

Consent of Creation

Regan Linton– *Independent Artist*

About the Author:

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The intimate experience of theatre doesn't begin when the curtain rises; it is woven from the first spark of an idea. There is intimacy between the playwright and the characters they bring to the page; in the actor's soul-baring audition; in the designer's sketching of bodies and spaces; in the dramaturg's treatment of relevant cultural histories; in the technician's consideration of safety; in the director's abstract concept of how it will all look, feel, sound, and exist in bodies; and in actors propelling their flesh-and-blood across a stage, while other flesh-and-blood bodies stacked in spectator seats close enough to smell each other experience the action in real time. It's all-in, demanding collective body/mind engagement from participants for the duration.

Yet, as a multidisciplinary theatre artist, the experiences and conversations I've had in professional theatre spaces around intimacy and consent are predominantly focused on scripted actions of a play. For instance, a kiss between characters or a moment of violence and how it should be choreographed onstage. These conversations often don't happen until actors are in the rehearsal room or sometimes even in tech rehearsals.

Theatre practitioners aren't typically discussing other intimacies and consents that are woven through the process. For example, a playwright's choices for how they write about communities or cultures in a play about aren't often considered within a framework of intimacy. We don't discuss the theatrical processes that set certain expectations of the participants, sometimes without options for consent beyond a blanket signature to a hiring contract. There's rarely space to consider how narratives get built, designed, produced, and performed, sometimes in the absence of input from those that are being depicted or directly involved. In other words, the consent of creation.

As a paraplegic artist who uses a wheelchair full-time, I am keenly aware of the lack of consent related to the representation of disability in traditional theatre. The longstanding underrepresentation—or widespread exclusion—of artists with disabilities in theatre has led to general theatre practices that do not account for our voices and complex intimacies, both in narrative and process, and offer little consent to the creation of the works that depict or involve us.

I'm a practitioner, not an academic, so leaning into performance-as-research methodology, I will outline examples gathered throughout my 15+ years as a professional theatre artist, presenting these details as case studies to illustrate the failure to acknowledge and respect boundaries of artists with disabilities throughout creative processes that depict or involve us within the current culture of the performing arts in the United States.

Current Knowledge Fueled by Past Experience: Case Studies

I have worked directly with playwrights who sought my input about a disability narrative, either due to their own personal interest or mandate from a producing organization, but then neglected—or refused—to consider the feedback, instead choosing to write what they wanted, even if it was inaccurate, implausible, or furthering problematic stigmas and stereotypes about people with disabilities.

I have been on projects where directors and choreographers made choices for disabled actors that were unsafe or did not work for their particular needs without ever seeking their input.

I have worked with costume designers whose renderings depicted me standing, rather than in my wheelchair, and who seemed unwilling or unable to adjust their design concepts for my sitting body.

I have watched “classic” theatre stories with stale depictions of disability get continually produced and lauded, and of course, often nondisabled actors are in the disabled roles, with no consideration of the disability community’s urging for these works to be retired.

I have seen nondisabled playwrights and directors with no personal disability identity or experience consistently get hired to put their stamp on disability narratives—the few that get produced—while disabled playwrights and directors struggle to be taken seriously.

I have been on projects where scenic designers have argued about adjusting certain elements of their design so that my body could effectively navigate the set design on wheels; by the same token, I know of theaters that have resisted granting wheeling designers the reasonable process adjustments they needed to do their jobs safely and effectively.

I’ve had to describe my bowel routine to strangers in order to advocate for the right kind of accessible setup in artist housing.

I’ve felt shame and embarrassment in having to explain bladder leakage during a costume fitting, which would have been entirely preventable had the schedule been more explicit and had it not been conveyed that five minutes to use the restroom would waste someone else’s time.

I’ve had to be hurriedly carried in my wheelchair up a stairway during a performance by people who had never practiced it, in order to make my entrance after the only elevator to take me from dressing rooms to stage broke down in the middle of the show. While those around me treated

it like a moment of impromptu adaptation and jocular success, for me it was a moment of forced intimacy and unsafe practice.

I've felt pressure to accept roles I was offered even when I hated the way I was representing disability, because it was the only thing being offered; I've also turned down other opportunities on projects that I felt were perpetuating insidious disability tropes, and subsequently had nondisabled theatre peers act like I'm a nutso with unreasonable expectations who just couldn't see the beauty that existed in the project.

