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Renegotiating Theatrical Space through Learning Disabled Theatre

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Renegotiating Theatrical Space through Learning-Disabled Theatre**Tony McCaffrey**

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Abstract

This article considers how learning-disabled theatre, and disability more generally, can provoke a creative re-examination of what is meant by performing space. It does so by comparing the creative struggles and affordances of a disabled woman in a constrained space revealed in a documentary film made in Christchurch, New Zealand (2024) with the theatricalization of such creativity and constraint by renowned Australian learning-disabled theatre company Back to Back in *Super Discount* (2013). The article then goes on to trace the development of Back to Back Theatre's theatrical aesthetic of indeterminacy with particular reference to the spatial relationship between performance and audience, disabled and non-disabled. This includes the use of a site-specific reversal of audience and spectators in *small metal objects* (2005), the blurring of theatrical space in the Ganzfeld of *Food Court* (2009), the spatial coup de théâtre of *Lady Eats Apple* (2011), the confounding of *theatron* and agora in *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes* (2019) and the promise but ultimate foreclosure of a space called home for disabled performers in *Multiple Bad Things* (2024). This analysis of and response to spatiality in Back to Back's oeuvre is then put in the context of the author's twenty years of practical and theoretical research with learning-disabled collaborators of Different Light Theatre in Christchurch, New Zealand. A practical account is then given of some examples of working with the spatio-temporal distinctiveness of learning-disabled theatre artists, in terms of the *kairos* or good timing of theatrical performance and the physical "ownership" of the space by the performers. The meaning of performing space is then expanded to include the spaces of collaboration in which the company has more recently participated. The article concludes by affirming the social and creative benefits of including learning-disabled artists whilst emphasising the need to appreciate *both* the intransigence and potential for the beauty of disability in performing space.

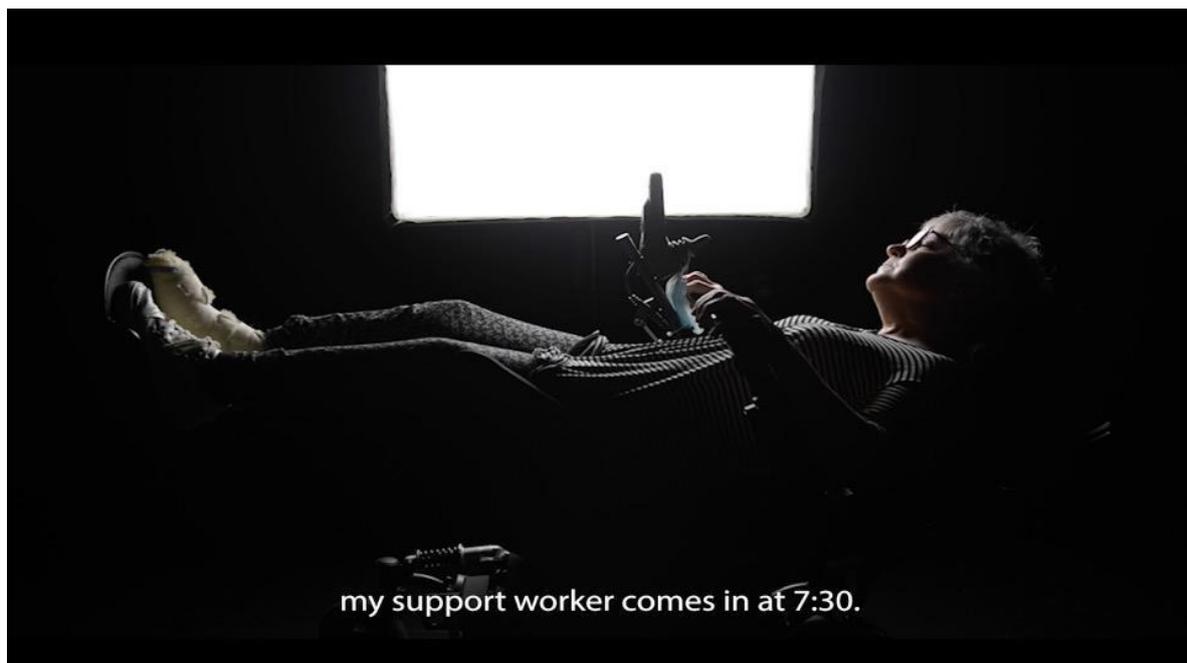
Keywords: Learning-disabled theatre, performing space, performance and audience

