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Differentiated Bodies, Dysfluency, Anarchitecture: Disabling Performing Space

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Abstract

The article considers how recent work in disability-led theory and theatre practice provokes a radical re-examination of conventional assumptions about disability and the event-space of performance. The article argues that the presence of disabled artists and the development of disability arts culture challenges boundaries and binaries of spatiality and performance. Disability brings an excess to the performer-audience relationship that problematises conventions of aesthetic distance and that emphasises affective, somatic and gestural exchanges as shown in the responses to Felipe Monteiro's performance *O problema e porque sou lucido?!*

The article then draws on how these excess manifests in theatre-making, drawing on the practical experience of working with Different Light Theatre performer Glen Burrows and his deteriorating health conditions and how these blur the lines between the discipline of performance and the need for care and support.

The article then cites Joshua Saint Pierre's articulation of dysfluency, a term he uses to valorise the perceived errors and missteps in spoken communication of those who stammer and stutter as a critique of the fluency of communicative, and by extension neoliberal, capital (Saint Pierre, 2022). This critique is then compared to Jack Halberstam's recent thinking on transness, which like Saint Pierre's thinking on disability, does not merely wish to replicate the boundaries that would render transness a vehicle of capitalism but rather to generate unimagined lives and structures beyond these boundaries and mechanistic economic models.

The article then attempts to relate the somatic and conceptual framings of Monteiro, Saint Pierre and Halberstam to specific examples drawn from the performance practice of Back to Back Theatre and Different Light Theatre in which these theoretical underpinnings appear to be embodied in the practical yet poetic spaces of disability performance. The article concludes that disability-led thinking, culture and practice generates new as yet unimagined possibilities for relationality and relationships.

Keywords: disability culture and performance; aesthetics and access; critical disability studies; politics and aesthetics of disability; radical inclusion and access.

Differentiated Bodies, Dysfluency, Anarchitecture

How does disability performance enable a radical reconfiguration of what Dorita Hannah terms 'event-space'? Disability is itself a social, situational, spatial construction that includes the marginalised, pathologised spaces to which disability is normally confined. Disability performance opens up new possibilities for the event-spaces of theatre, public space, and the conceptual and relational space between disabled and non-disabled bodies. Drawing on the work of Felipe Monteiro, Joshua Saint Pierre and Jack Halberstam, I wish to consider how disability thinking, culture and performance provoke a radical reconfiguration of theatrical, conceptual and social spaces and boundaries.

Disability Exceeds the Boundaries of the Performer-Audience Relationship

This is Brazilian disabled performance artist and scholar Felipe Monteiro.

In 'On Performance and Disability: Differentiated Bodies and the Aesthetics of Invasion' Monteiro (Monteiro & Pagnes, 2024) writes that his 'differentiated body' is:

affected by severe progressive spinal muscular amyotrophy (SMA), a genetic neurodegenerative disease that affects the anterior horn of the spinal cord. A progressive degeneration of motor neurons occurs. Due to the SMA and severe scoliosis, I have no autonomous locomotion (p.91).

Figure 1

Felipe Monteiro presenting a paper by Zoom in the Performance and Disability Working Group at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference, University of the Philippines, Manila, 2024. Screenshot by Tony MCCaffrey (2024).