I have experienced numerous occasions where I have been the first and/or only disabled artist a company has worked with, and where they are happy to celebrate and promote me, but not to consider the more comprehensive environmental and procedural adjustments I have suggested in order to make the paradigm more workable for myself and other disabled artists, whom they subsequently never hired.

The State of Our Creative Community

These experiences are just a sampling, and they are exhausting, uncomfortable, invasive, and at worst, dehumanizing. I know I'm not alone in having them. During the few weeks preceding my writing of this article, I spoke with at least three disabled and/or deaf peers who, unsolicited, told me they were considering or had decided to give up their particular theatrical craft because of dehumanizing experiences on recent projects.

Those of us who *do* get hired are working where a high degree of intimacy is being demanded from our bodies, our emotions, our artistry, and our narratives, in a structure that has been created and perpetuated without our input, assent, and consent; where stories were written and directed and designed about our community with omission—or direct disregard—of our voices; and where longstanding historical narratives full of bias and stigma about our community still hold great influence while going largely unchallenged.

We scramble to make it work and prove we are “professional.” We try to celebrate the work and achievements of our peer disabled artists, especially on high-profile productions, even as we quietly grumble about the missteps in representation, authenticity, or consensual creation of the work, simultaneously feeling that we can't openly write about it or talk about it for fear that we'll be blacklisted by the wider community and lose the opportunities we need to get in the door and

try to improve the culture. We are denied consensual participation even up to the point of feedback and criticism about a produced work.

Instead of feeling like the talented artists that we are and that can move freely and comfortably in a space and process that supports us, we feel like a burden. A problem to be solved. As Mia Mingus describes in her article “Forced Intimacy: An Ableist Norm,” “There is a magnificent vulnerability to access and to disability that is powerful and potentially transformative, if we would only tap into it. Sadly, in an ableist world, access and disability get stripped of their transformative powers and instead get distorted into ‘dependent,’ ‘burden’ and ‘tragic.’”

I would argue that if theatre community as a whole, in all of its spectacle and gravitas and creative glory, continues to perpetuate systems that treat an entire community of people – technically one in four people in the United States – as though they have no consistent, valued place in the creation of work about the human experience, and that making the necessary adjustments to include them and advance the paradigm is just too much to ask...then how truly human is this art form?

Here's the bright side: there are practitioners, disabled and nondisabled, who have built paradigms that do involve disabled artists in creation, and thereby make the entirety of the work and product more expansive, authentic, and humanizing for all involved. An increasing number of companies are shifting processes to build in what Mia Mingus describes in “Access Intimacy: The Missing Link,” as “...that elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.”

In theatre, I think “access intimacy” shows up in someone saying, “We value you as full humans and complex, transformative artists, and we want you involved, and we will do what is necessary to get you involved and to remove barriers so that you can do your best work. And if we tell your story, we want *you* to guide it. We will listen to you and support you, and please tell us what we don’t know so that we can make the whole system better.”

Some have been doing it for decades. Phamaly Theatre Company, a Denver disability-affirmative theatre company founded in 1989 by disabled artists, transformed my own understanding of disability affirmative consensual creation after I began performing with them following a car accident that left me 2/3 paralyzed. The leaders set a robust professional standard for the company’s performers—all disabled—with professional expectations that were established

in collaboration with the artists. The practice had been engineered according to what the body/minds in the room needed to do their best work, without impediment from barriers. These ranged from more flexible schedules and advanced planning for folks who needed to schedule transportation or caregivers, to designs that were built in concert with accommodation needs received in advance from the artists, to a general ethos that prioritized the support and input of the disabled artists where adjustments could be made no matter if it was the first day of rehearsal or the last day of performance.

Others are newer to the paradigm shift but still making important strides, even at major institutions. A recent production of *Through the Sunken Lands* at The Kennedy Center is an example. An undoubtedly influential element was playwright Tim J. Lord—himself disabled—and his consideration and desire from the beginning to engage other disabled artists throughout the process of creating the musical. Numerous disabled artists, myself included, were engaged from workshops through production, providing input and feedback that added to the shape of the narrative. The disabled artists who were involved were valued for their artistic contributions, and necessary accommodations were made to ensure their energy would not be wasted on accommodating themselves to inaccessible environments.