Disability and the Imaginary Space of Performance

This is Mary Miller (Figure 1), a woman with cerebral palsy who uses a motorized wheelchair. She lives in the Alpine Village Retirement Home in Christchurch, New Zealand. She is also a member of the disability performance group Many Hats. The image is from the group's 2024 film, *A Few Minutes of Everyday Ordinary Life*. When asked what life event she wanted filmed, she chose getting out of bed. To do this she needs the assistance of a carer who arrives at 7.30am and helps move her legs. In the film we see her repeated, faltering efforts to get off the bed and into a walking frame. All the while Miller talks to the camera about her elaborate process. Miller's inhabiting of the world shrinks to her body's hard won but small victory in eventually raising herself onto a walking frame, and sitting in a chair.

Figure 1

Mary Miller in A Few Minutes of Everyday Ordinary Life (2024). Image courtesy of Paul McCaffrey, Many Hats Films.



Her morning routine, like her life, is subject to what Dokumaci terms the “shrinkage” of chronic pain and debility, “the constraints, failures and losses” (Dokumaci, 2023 p.7) of impairment, the intransigence of her disability to cope in the spatio-temporal environment. And yet something else emerges in Miller's daily struggle. To cite Dokumaci: (2023)

As actors relate to the stage and its props within the imaginative layer of performance, they transform this materiality into an elsewhere and an else-when through their actions. I argue that the same transformation takes place in the everyday lives of disabled people, which are lived within a shrinking world of

possibilities...when the world's offerings become unreachable in states of extreme deprivation and debilitation, it is exactly the imaginary space of performance that opens up. (p.8)

The event-space of Miller's actions is subject to the constraints of shrinkage but provokes her creativity of movement within the confining space. This represents a choreography of affordances, improvised movement that allows disabled people creative ways of inhabiting a world not designed for them.

Back to Back Theatre: Staging Disability in the Theatrical Space

Back to Back Theatre is a world renowned Australian learning-disabled theatre company. In *Super Discount* (2013), Sarah Mainwaring, a performer with an acquired brain injury whose voice and movements are characterised by tremors and palsy-like shaking performs a simple goal-oriented action similar to Miller's: putting a microphone back into a stand. We see her attempts toward the completion of this action and the involuntary movements that, despite herself, take her away from it. Her action calls attention to itself: pointing to her inability, but also to the theatricality of that inability. While Mary Miller performs creatively in spite of the shrinkage of her physical disabilities and a disabling environment, Back to Back bring "shrinkage" to the stage. Sarah Mainwaring's struggle in the small but agonisingly untraversable space between microphone and stand represents a theatricalization of the constrained event-space of disability.

Back to Back Theatre's unique deployment of spatiality is present throughout their oeuvre. This includes *Multiple Bad Things* (2024) in which members of the core ensemble inhabit a theatrical space that appears uniquely hostile to them. The set incorporates a jumble of scaffolding poles blocking their access to movement. The actors perform awkward, elaborate choreography to avoid the poles. They also struggle to assemble the scaffolding poles into some kind of structure. The intent of this strategy is revealed in a coup de théâtre at the end of the performance when the structure is flipped through 90 degrees to reveal the form of a house: roof, door, windows, picket fence. The production's narrative has consisted of arguments between the performers over their differences. These differences appear to be resolved in this construction of a space of inclusion. The frame of the house that rises up and appears before us is, however, revealed to be no more than the abstraction of a house, the mirage of a "normal" home. The production implies that however much the disabled performers struggle to access the domestic space it will never be hospitable to them.

The company has over many years questioned the spatiality of the performer/audience, disabled/non-disabled relationship. In *small metal objects* (2005) the audience is located in seats in the middle of a public space in which it becomes as much a spectacle as the

performers. The audience is atomized, each spectator provided with individual headsets, through which they hear the arrival of the performers before they see them. The performers enter the public space surrounded by people going about their business. Like many disabled people, they are at once highly visible - marked by the difference of their appearance or movement - and invisible – discounted in the daily rush of public space.

