**Disability, care and debility: radically reframing the collaboration between non-disabled and learning disabled theatre makers.**

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In this paper, I would like to examine the aesthetic frames and the performed relationships that are constructed in two distinct but comparable performances. Both of these productions are performed by well-established companies that work primarily with learning disabled actors: *Disabled Theater*, a 2012 production by the Swiss company Theater Hora; and *Contained*, a 2015 production by British company Mind the Gap. In each case, the performance ensemble worked with a non-disabled guest director external to the company: Jérôme Bel in the case of *Disabled Theater* and Alan Lyddiard in the case of *Contained.*

The devised shows that resulted from these collaborations are markedly different in tone, structure and content. *Contained* is built on autobiographical stories told by the cast members, offering accounts of personal experiences and relationships that encompass struggle, achievement, pain, joy, victory, defeat and resilience, even within single narratives. The performers’ disabilities have particular significance in some stories, but not in others, though they usually inflect the perspective of the storyteller. Overall, however, rather than being about disability the show opens up the complex layers of human experience as it has been, and is, lived by these particular performers. Structurally, the stories are interwoven with each other throughout the two acts of the performance, and also interspersed with original songs, written by cast member Jez Colborne and performed live by the ensemble, dance sequences, and video segments, that variously involve pre-recorded footage, live feed and green screen technology. The show opens with a relatively bare stage, apart from a row of chairs for the cast and a microphone. Throughout the show, the cast themselves stage manage, assembling and disassembling the technical equipment as required.

*Disabled Theater* also begins with a bare stage apart from a row of chairs and a single microphone. I should perhaps confess at this point that, while I have seen *Contained* live on two occasions, I have only seen *Disabled Theater* once as a video recording, and my observations are based on this recording, which does not present the full stage action: the translator Simone Truong, for example, appears as a disembodied voice in the video, which is why I describe her as ‘unseen’ in my abstract: in fact, as Yvonne Schmidt (2104, p.232) notes, Truong (or Chris Weinheimer, the alternative translator) ‘sits on the right-hand side of the stage … [and] she also positions the microphone correctly before each scene, adjusting it for the disabled actors’. My descriptions of the stage action therefore reflect the recorded rather than live version of the show.

The structure of *Disabled Theater* is built on a series of six tasks that the actors are asked to perform: to spend one minute individually on stage before the audience; to state their name, age and occupation; to identify their disability; to dance individually to a piece of music of their own choosing; to give their opinion of the show; and to take a bow. Each of these tasks is articulated by the translator, and it is then undertaken by each actor (usually as called forward by the translator) before the next task begins. The one interruption to the regularity of this sequence is in the solo dances: originally, it is claimed, Bel selected the seven best dances for performance, and these are presented as task four; as part of the fifth task, however, while giving his opinion of the show, the performer Gianni Blumer complains that he was denied the opportunity to present his solo dance. Before the final task (the bow), therefore, the translator informs us that Bel changed his mind and at this point allows the remaining four dance solos to be seen.

If both productions have, at their heart, the direct presentation of personal material to an audience by learning disabled performers, the principal difference between them lies in the simplicity of the design in *Disabled Theater* against the complex interweaving of narrative, music and technology in *Contained.* The basic instructions given to the Theater HORA actors establish a series of self-contained episodes as the individual actors interpret the tasks. Each episode presupposes its own internal coherence in the pared back relationship of actor to activity, and the piece itself proposes no meaningful relationship between the individual interpretation of the tasks, except, perhaps, for the revoked decision which allows the four dances that were originally excluded to be performed which, according to Benjamin Wihstutz, ‘invites the audience to compare and evaluate the choreography of the different performers. Are the last four solos really less good than the first seven? What did Bel dislike about them?’ (2015, p.46).

In *Contained*, on the other hand, the interweaving of stories with each other, and with different media invites constant cross-cutting between the stories and performers as they hove in and out of view, or individual narratives give way to concerted musical numbers that draw out threads from all narratives and offer a thematic commentary on the material. The ongoing busy-ness of the technical stage management compounds the complexity and restlessness of the focus so that the performance never settles into seemingly finished routines in the way that *Disabled Theatre* does. *Contained* is designed to feel like a work that is in flux, that is perpetually making itself: indeed, as the performers continue to live their lives offstage, the stories themselves are accordingly updated; *Disabled Theater*, by contrast, is presented as a finished product in which, notwithstanding any ambiguity about the extent to which the performers are improvising or performing a set score, the making process has been concluded.

There is also a structural similarity between the show that underpins this difference, which is the presence onstage of a non-disabled performer who articulates something of the directorial process. In *Disabled Theater* this is the translator mentioned above. This figure addresses the audience directly, and, as Gerald Siegmund outlines, ‘they assume the role or position of a spokesperson for *Jérôme* whose commands they repeat for both the actors and the audience to hear. “The first thing Jérôme asked the actors was to enter the stage one by one and to stand in front of the audience for one minute”’ (2015, p.20). The explicit reference to the absent Jérôme Bel, along with the use of past tense, makes clear that the performers in the live event are realising actions that have previously been decided.