Consent of Creation

Consent of creation and access intimacy are really very simple. They are about feeling significant. Validated. Heard. Considered. Like your presence is worthy, both as an artist and a human. That your perspective matters, especially in stories about you and your community. And that if the world was built in a way that didn't take you into consideration, then dangnabbit, we're gonna collectively dedicate the necessary resources to change it, because we want you here in the mix with the rest of us.

This does mean that occasionally certain values must be prioritized over others. It means that sometimes creatives will have to make room for other voices in the mix. Ideas that a creator thinks are brilliant, but then learns through community feedback are teeming with unproductive, stale stereotypes, may have to be trashed or changed, no matter how precious. Classical training and production processes that are inherently inaccessible and exclusionary may have to be honestly examined, and the people who have become experts in those processes may need to let go and find

new ones. New relationships with disabled creatives may need to be forged. Fear and avoidance will not achieve progress, but openness to forging a new paradigm will.

Over the last 15+ years, I have constantly ruminated on how I can best contribute to shifting the theatre paradigm toward consent of creation, specifically involving the disability community. Because it is a multidimensional conundrum involving all aspects of theatre, I have by necessity become a multidimensional artist, working as an actor, director, playwright, artistic director, consultant, and educator. I have no illusions about the fact that I am just one practitioner and no messiah; I don't have the power to fix it all. But if I can create projects that, in some measure, solve some of the "problems" that have been cited by traditional theatre practitioners in the excusal of keeping disability out of the mix, while simultaneously providing a package that excites disabled creatives and gets them into the mix, I'm doing my job.

With this in mind, I recently created a new piece called *Squishy But Firm: Sexcapades of a Crip Girl*. A reading of the play was performed in August 2024 as part of The Kennedy Center Local Theatre Festival. I'll share a few excerpts of it and explain my intentions behind crafting it the way I did with hopes that it provides food for thought in how all theatre practitioners can build consent of creation and access intimacy into our collective work.

First and Foremost: Representation

My main priority in writing *Squishy but Firm* was to create a piece that, if produced, would get disabled bodies onstage, telling stories authentically rooted in the disability experience. In the development process, I wanted to get disabled humans in the room, actively contributing to the piece.

I felt from the beginning that it had to be 100% true stories. After all, we've had enough stories about disability concocted by nondisabled imaginations. I wanted *Squishy* to fully rebut this problematic tradition and assert some slice of reality around our lives and intimate encounters.

Originally, I thought of collecting stories from other disabled people about their intimate encounters. However, I worried that the translation of stories from one human to another, or from a real human to a character, could naturally cause inaccuracy, exaggeration, or leave gaps to be filled with imagination. I didn't want that. I wanted the piece to be true. Real. Lived. Nothing even the slightest bit contrived.

Without the Onus of Divulgence

Plus, let's face it, discussing intimacy is still largely taboo, and discussing intimacy *and* disability is still difficult for many people based on our collective social traditions of shame and embarrassment around disabled bodies as intimate instruments. As a writer for *New Mobility Magazine*, I have written multiple articles related to intimacy, sexuality, and relationships, and I've always had a difficult time finding subjects who were willing and open to sharing their stories. I get it: we want to keep the private stuff private. However, we can't begin to abolish the taboos around intimacy and disability until we can infuse more narratives into the mainstream, and we can't infuse more authentic narratives if people won't share them.

I sometimes also sensed in trying to find people to talk about their intimate experiences that many people were still waiting to have them, or they might have felt embarrassment about the particular way they had experienced an intimate encounter. Perhaps with a caregiver. Or not practicing safe sex. Or with a paid sex worker. Or a friend.

There is often baggage attached to intimate experiences, and it can be painful or difficult for people to share them.

I didn't want to put that burden—one more example of "forced intimacy"—on someone else for the benefit of the piece that I wanted to create. I felt that other people with disabilities could create their own pieces if and when they felt like doing so.

Without Exploitation

I was also keenly aware of the real risk of putting your personal intimate story out to be synthesized, written, performed, and judged by other humans. I know of the potential for other people to exploit, bastardize, or simply fuck it up, as has happened so often historically when people who have not lived something themselves are trying to interpret or represent it.

