas about identity or a specific art form, as she choreographs her performance on her own terms.

It is possible to read Pagliaro's freestyle dance solo as an exemplar of crip performance. If we recall the opening section of the performance when the translator Chris Weinheimer asks the cast members in *Disabled Theater* to name their profession, we will note that Pagliaro and her colleagues proudly describe themselves as performers (*Schauspieler* in German). By emphasizing that they are professional performers, the cast members detract from the "message of benevolence" in the performance program, which characterizes them as "beneficiaries" of HORA's mission to provide disabled actors with a platform for their artistic development. I

would therefore contend that Pagliaro's freestyle dance performance, coupled with her identification as a professional performer, unfolds the possibility of crip performance, which, unlike an ableist conception of performance, acknowledges disability as a reality that is constitutive of everyday life. Through crip performance, persons with disabilities do not need to hide or downplay their disability in order to be publicly acknowledged as artists and performers.

"The term crip," as Carrie Sandahl notes, is derived from the word cripple, and the term "has expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well" (2003: 27). Persons with disabilities who identify as "crip" may tend to use the term to describe the social and cultural practices that they engage in. At the same time, there is, as Eliza Chandler elucidates in her discussion of "crip community", a nuance between the use of "crip" as an identity maker and "crip" as an action and a verb. "To crip," Chandler writes, "is to open up desire for what disability disrupts" (2012: 1). Building on this definition of "crip", Chandler describes the "crip community" as a community that is "enacted through mutual motivation or desire to dwell with disability" (2012: 1). It is the mutual desire among disabled and non-disabled people to "dwell with disability" that can "crip" community and bind its people together.

The use of "crip" as an identity marker and an action can be seen as a mode of resistance against what Robert McRuer describes as the condition of "compulsory able-bodiedness". As McRuer elucidates, "compulsory able-bodiedness […] militates against crip identifications and practices, even as it inevitably generates them" (2006: 35). "Certainly," he goes on to explain, "disabled activists, artists, and others who have come out crip have done so in response to systemic able-bodied subordination and oppression" (2006: 35). If a particular artistic or performance space contains structural and ideological barriers that exclude the presence of persons with disabilities, then any artist or performer who identifies as "crip" could challenge the

biased and oppressive able-bodied culture that the space embodies. "Stigmatized in and by a culture that will not or cannot accommodate their presence," as McRuer points out, "crip performers (in several senses of the word and in many different performance venues, from the stage to the street to the conference hall) have proudly and collectively shaped stigmaphilic alternatives in, through, and around that abjection." (2006: 35). Persons with disabilities who want to participate in creative enterprises as artist and performers are "crip performers" – to borrow McRuer's turn of phrase – who actively perform the embodied process of creative expression. Such "crip performances" could potentially subvert a normative mindset that stigmatizes disability as a debilitating lack that curtails individual creativity in many forms of performance practice, including dance.

As an embodied process, crip performance is analogous to what Arseli Dokumaci calls "affordance-creation", a term that encapsulates the innovative ways in which HORA's actors remake the affordances of dance. Drawing on James Gibson's theory of affordances, which attends to the possibilities of action that are actualized through the complementary relationship between an organism and the environment, Dokumaci interprets the HORA actors' improvisational approach to dance as "reiterations of the rehearsal process in which the performers sought out new relationalities with their material surroundings in and through per-*form*-ance" (2016: 188, emphasis in the original). Dokumaci's notion of "affordance-creation" embraces others ways of becoming, as it is less concerned with those affordances that emerge from disciplined training than with the action possibilities of remaking the affordances of performance. As the *form* that the performance takes is constantly remade with every performance, Pagliaro's free-flowing choreography appears to manifest the regenerative principle of "affordance-creation". And just as Pagliaro's freestyle dance solo defies conventional ideas of

artistic expression, her colleague, Julia Häusermann, delivers a performance that refashions Michael Jackson's dance routine in "They Don't Care About Us".