In *Contained* alternatively, Charli Ward, Mind the Gap’s Academy Director, performs a version of the directorial role as though in rehearsal. She speaks directly to the actors rather than the audience, and gives instructions in the present tense. Her onstage representation assumes or conflates two separate roles of the making-process: the directorial role, which was officially the remit of the director Alan Lyddiard, and his assistant, Mind the Gap’s Resident Director Joyce Lee; and her own role, working between the directors and the actors as a supporting facilitator. This role is akin to the translator of *Disabled Theater* but rather than mediating the languages of the two parties, Ward uses her knowledge of theatre and her knowledge of the actors to facilitate the process by rending directorial ideas and instructions into forms that are accessible for the performers. The onstage use of the present tense in giving instructions thus becomes somewhat ambiguous: it can be read either as Ward giving fresh directorial instructions which the performers carry out as if for the first time; or it can be read as Ward offering ongoing support by prompting the actors to repeat a pre-ordained action.

This latter role is foregrounded at particular points in the performance. While most of the performers take charge of telling their own stories monologically, cast member Paul Bates is accompanied by Ward who poses questions to him. Bates’s impairment prevents him from fixing the story sequentially, so Ward’s questions – which may vary from performance to performance – function to guide his narrative. This is not to say that she asks questions to jog his memory but that, once he has begun the story, she finds questions in response to his material in order to negotiate a route through to the completed story. Similarly, Ward is visibly alert when Howard Davies tells his story, as he may sometimes struggle with memory.

The translator in *Disabled Theater*, as well as representing the voice of the director, also reflects their own role in the process, offering a more conventional translation between the Swiss-German speaking actors and the French-speaking Jérôme Bel. In performance, this develops into also working between the Swiss-German of the actors and an English translation for the audience. Thus the translator occupies a functional role which, by extension, imputes a similarly functional role to Jérôme Bel. Translator and director both occupy a heavily circumscribed position, which is spatially marginal (stage left and offstage respectively) and temporally finite (limited to the time between the individual interpretations of the tasks by the actors). It is in this sense, perhaps, that both the act and aesthetics of translation, in Gerald Siegmund’s words, ‘does not refer to the actual person Jérôme Bel. Rather it refers to the (depersonalized, structural) *function of power* that organizes the field of performance’ (2015, p.23).

For Siegmund (2015, p.19), this particularly proscribed function of power organizes the field in such a way that it empowers the actors: in wholly occupying the space and time between the finite instructions, they ‘are given agency to speak and act in their own right’ and as a consequence, ‘[e]ach actor and actress takes liberties according to their own liking with the command given to them’ (Siegmund, 2015, p.21). The translator, however, also fulfils a less overt, aesthetic role. As Bel explains, the translator ‘had to be a dancer … [b]ecause I knew she would be playing my part … As a dancer, she would be an expert in timing, and the question of timing in dance, of timing in my work is very important’ (Interview with Jérôme Bel, 2015, p.165). The implication here is that the translator figure is not just setting up space and time for the actors, but is controlling the temporal rhythm of the action in particular.

This covert management of the rhythm also has its roots and reflections in the process, as Yvonne Schmidt outlines:

This becomes especially clear in the scene where the performers are asked to stand in front of the audience for one minute. “Thank you, Peter,” says Truong to summon Peter Keller off stage, after he had been standing in the spotlight for about five minutes without showing the slightest inclination to yield his place to the next actor. Interestingly, according to the descriptions of those involved in the production, this scene has been carefully staged to the last detail. At the beginning of the rehearsals, Keller actually remained on the stage for too long, only to walk off after almost exactly one minute at the next rehearsal. But Bel chose to keep the first version. Keller was supposed to stand and wait until he was prompted to exit.

(Schmidt, 2015, p.233)

Schmidt also outlines other examples in which Bel’s direction tends more towards auteurism than the agency of emancipated actors, despite appearances to the contrary.

In *Contained* alternatively, Ward’s double-role appears more integral as she repeatedly shares space and time with the performers, such that the degree of influence she claims in managing the action is difficult to determine. Indeed, by contrast with *Disabled Theater* it appears as though Ward takes more agency than the performers in controlling the space and time of the actors, reflecting a more decisive use of directorial power in the process. What is recognised in this performance, however, is that the agency of the performer does not exist in offering them time and space, even when this offer is illusory. What Ward is doing, as an intermediary between the director Alan Lyddiard and the performers, is establishing the conditions in which the performers can have agency, in performance, over the form. Agency here is not completely independent autonomy to do as one pleases – as presumed in Siegmund’s critique of *Disabled Theater* – but the freedom to make professional judgements in performance about the form as negotiated in the process. Ward consistently deploys her own agency, as necessary, in readjusting the foundations of the performance, in order that the performers can determine their own rhythms. The recognition here is that agency is co-dependent.