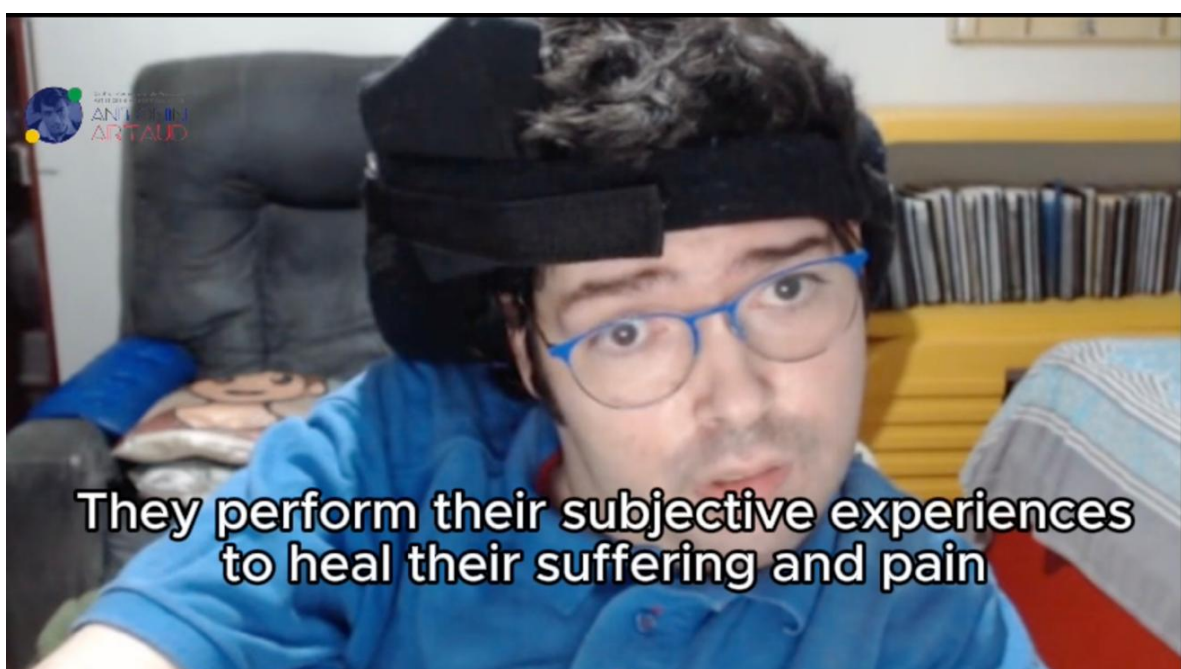


Figure 2

Felipe Monteiro in the performance O problema é porque sou lucido?! Taken from TDR: The Drama Review 69 (1) 2025.



His last performance in 2018 was *O problema é porque sou lúcido?!* The title is both a question and an exclamation. The translation of the Portuguese could mean either “Is the problem because I am lucid?” or “The problem is that I am lucid!” or both. In his understated and poignant words in ‘We Do Not Need Pity. We Need Opportunities: Considerations of a Performer with [a] Differentiated Body’ he explains:

I chose this title because sometimes I disagree with the care the professionals attending me at home give. They often want me to be docile and submissive. A while ago one of them said I am a problem because I am lucid and outspoken (Monteiro & Pagnes, p.102).

In the performance Monteiro lay motionless on a hospital stretcher. He breathed through a ventilation machine. He used the sound of his heartbeat recorded from an echocardiogram. Audience members sat on benches or approached the stretcher to interact somehow. Some put their head on his chest to listen to his heartbeat and touched his hands gently.

Some... watched me closely and asked if they could touch me. As time passed, it became evident that spectators had more sensory reactions than rational responses. (p.103).

The space between performer and audience shrinks to the haptic or perhaps to the affect passing between and within bodies, similar to what Erin Brannigan (2011) described as a “sensory and bodily exchange as a type of gestural exchange — a response that occurs between the performer’s bodymind and the viewer’s bodymind, and vice versa” (p.77). Monteiro’s last performance was in 2018, the deterioration in his condition preventing him from performing. He continues to write. We correspond online. In an acknowledgement of his lifelong love for, and engagement with, the work of Antonin Artaud, I would say that he is ‘signalling through the flames’ of his deteriorating condition.

Disability Exceeds the Boundaries of Theatre Making

In my own work with disabled ensemble Different Light in Christchurch we are experiencing the deteriorating condition of Glen Burrows. He is a motorised wheelchair user with cerebral palsy who has been working with the company for seventeen years, touring performances in New Zealand, Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. Recently, in addition to his other conditions, he has had a cancerous tumour removed, he has seen an increase in what he calls ‘sparking’—epileptic fits—but, perhaps more devastating for him, he now needs to be fed through a stoma. In the 2017 Different Light performance *I belong in the Past and the Future and the Very Now* other members of the company concluded the performance with a response in performance to an incident in rehearsal in which Burrows’ ‘sparking’ was so severe that we called an ambulance. I quote from the script devised by the performers:

BEN: Hold on here comes an ambulance

JOSIE: Real life drama at Different Light drama

GLEN: Isaac

ISAAC: I’ll go with you to the hospital

BEN: How much pain do you feel on a scale of one to ten. Ten being your legs being cut off.