I determined the best way to achieve these aims this was to utilize solely my own experiences. My own stories. Then, I could control how they were presented, without sentimentality, melodrama, inaccuracy, hyperbole, or infusions of ableist or pity-based undertones and nauseating tropes. For this piece, I would attempt to model sharing personal stories of intimacy with the hope of encouraging others to do so without shame or embarrassment.

The performers would have the built-in safety of telling stories that perhaps they could relate to but that were removed from their own personal experience.

With Various Voices of Disability

Once I decided to utilize just my own stories, I thought, “Well, maybe I should just perform it as a one-person show.”

NO.

The entire point of creating the piece was to allow other disabled people access to these stories, both as an audience member and a performer. If it was just a one-person show, it ends up being an isolated event, where only one performer can own the story.

I therefore created four “Crip Girl” characters who would tell my stories. My writing, other disabled humans speaking.

Balancing Specificity and Flexibility

Disability is a wide umbrella. Many folks with disabilities are not afforded opportunities for performance experience as their nondisabled counterparts. I believe we can create works that intentionally allow for flexibility of physical and cognitive identity and experience level of the performers, while still maintaining specificity in the narrative and artistic virtuosity. I wanted to build this accessibility into the design of the play, allowing for flexibility of character embodiment.

I did feel some measure of narrowing was necessary to ensure that what I wrote about a physical disability experience would resonate if communicated by another person, even if their exact disability did not match my own.

I therefore included these notes at the top of the play regarding casting:

Characters

CRIP GIRL 1 – witty intellect

CRIP GIRL 2 – alternative sasschick

CRIP GIRL 3 – girlboss

CRIP GIRL 4 – sage BFF

Notes about the Crip Girls:

- *The noted attributes are a simply a guide. These attributes are not exclusive...all the Crip Girls share bits of them. The Crip Girls should be unique individuals with different POVs – just like the actors playing them – but are also one voice, telling a story that is all of theirs.*
- *Each should exude their own unique brand of sexy and confident.*
- *Age: range from 20s to beyond...should cross generations.*
- *Gender: Cis-female or non-binary/trans femme-presenting.*
- *Race: All races, variety is encouraged.*

- *Ability: See next note.*

Note about body representation:

*This story involves moving through the world with a disabled body that elicits stigmatized assumptions from the collective social gaze. Therefore visible representation of authentic disability/difference in this piece is of the utmost importance. **The Crip Girls MUST BE CAST WITH ACTORS WHO HAVE AUTHENTIC VISIBLE DISABILITIES, AND IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT AT LEAST HALF THE CAST SHOULD BE WHEELCHAIR USERS.** They do not have to be the same disability as the author (paraplegia from spinal cord injury). Variety is good. But, they should create visual impact. This can include but is not limited to paraplegia, quadriplegia, people who use wheelchairs/crutches/prosthetics, people with paralysis, stature differences, cerebral palsy, stroke survivors, limb differences, spina bifida, visible genetic conditions, people who use a speech-generating device, etc etc etc.*

This is not to diminish invisible differences. *But without visible difference/disability, the piece will resonate differently from how it is intended.*

The four performers who played the Crip Girls during The Kennedy Center reading had various gender identities, various race and ethnic identities, three used mobility devices, and all had a disability that was visible in some measure. All their disabilities were different, and none of them matched my own.

Some had theatre experience, some didn't: two poets, a director/dramaturg, a student, all advocates. Most importantly, all had authentic, powerful voices and unique brands of charisma.

Throughout the text of the play, I was intentional about giving plenty of specifics to be interesting, but ensuring that body references and other details are universal or open enough to allow for a wide range of Crip Girls to relate the stories believably.

From the initial choices such as casting, the show intended to allow openness for expansion of how we think about the human participants, not distilling down to one aspect of human identity.

Flexible Staging

I included the following notes about staging of the play:

Note on staging:

This play is in development. As such, it currently does not have a mandated staging. Maybe it never will.

Potential ideas include simple monologue style a la The Vagina Monologues or Anna Deavere Smith.

Or perhaps the Crip Girls narrate and are accompanied by shadow puppetry.

