

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association
Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

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Review: Kirsty Johnston, *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*. Montreal: McGill University Press, 2012. ISBN 978-0-7735-3994-2.

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The literary, cinematographic and theatrical landscape has long been laden with a disproportionately large number of negative depictions of people with disabilities. In some cases, a mutant, corrupt or morally suspicious cripple has come to signify personality flaws or problems a person needs to overcome. In other cases, a deaf, dumb or blind character has come to signify the sort of superior insight that comes only to those willing to struggle to overcome their own suffering. None of these images capture the physical, social or political realities of people with cognitive or corporeal differences.

In this context, it is perhaps not surprising that stage depictions of disability have proven ripe fodder for analysis, repetition and repudiation, not just in disability studies, or disability studies of art, culture and communications, but in the stage practices of performers, playwrights and directors with disabilities in Canada and around the world.

In *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*, Kirsty Johnston provides a detailed picture of the aesthetic, professional and activist practices of performers, playwrights, directors and companies who have worked in disability theatre in Canada over the past three decades.

From the outside, Johnston acknowledges the complexity of this undertaking. The terms disability theatre, disabled theatre, disabled theatre makers and theatre makers with disabilities

are all highly contested. This means the practices these terms cover are “neither easy to define nor homogeneous in [their] expression” (xv). The terms cover a range of different ideological, aesthetic and professional positions in a terrain that includes representations of disability in dominant theatre traditions, the professional theatre making practices of people with disabilities, the live, performance and public art practices of people with disabilities, along with day-to-day and therapeutic practices in which disabled people take part (5). They also cover a host of different congenital, acquired, cognitive and corporeal differences, variously identified or defined as psychological impairments, physical impairments, social impairments, or, as in some Deaf communities, simply a difference in culture. Accordingly, in her attempt to “make sense” of disability theatre in *Stage Turns*, Johnson “take[s] snapshots of important companies, productions and moments in the emergence of disability theatre in Canada but make[s] no claims to comprehensive coverage or a group portrait, if one were even possible” (xv).

In scoping her study in *Stage Turns*, Johnston limits her survey to professional theatre makers who identify as disabled, and to professional productions in traditional, stage-spectator divided theatres (12). The warning about variability notwithstanding, Johnson focuses on a number of features that are common to the disability theatre discussed through the book. Most of the theatre makers Johnson discusses acknowledge an activist agenda within their aesthetic practices (5). As a result, most are conscious of the links between their practice and the identity politics of disability activists and disability studies scholars that emerged almost contemporaneously in a Canadian context (3). The majority are committed to positioning people with disabilities on stage and in the driver’s seat in the theatre, as makers, not simply subject matter or spectators (3). They

position themselves as part of what Johnson calls an “international movement” (4) of theatre makers with disabilities.

Allowing these features as typical of disability theatre in Canada over the last three decades, Johnson situates the emergence of disability theatre squarely in the context of an increasing commitment to disability rights advocacy (6), and a concurrent upsurge of interest in disability studies and disability arts (9), since the 1980s. For Johnson, this “movement” started with the rise of disability advocacy in the US, UK, Canada and beyond after the United Nations Year of the Disabled Person in 1981, and its subsequent impact on Canadian legislature in the 1980s, the Americans with Disabilities Act in the US (1990), and the Disability Discrimination Act in the UK (1995) (7-8). “Tired of discrimination and claiming disability as a positive identity,” Johnson says, “people with disabilities insist on the pertinence of disability to the human condition, on the value of disability as a form of diversity and on the power of disability as a critical concept for thinking about / human identity in general” (9-10). The nexus of political, activist and aesthetic advocacy since this time has, Johnson says, become mutually productive in terms of teasing out the influence of medical, social and minority models of disability on people’s lives, and negotiating continuing challenges in balancing physical, psychological and societal factors in the oppression of people with disabilities (9-11). Tracing this territory – together with differences between a theatrical approach that studies disability in plays and a performance studies approach that analyses disability as everyday social drama (12) – Johnson’s introduction is succinct, noting uncertainties and conflicts inherent in the field and how they inform this study of the theatre without turning the book into a rehearsal of political and philosophical positions in a complex field.

Having framed the field of inquiry, Johnson begins the first half of *Stage Turns* – focusing on histories – with a short survey of the landscape as she finds it: the emergence of disability theatre ensembles in the 1980s onwards; of festivals producing disability theatre ensembles in the 1990s; of government, research and educational reports on the participation of disabled people in Canadian culture in the 1990s and 2000s; and, most recently, additional Canada Council support for artists working in this area. She notes the influence of Theatre Terrific, Realwheels, and the initial disability arts festival KickstART in Canada’s theatre and festival city Vancouver. She also notes the influence of the Glenville Players, Workman Arts, Friendly Spike Theatre Band, festivals like the Abilities Arts Festival, and facilitative agencies like Picasso Pro in Toronto. Finally, turning to Calgary, she discusses the impact of Stage Left, MoMo Mixed Ability Dance Theatre, Inside Out Integrated Theatre and the Balancing Acts Festival. The community, union and working class origins of many of these theatre companies, whether concentrating singularly on disabilities or later on cross-disability communities, is clear. Together, they have connected as part of a national – though not nationalistic or institutionalised (86) – field of disability theatre. “[M]ost companies,” Johnson says, “have faced similar core debates over the balance between training and artistry, amateur involvement and professionalism, fundraising and partnerships, disability identity and politics” (172) as they have grown. Their commitment to inclusivity, professionalism and a distinctive voice has led to a burgeoning landscape of disability theatre. At the same time, it has led to tensions as companies balance the many aesthetic, ideological and community agendas at play in their productions.