Wearing a pair of orange slacks and a singlet of the same colour, Julia Häusermann presents an original interpretation of Jackson's choreography for the song. As the military drumbeat at the start of the track blares over the theatre's audio system, Häusermann marches across the stage in regimental fashion, swiping her right hand towards the ground and lifting it back up to her chest in a repetitive motion. It is clear from the initial part of her dance solo that she has been a serious observer of Jackson's movements in the music video for that song, which includes a scene in which the singer marches down a street in Rio de Janeiro. This observation is further substantiated by Häusermann's mimicry of Jackson's crotch grabbing motif that characterizes the latter's idiosyncratic style of performance. But her imitation of the motif is more than a straightforward copy of such a recognizable dance move, as she defies the audience members' expectation that a female performer would be so audacious as to grab her crotch and thrust her hips in a room full of strangers. Furthermore, the lyrics to Jackson's song, which touches on such controversial themes as slavery, deprivation, and abuse, seem to complement the subversive effect of Häusermann's dance solo. Even when she attempts the famous moonwalk, she does not appear to be concerned about the accuracy of her parodistic mimicry. My use of "parodistic" follows Linda Hutcheon's definition of "parody". In *A Theory of Parody*, Hutcheon argues that parody is not simply a form of "ridiculing imitation mentioned in the standard dictionary definitions" (1985: 5). Instead, modern parody consists of "repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity" (1985: 6).[5] While parody may operate as homage to or ridiculing imitation of the parodied object, Hutcheon holds that what remains significant in both types of parody is the difference between the imitation and the original (1985: 60). We see this difference unfolding as Häusermann delivers her own take on Jackson's

moonwalk by standing on one foot while thrusting her body forward and backwards in a manner

that is *analogous* – an analogy marked by difference – to the pop idol's iconic dance move, rather

than being a direct copy of it.

In further departure from Jackson's dance routine in "They Don't Care About Us",

Häusermann concludes her dance solo with an original act, which sees her flipping her hair up

and down as she spins her body around with both arms extended. While the rest of the cast

members move their bodies and hands to the pulsating beat of the song, Häusermann sets her

body spinning, and this revolutionary motion continues all the way till the last musical note is

heard. Feeling exhausted after her intense performance, she falls onto the lap of a fellow

performer who is seated next to her in the semicircle of chairs. The theatre falls silent. Several

seconds pass before the audience members break into a rapturous applause. But what exactly are

they applauding? Are they acknowledging what they perceive to be Häusermann's "extraordinary

ability" to imitate Jackson's unique dance movements in a "convincing" fashion? Or are they

applauding her creativity in interpreting the singer's performative style on her own terms,

regardless of how professional choreographers such as Bel might judge her performance?

The audience members' ambivalence towards Häusermann's performance seems to

epitomize the tension that undergirds the dance solos in *Disabled Theater*. On the one hand, there

is an expectation on the part of the spectators to be entertained by the dance performances that the

eleven cast members have choreographed on their own. On the other hand, some audience

members might have been genuinely concerned about the safety of Häusermann's fast-paced

spinning routine. In light of Häusermann's intense performance, there appears to be a tension

between Häusermann and her fellow performers' desire to be seen as artists (as evidenced by

their identification as professional actors through the German phrase, "Ich Bin Ein Schauspieler")

and the specter of an ableist ideology in normative culture that could potentially influence the audience members' interpretation of their dance solos.

In his review of the 2013 production of *Disabled Theater* at the Performa Festival in New York, Leon Hilton remarks that the dance solos that form the greater part of the performance "invite us [the spectators] to set aside the usual measures with which we are used to viewing and judging dance and other types of theatrical performance, particularly those associated with technical virtuosity and skill" (2014: 159). Hilton believes that the performance does not seek to "display how capable the performers are of 'overcoming' their disabilities" (2014: 159). Instead, he seems convinced that the show is "rather concerned with the expression of individual particularity through movement" (2014: 159). Hilton's use of the word "movement" in describing the potential that the performers possess when it comes to expressing themselves as unique individuals rather than a type of (disabled) being is quite telling, for it raises the following question: how easy or difficult would it be for the audience members watching the dance solos created by the actors from HORA to detract from an ableist perspective of dance performance, which tends to emphasize balance and precision in movement?