GLEN: Ten

PETER: Glen says ten

ANDREW: Glen is not a piece of theatre

JOSIE: Glen is not a few minutes of theatre

PETER: Glen is like a computer game.

A computer game you need to experience
over months

or years

or possibly

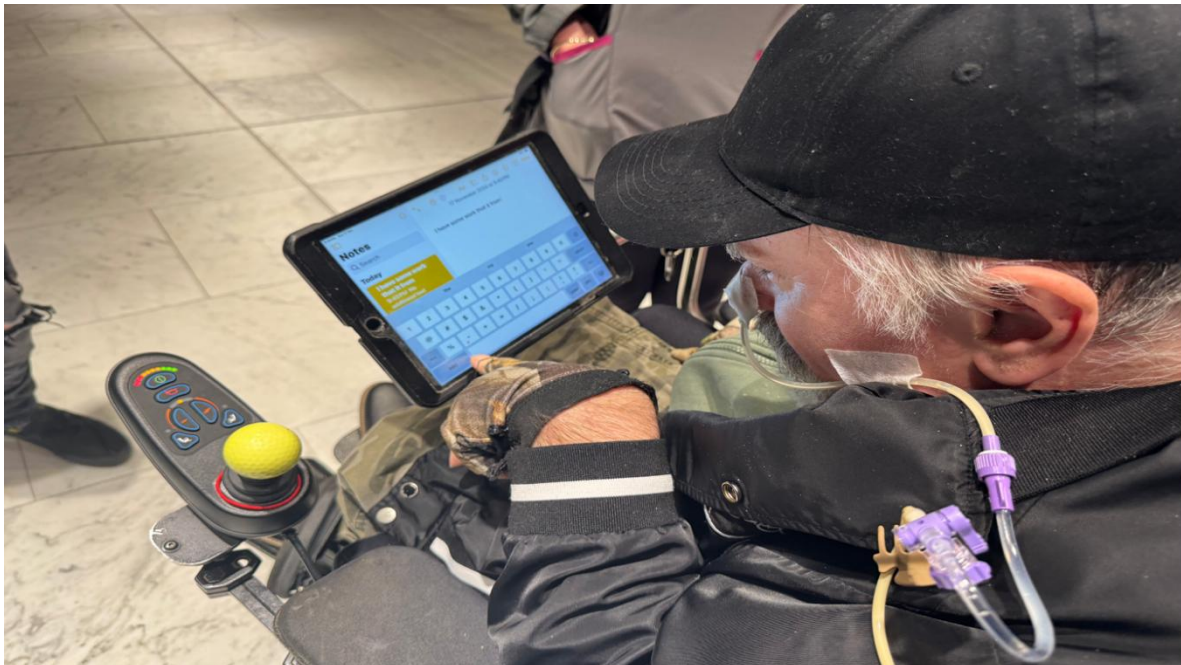
your whole life

Figure 3

Glen Burrows in the foreground with devil wings on his wheelchair, with the cast of Faust. Us, Different Light Theatre and NASDA. Photograph by Tony McCaffrey, 2023.

**Figure 4**

Glen Burrows in his motorised wheelchair typing on an iPad, the tube attached to his stoma is visible. Photograph by T. McCaffrey, 2025.



Felipe Monteiro chooses to expose his vulnerability in a conscious take on performance art practices of illness and pain through a disability lens. For Glen Burrows we needed to let a different approach emerge: one that would not undermine his sense of himself as a New Zealand male for whom the quality of staunchness and tight-lipped grip on emotion is

primary. We continue to seek to include him in-person in the rehearsal room, or online or even in the hospital room when we are allowed. We hold a space for him, a space in transition and transformation for Different Light as it was and is for Felipe Monteiro.