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, Johnson looks further at Workman Arts, Theatre Terrific, and then the festivals such as KickstART, Balancing Acts Festival, and the Madness and Arts Festival. For all that these companies and festivals have shaped disability theatre in Canada, and created significant productions, they have drawn attention to artistic, ideological and financial faultiness, Johnson says. Whilst they provide for more, and sometimes more permanent, modes of production, they tend to force greater separation between disability theatre and theatre for people with disabilities, for instance. Different people and different representational practices have come into conversation, Johnson demonstrates, but given the investment in human rights, identity and ideology at the heart of the practices, people have not always agreed on what constitutes ethical, effective and impactful practice.

Johnson continues to unpack these challenges in the latter half of *Stage Turns*, focusing on the stage and aesthetic strategies of specific performances to tease out tensions in the “remarkably diverse” “range of themes, genres, performance styles, dramaturgies and production methods” (3) that characterize disability theatre in Canada.

In Chapter 6, Johnson discusses two different approaches to telling a story about people with disabilities, their families, their communities, and the traumas they deal with. First, she considers Stage Left’s *Mercy Killing*, a play about a father who kills his daughter who has cerebral palsy. Then, she considers Realwheel’s *Skydive*, about what happens after one of a pair of brothers is injured in a skydiving accident. Johnson examines the way these two very different productions work to move past stereotypes, and to some degree past naturalistic storytelling, stage design and media too, in order to speak to the experience, everyday life choices, concerns and cultural

representation of people with disabilities in sophisticated ways (111). In Chapter 7, Johnson discusses Workman Arts' *Vincent*, in which family, friends and acquaintances talk about an absent schizophrenic character, Vincent. In Chapter 8, Johnson turns her attention to two productions by Theatre Terrific, *The Glass Box*, in which performers play sex symbols in the framework of a gameshow and answers about their private and sex lives score points within the clinical glass box set, and *The Secret Son*, about a school for students with 'mental retardation' which brings together multiple, more realistic themes about disability, identity, institutionalisation, and the medical gaze.

Throughout these chapters, Johnson continually highlights these companies' commitment to staging stories, memories and images meaningful to people with disabilities, by people with disabilities, for people with disabilities, their allies, and the public at large. There is, she notes, a connection with the "nothing about us without us" (62) rhetoric that came to characterize political and activist work by people with disabilities during the same period when these disability theatre companies came into being. In Chapter 9, Johnson pursues this issue further through a comparative analysis of three different plays about people with disabilities presented during the Cultural Olympiad associated with the recent Vancouver Winter Olympics. In focus are William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* about Helen Keller which was produced without the presence of disabled artists, Dennis Foon's *Rick: The Rick Hansen Story* about a living legend before and after an accident and also without the presence of disabled artists, and *Spine*, a play about human-technology interaction which did include the presence of artists with disabilities. Johnson considers the degree to which these productions incorporate people with disabilities in

conception, production and performance, the way this determined their aesthetics and agendas, and the reviews and spectator responses to them.

Stage Turns enlivens debate about who speaks, when, and how, and about the cultural attachment to using disability as a signifier of deficiency, fear, struggle, strength or overcoming. In this sense, *Stage Turns* is more than a survey and an interesting summary of practices that Canadian artists and scholars in particular will find useful, in much the same way that an anthology such as Victoria Ann Lewis's recent *Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights* is useful to US artists and scholars. *Stage Turns* offers a compelling picture not just of disability theatre in Canada, but also of the difficulties in accessing stages, stage training and receptive audiences that some disability theatre companies in Canada continue to face (xiv). The discussion delivers a call to read between the lines, think, and react to the provocations, problems and successes Johnson captures in *Stage Turns* beyond Canada into one's own cultural contexts. Indeed, the readability of the text, and the passion with which Johnson recounts her engagement with work that has, she says, challenged her 'understanding of humanity' in exiting, intellectual and emotional ways, means the text is likely to be of interest to anyone interested in depictions of disability in theatre or in other cultural spheres. In this sense, the greatest success of the text is not so much its summary of a significant field so much as its readability, rigour and insight, and its ability to encourage those of us working in other contexts to consider our own dealings with disability in new ways.