Scholars examining the relationship between disability and able-bodiedness have defined the concept of *ableism* in contrasting ways. Simi Linton makes the point that ableism "includes the idea that a person's abilities or characteristics are determined by disability or that people with disabilities as a group are inferior to non-disabled people" (1998: 9). Linton's definition rides on the assumption that "disability" and "ability" or "disabled" and "non-disabled" are absolute categories that are mutually exclusive of one another. Such a view, as Fiona Kumari Campbell contends, is problematic, for it appears to affirm "a schema that posits a particular worldview that either favours or disfavours disabled/able-bodied people as if each category is discrete, self-evident, and fixed" (2009: 6). In contrast to Linton's schematic distinction between "disabled"

and "non-disabled" people, Campbell believes that ableism sets up a binary dynamic between "able-bodied" and "disabled", with each category constituting the other as a mode of difference (2009: 6). And what reinforces this categorical difference between "able-bodied" and "disabled", as Campbell argues, is an ableist perspective that regards impairment or any form of disability as something negative that needs to be managed, remedied, or completely eradicated (2009: 5-6). In *Disabled Theater*, we see this impulse to manage, if not eradicate, any sign of disability when Noha Badir, who identifies himself as a person with Down syndrome, presents his dance solo.

Dancing Amid the Specter of Ableism

As the only performer who is an ethnic minority, Badir already stands out from the rest of the cast members. But rather than playing on ethnic stereotypes, he chooses to present himself as a trendy B-boy dancer. Donning a white singlet, brown cargo pants, a pair of soft canvas shoes, and a black-rimmed cap, Badir choreographs a sequence of break-dancing moves set to a fast-paced Latin dance track. Placing one hand on the ground as a pivot, he attempts to deliver a series of "flares", a technique that requires the dancer to move his or her legs around the body without letting them touch the ground. Watching him rotate his body on the floor like a gymnast performing on a pommel horse, the audience members break into spontaneous applause, with a few of them whistling in support of his spectacular act. For a brief moment, it seems as though Badir has been "freed" from his disability, having transformed into an agile dancer whose acrobatic manoeuvres wins him cheers and plaudits. But the audience members' enthusiastic reaction to Badir's physically demanding performance occurs amid the specter of an ableist ideology that is inclined to focus on his ability to execute complex break-dancing moves that might serve to mitigate the fact that he has a disability.

Instead of being regarded as a performing artist who happens to have Down syndrome, Badir's dance solo captivates the spectators who seem to enjoy a deep sense of affinity with his act. Commenting on the affective effects of *Disabled Theater* on the audience's perception of disability, Scott Wallin asserts that the production "achieves its force and audience interest by tacitly targeting the uncomfortable feelings many of us have about disability and then offering a sense of emancipation from these disabling perceptions and emotions" (2015: 64). Badir's energetic choreography frustrates the audience members' affective reactions towards disability performance with the implicit promise of releasing them from the astringent effects of these autonomic responses. As a result, the spectacle of Badir's dance solo reveals how "*Disabled Theater*," as Ashley McAskill observes, "consistently creates affective tensions by challenging audiences' emotional responses to watching disabled artists onstage" (2016: 212). Indeed, the audience members' fascination with Badir's "extraordinary ability" to break dance reaches a climactic moment when he attempts to execute a front-roll somersault routine on the ground. As Badir prepares to perform the somersault, a collective sense of anxiety fills the air. Some spectators place their hands on their mouths in nervous anticipation of what is to come. But as soon as the somersault is successfully completed, a spontaneous round of applause thunders through the theatre, as the audience erupt into cheers of "bravo" and "you rock". The contrast in the audience's affective reactions to the somersault routine reinforces Wallin's suggestion that *Disabled Theater* fascinates people who are unfamiliar with disability, as the performance accentuates "the feeling of normate discomfort and longing instead of any special characteristic of individual difference" (2015: 77). In turn, the audience's affirmative response to Badir's acrobatic performance reminds us of what McRuer terms "compulsory able-bodiedness", a concept that I have explored in the previous section.