Disability Exceeds Economic Boundaries of Communication and Representation

Disabled scholar Joshua Saint Pierre (2002) in *Cheap Talk: Disability and the Politics of Communication* coins the term 'dysfluency' for the speech of those including himself diagnosed as having speech impediments, stammering and stuttering:

dysfluency represents the erasure of a communicative subject and erosion of communicative capital (...) Dysfluency is interesting not as a case study of breakdown but as a disclosure of the asymmetries of power and the declensions of freedom that structure our collective environments of speech (p.17).

I would like to adapt Saint-Pierre's term 'dysfluency' from its purely verbal and speech-related provenance to encompass the particular temporality of learning disabled performance. Dysfluency in this context would describe stammering, uncertainty in occupying the stage space as well as stammering and difficulties of articulation. All of these particularities of learning disabled performance reconfigure the concept of theatrical *kairos* or good timing. Learning disabled performers step in and out of the conventions of theatrical performance in interesting, challenging and radical ways.

Disability Exceeds Binaries

Saint Pierre's notion of the erosion of communicative capital chimes interestingly with recent writings of Jack Halberstam on transness. In lectures delivered in person and online in April 2025 as a prelude to the forthcoming book *Anarchitecture After Everything* Halberstam (2025) writes:

(...) anarchitecture delivers a version of transness that does not seek to become a new vehicle for capital, it offers an alternative to the process by which once-excluded groups become new markets. Rather than becoming a new platform for neoliberal marketing, the unbuilding of the body opens onto a critique of capital, real estate and the realities that subtend them. And finally, trans bodies, like the buildings that Gordon Matta-Clark opened up, represent an unworld within which representational systems can and do come apart. The trans body that can be glimpsed through Matta-Clark's anarchitectural experiments is not figure but ground, not body but landscape, not building but demolition site.

Saint Pierre and Halberstam and, I would claim, disability performance, are all trying to find alternative paths of inclusion and access that do not seek merely to replace a marginalised, excluded self with the entitled, atomised, narcissistic, but ultimately disempowered self of late, last gasp capitalism.

Figure 5

Scene from *Multiple Bad Things* performed by Back to Back Theatre (2024). Used with permission.



Disability and Placelessness

Disability brings to performance the possibility of a new and different sensorium. Disabled bodyminds bring to performing space the shadows of other spaces: confined, 'theatrical' spaces such as the operating theatre, the medical lecture theatre, the segregated institution, the sanatorium, the asylum, the freak show and the clinical spaces of eugenics. They also bring the troubling and unbuilding of spaces we assume to be 'normal'. They also bring the possibility of speculative future spaces.

Multiple Bad Things (2024) is a performance by world-renowned Back to Back Theatre in which learning disabled, neurodivergent 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 an 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 right at the end of the performance when the structure is flipped through 90 degrees to reveal what they have been

building: the form of a house with roof, door, windows and picket fence. The production's narrative consists of arguments between the performers over the differences between their perceived disabilities. 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 of the normal it will never be hospitable to them. This is for me a moment of theatrical anarchitecture. The building is revealed to be unbuilding and a cry for a completely different accommodation for disability in performing space.

Figure 6

Ben Morris, Isaac Tait and Glen Burrows in *Still Lives* at Riley Smith Hall, Leeds (2012). Photograph by Stuart Lloyd-Harris, Different Light Theatre.



Finally, I wish to turn to *Still Lives* (2012) by Different Light Theatre, an account of three disabled young men, Glen Burrows, Ben Morris and Isaac Tait, and their experience of the Christchurch earthquakes of 2010 and 2011. These quakes were an involuntary anarchitecture of public space. In their wake, despite the opportunity to rebuild the city to include access for all, the 'recovery' of 'disaster capitalism' (Klein, 2007) left them, and so many other disabled people, behind. In the final scene they imagined flying on Glen Burrows' wheelchair above the shattered buildings and the shattered promises of inclusion. Flying where? To a placelessness that they choose.

Disability culture and theatre challenge conventional boundaries and spatiality — of disability and of representative systems. The potential of differentiated bodies, dysfluency and anarchitecture is to generate a 'disabling' of performing space: to deconstruct binaries

of non-disabled and disabled, of performance and audience, and to create a radical placelessness out of which new relationalities and relationships might emerge.

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