In *Food Court* (2009) the spatiality of the proscenium stage is rendered blurred, at times indiscernible, through the use of scrims and lighting. Figures appear hazy and indistinct in a theatricalization of Turrell's concept of the Ganzfeld (Grehan and Eckersall, 2013. p.242)

In *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* (2011) this aesthetic of indeterminacy is manifest in the switching between three levels of narrative – the mythical: the epic tale of Ganesh and the swastika; the historical: a narrative of Dr Mengele's fascination with twins, freaks, and abnormalities; and the self-reflexive narrative of the company "devising" and "rehearsing" the current performance text. The theatrical space is repeatedly deconstructed and reconstructed, never certain.

In *Lady Eats Apple* (2016) – a title referencing the mythical space of the Garden of Eden – the audience enters the theatre through a large plastic blow-up structure. The discomfiting of the audience culminates in a full-blown coup de théâtre when, later, the blow-up structure deflates to reveal the audience sitting on the stage of the theatre, the performers up in the gods.

In *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes* (2019) there is a confounding of the agora and the *theatron* in an unspecified "public meeting." The production radically undermines what is meant by public space and having a voice. The performers challenge the company's own use of captioning – language deferred in space and time: from mouth to back of the stage. They do not want to have the difference of their speech glossed over for the easy consumption of a non-disabled audience.

Different Light Theatre and Takiwatanga – to Each their own Space and Time

My response to Back to Back's work is informed by my own 20 years of collaboration with the learning-disabled artists of Different Light Theatre in Christchurch, New Zealand. I have become aware of the difficulty for such performers accessing the conventional "kairos" or good timing of rhetoric, the unconventionality of the performers' ownership of the space, and the need to accommodate different temporalities and spatialities in performance. The Māori word for autism is *takiwatanga* – to each their own space and time. There is a need to let time take time – to accommodate what disabled scholars' term "crip time" and Margaret Price (2015) "crip space-time":

What then is crip space time? infusing the disruptive potential of disability into normative spaces and interactions. (Price, 2015, p. 269)

Making Spaces for Learning-Disabled Theatre

Over 20 years, Different Light has moved from the practice of community theatre, dramatic and post-dramatic theatre into site-specific and immersive performances, in short, into different spaces. This has recently included academic space - an online presentation at the Performance Philosophy Problems conference at the University of the Arts, Helsinki. After the New Zealand lockdowns, the company performed in-person for the first time in three years at the University of Auckland. An account of the difficulties of this re-staging forms the basis of a jointly authored article in *Performance Philosophy Journal* (Gibson, J. et al, 2024). Different Light performers have also worked in collaboration with the degree students of NASDA (National Academy of Singing and Dramatic Art) on a production of *Faust. Us* (2023), loosely based on Marlowe's text. Disabled and non-disabled performers shared rehearsal, backstage, and communal meal spaces. In all of these projects different aesthetic, political and affective spaces opened up affirming the benefit of accommodating the creativity of learning-disabled artists.

Different Light are currently heading towards another difficult space with the project "*Ancient Greek Theatre and Intellectual Disability*" a proposed festival of learning-disabled theatre in Athens/Epidauros in collaboration with Margarita VTC (Athens), Back to Back, Teatr 21 (Warsaw), Créahm (Brussels), Theatre HORA (Zurich) and Blue Apple and HiJinx (UK). We are all trying to find spaces of collaboration - in the texts, in learning about each other, in online dialogue, and in the many unforeseen felicities and epiphanies of these encounters. The paradox is that in seeking spatial expansion for learning disabled theatre in international collaboration there is still, crucially, a need to accommodate, acknowledge, and celebrate the difference of disability, including the "constraints, failures, and losses" (Dokumaci, 2024, p.7). From the daily struggles and scant victories of Mary Miller to the global collaborations of learning-disabled theatre we need to acknowledge *both* the intransigence and the hard-won beauty and dignity of disability in performance space.

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