According to McRuer's analysis of normative culture, "[a] system of compulsory able-bodiedness repeatedly demands that people with disabilities embody for others an affirmative answer to the unspoken question. Yes, but in the end, wouldn't you rather be more like me?" (2002: 93). Badir's break dancing routine, with its physically intense and risky manoeuvres, embodies for the audience members a tantalizing validation of what they perceive to be his desire to be more like their non-disabled selves. Perhaps it is on this basis that he is recognized for his "extraordinary ability" to perform the same dance moves as a young non-disabled dancer, a feat that somehow ameliorates the negative image associated with his disability and makes him appear to be slightly more "normal". And this quest to normalize Badir's image, despite the pheno-typical traits on his face that mark him as a person with Down syndrome, culminates in a final gesture that sees him throwing his black-rimmed cap towards the audience, an action that is commonly associated with hip-hop artists at live concerts.

Badir's deployment of popular break-dancing techniques complicates the audience members' experience of *Disabled Theater*. On the one hand, his sleek actions appear to satisfy their expectation of what break-dancing entails. On the other hand, his physical presence on the stage as a person with a visible disability seems to undermine the spectators' image of him as a skilful dancer. Even Bel, whose unseen presence dominates the performance, contends with this apparent paradox as he discusses his artistic vision for the show. In an interview with Gia Kourlas, Bel reveals that in his interactions with the performers from HORA, he "was looking for the presence of the performer, against the reproduction [of actions that have been rehearsed]" (2013). Bel's emphasis on presence and spontaneity lends a generative touch to the performance, as it suggests that the performers have not been instructed to perform in the way they do on the stage. Instead of following a predetermined script, the cast members are free to choreograph their

dance solos on their own terms. But despite the freedom accorded to the performers, Bel remains a dominant, albeit unseen, force throughout the performance.

In light of the translator Chris Weinheimer's repeated use of the instructive phrase "Bel asked the actors" throughout the show, it sounds as though the performers from HORA, like any theatre performer, are simply abiding by the machinations of their director. Despite Weinheimer's initial assurance that the actors have been given free rein to choreograph their dance solos on their own terms, the translator reveals that Bel had originally omitted four of the dance solos without consulting the respective cast members involved, only to change tack and readmit these same performances on the actual day of the show. The translator's role in mediating between Bel and the audience reveals the contrivance of the situation. As Scott Wallin observes, Gianni Blumer's complaint about the omission of his performance comes across as a "staged protest" that is incorporated "into the show's structure by having the translator announce Bel's consequent decision to allow the remaining four actors perform their solos" (2015: 74). It is possible to read this turn of events as a manifestation of what Lionel Abel terms "metatheatre," as Weinheimer's position as Bel's "spokesperson" implies a self-reflexive gesture through which the translator is "aware of [his] own theatricality" (1964: 61).[6] Perhaps the metatheatricality of Weinheimer's presence might thereby encourage the audience to reconsider the power dynamics between Bel and the actors. While it is not uncommon for theatre directors to assert substantial authority over casting decisions, the power dynamics that transpire between Bel and the cast members in regard to choosing which dance solos to include or exclude renders salient the power relations that persons with disabilities have to contend with on a daily basis. Often times, the decisions of non-disabled and neurotypical persons can inadvertently undermine the agency of persons with intellectual and physical disabilities, whose voices and opinions might be misunderstood or overlooked.