This is distinct from the paradox in *Disabled Theater* in which the actors’ apparent individual agency is contingent on Bel: he gives it to them, and so retains control over it. This is exemplified in Bel repealing the decision to only show seven dances. Far from destabilizing his own directorial power, as Siegmund suggests (2015, 23), it confirms the actors’ contingency, as Gianni Blumer does not simply seize the space and perform his dance, but must wait to be licensed by the director. The apparently simple separation of roles is significant here: if Bel’s auteurship is obscured by a veneer of the actors’ absolute autonomy, the actors themselves are understood as authors of their own formal choices even though, as we have seen, Bel has overridden the actors’ preferences. While some commentators have commended the *jouissance*, exuberance or affective presence of the actors, others, perceiving the actors’ performance choices and execution as artless or unsophisticated, have been provoked, as Sandra Umathum puts it, to offer ‘the accusation that Bel had made the actors of the HORA company look like amateurs and exposed them to ridicule’ (2015, p.108).

What is being implied here is that Bel’s auteurship has not shown care for the Theater HORA actors. The same sense underpins the disgruntled comments by members of the actors’ families that are included in the show. Comparisons with the freak show, or suggestions that the actors are made to look like monkeys, are not critical complaints about form but indicate a resentment that the show does not demonstrate care for the performers either as people or as actors.

Disability theorist Dan Goodley suggests that care as a value has been superseded in a neoliberal context in which disability and ability are held as mutually exclusive categories. If disability is aligned with incapacity and non-productivity, ability is aligned with transhuman levels of capacity and productivity, and the imperative for non-disabled people is to overreach themselves in realising such transhuman potential. To radically counter this, Goodley, following Jasbir Puar, proposes a politics of debility in which the clear boundaries abled and disabled categories begin to dissolve under a recognition of debility as a common factor of the human condition. This reframing of humanity destabilizes neoliberalism by reprioritising reciprocal care over individual productivity as the governing value of human relations.

Benjamin Wihstutz senses a similar political radicalism in *Disabled Theater* but this is, once again, subject to a paradox grounded in the apparently clear separation between Bel and the actors: ‘Jérôme Bel aims at … replacing performance as achievement (as a fundamental principle of neoliberal societies) with a different kind of performance … [I]t is fully justified to accuse Mr Bel of exploiting the HORA actors. They *are* instrumentalized for an aesthetic concept that lies at the very core of Bel’s *oeuvre*’ (2015, p,45). This instrumentalization consists of their apparent aesthetic failure by conventional means, even though, as we have seen, this is actually an aesthetic choice of Bel’s. At the same time, within the purposive framework of Bel’s own *oeuvre* the performance is a success: in other words, Bel himself achieves as a consequence of the actors’ seeming failure, and the neoliberal distinction between disabled and non-disabled remains intact.

By contrast, another moment in *Contained* is more attuned to Goodley’s concept of debility. Having supported the performers through the artistic and technical complexity of the show, Charli Ward herself takes centrestage and tells her own autobiographical story about the very recent breakdown of her relationship, and the consequent loss of a future that she had imagined for herself. Under the weight of the raw emotion of the story, Ward struggles to maintain the composure required of her as a performer, the same composure that underscores her ability to adjust the foundations of the performance as a whole. As she struggles to regain control, the performers move caringly towards her, an act of care which itself establishes the foundation that allows Ward to recover agency within the aesthetic. This, nonetheless, requires the performers to make a choice: not about performance, but between performance and care, as Ward (2016, email correspondence) explains in noting the different intensities of various performances: ‘the support at its highest if I am really struggling with the story with hugs and constant 'you can do it' support. On those nights where it felt easier, there would just be a gentle touch of the shoulder for reassurance that they were there. I believe that in that moment, all the guys are with me and forget the audience, they are not performing’.

Within her narrative, Ward herself acknowledges the necessity of this care and support during the making process of *Contained.* In the face of Ward’s own debility, which is both present and reported, the distinctions between disability and ability, supporter and supported, director and performer all collapse. Care is not just an intuitive human impulse in this moment, but the very mechanism by which theatre is maintained. This is another illusion of *Disabled Theater*, that the show somehow disables the grounds of theatre itself: in fact, owing to the care of the Theater HORA actors, and in spite of the ouevre of Jérôme Bel, theatre is sustained here as it is in *Contained.* It is, however, the latter production which radically reformulates theatre as artistic endeavour and, by extension, audience judgement are both troubled and nourished by an imperative to care in the face of debility.

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