"Persons with mental disabilities," as Margaret Price observes, "are presumed not to be competent, nor understandable, nor valuable, nor whole. […] The failure to make sense, as measured against and by those with 'normal' minds, means a loss of personhood" (2011: 26). We could argue that Bel's decision to omit the four dance solos without consulting the actors beforehand devalues their sense-making capacities. At the same time, what the spoken sections in *Disabled Theater* reveal is that the performers from HORA possess varying levels of comfort with verbal communication. While performers such as Damien Bright and Julia Häusermann may feel confident expressing themselves with words, others like Tiziana Pagliaro seem to possess a subdued sense of rhetorical authority, as they grapple with the challenges of verbal expression. Yet, amid the specter of ableism, the presence of persons with intellectual and physical disabilities as creative performers with contrasting styles of self-expression also reminds us of the need to expose and critique the ableist assumptions that continue to underpin the practice of spectatorship in the arts.

It is worth noting that *Disabled Theater*, as Yvonne Schmidt informs us, marks the start of an ongoing conversation about disability and performance. Schmidt is a scholar of theatre and disability studies at Zurich University of the Arts who regards "theatre-making as a social process" (2015: 228-9). In keeping with this philosophy, she has spent several years working with Theater HORA on various projects, including "DisAbility on Stage", a practice-led research initiative, and the experimental performance project, *Freie Republik HORA*. As an artistic collaboration, *Freie Republik HORA* is, according to Schmidt, "a critical response to *Disabled Theater*, whose examination of the conditions of disabled performers' autonomy and authorship it continues and takes one step further" (2016: 228). It is therefore important to note the inter-relatedness of HORA's projects, which seek to challenge the structural conventions, social dynamics, and affective tensions of theatre performance. In the Toronto production of *Disabled*

Theater, we encounter the HORA actors in the making of crip performance, as they fashion a

series of dance solos that uncover new modes of embodiment and signification. Consequently,

this collective art of making crip performance urges us to consider how multiple modes of

physical and cognitive capacities can co-exist in a generative relationship that is conducive for

challenging ableism in contemporary society.

Notes

1. Jim Sinclair introduced the term "neurotypical" as an alternative descriptor to what is popularly referred to as the 'normal' mental functioning of persons without disabilities. According to Sinclair, "Neurotypical (abbreviated NT), used either as an adjective or a noun, refers to people who do not have autistic-type brains" (1998). Even though Sinclair uses the term in specific reference to individuals *without* autism, I am using it here to describe the cognitive functioning of the general normative population of a given society.

2. A public call for Toronto-based performers with developmental or intellectual disabilities to collaborate with Elber and HORA's performers on a 5-day workshop that takes participants through the creative process for *Disabled Theater* states explicitly that "artists with physical disabilities are not the target participants" for this event ("Harbourfront Centre – World Stage 2015"). Such exclusionary language discriminates between different forms of disability, which undermines the message of inclusivity that HORA propagates.

3. Barba claims that the performer who is "present" on the stage is capable of attracting the spectator's attention before any message is transmitted through speech and gesture. This is what he calls the "scenic bios", which is the element that opens up the possibility for the spectators to interpret the energy of the performer.

4. In *Revels in Madness: Insanity in Medicine and Literature*, Allen Thiher notes that the Hippocratic medical corpus of Ancient Greece regards the human body as "unified" in the somatic sense that sets the somatically unified body in dialectic opposition to the psyche as a unified concept. Thiher explains that the Hippocratic corpus presents the somatic-psychic distinction between the unified body and the unified concept of the psyche not as a subject-object duality but as a means by which to speak rationally about the unseen "mind" and the highly visible and physical body. In turn, the somatically unified body and the conceptually unified

psyche are mutually "unified in logos" (2009: 16). As such, any disruption of the unity and coherence of the body or the psyche would undermine the "normative" conception of body and mind in rational terms.

5. According to Linda Hutcheon, ironic inversion is a feature of parody that differentiates the imitation from the original object of parody. "Parody," she contends, "is a form of imitation, but imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text" (1985: 6). In other words, parody is at once respectful and critical of the parodied object.

6. According to theatre scholar Lionel Abel, who coined the term "metatheatre" in 1963, a performance is considered metatheatrical when the characters are "aware of their own theatricality" (1964: 61). In this sense, "metatheatre" describes those theatre performances that self-reflexively allude to the artificiality of their production.

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