Maybe it's lightly staged.

The most important is that it be Crip Girls telling this story, and that their bodies be present and conspicuous.

The rest can develop with imagination.

The play is written with intentional simplicity and flexibility that prioritizes the Crip Girls at all points. Depending on disability and mobility considerations of the actors, the staging could morph.

I am intrigued by the idea of a simple, static staging of the performers accompanied by shadow puppetry representation of the stories being told. This would provide expanded flexibility for who could do the play, and remove any implicit mandate for mobility, meaning that performers with a wide variety of disabilities and experience levels could have access to it. It could be done at professional theatres, schools, community centers, even assisted living facilities. Actors could be fully memorized or not. There could be light plots or not. There could be a set, or not. It's flexible.

Alternative Possibilities for Intimate Physical Action

The possibility of shadow puppetry would be one more way of adding humor and creative action to the play, while removing any forced intimacy expectation of the performers to physically perform the very intimate scenarios in the piece.

While much of the content of the show recounts physical intimacy, the intimacy experience of the performers and audience should not rely on reenactment of the scenarios in real time. I don't think getting naked onstage makes a *real* actor or fosters true intimacy. It often ends up making everybody in the room more uncomfortable than less.

If comfort and trust are one of the foundations of building intimacy and consent, then throwing performers and audience into the deep end with naked bodies and simulated sex acts performed onstage will do the exact opposite of what we're trying to achieve. We need less alienation, not more. And I do not think a small program note or content warning is often enough to give all the participants a true feeling of consent.

Hence, using the proxy of shadow puppets, and giving the actors the choice of how they represent their bodies physically onstage, and how they relate the words of the script to paint the picture of the action.

A Story Centered on Intimacy

Synopsis

Squishy But Firm: Sexcapades of a Crip Girl is a tale of soulmates, shitty dates, and the intimate adventures of a paralyzed body. The play features four “Crip Girls” who share their collective story of an embodied existence: from adolescence riddled by disordered eating, through young adulthood marked by catastrophic injury, on to adult adventures that are complicated – and enhanced – by disability. Through raw, real, absurdly comical stories of hookups, long term relationships, heartbreak, and everyday gunk, the Crip Girls ultimately find their way to a new understanding of the gift of human connection between squishy-but-firm human meatbags.

When I have polled disabled peers about what kinds of stories they wish we had more of—to read, perform, or witness—it often comes down to sex, relationships, dating, and intimacy. Why? Because these fundamentals of human connection are the basis of humanization: that we can love and be loved, touch, deepen a connection with another human, and experience a variety of intimate pleasures that make our existence joyful. When the realities of intimacy among disabled people have been ignored, it is often the basis for dehumanization of the disability community.

Squishy But Firm foregrounds firsthand stories about intimate encounters between disabled and nondisabled humans, relatable to anyone regardless of disability.

With Adjusted Definitions

The ways we think about intimacy in a popular sense, how it’s represented in porn, therapy, podcasts, books, movies, is limited. Typically, it’s intimacy based purely on sensory delights of the flesh and acute physical responses of our bodies. Which, for anyone who is non-normative, or even just human, does not adequately represent the varieties of intimacy that can be present and profound in our lives. But this also doesn’t mean we aren’t capable of experiencing delights of the flesh.

I have been delighted by the proposals from people like Emily Nagoski, whose book *Come As You Are* lays out a strong scientific case for re-thinking our definitions of pleasure and intimacy to be more inclusive of human variation; I just wish she addressed disability a bit more.

Yet, “adjusted” definitions of intimacy for non-normative, disabled bodies often get pegged as inferior. Subpar. Incomplete. Compromised. In *Squishy But Firm*, I aimed to make a case for the ways in which adjusted intimacies are expansive and superior to the limited typical definitions

of intimacy that default so heavily on genital and sexual functions. Instead, intimacies of intellect. Energy. Access. To name a few.

The following excerpt unfolds toward the end of the play, after the Crip Girls have shared a number of stories about intimate encounters, mostly sexual, with varying results of pleasure or fulfillment. Crip Girl 1 shares stories of two relationships that have changed her perspective of care and connection, subverting traditional notions of sexual intimacy and elevating access intimacy.

CRIP GIRL 1
SYMBIOSIS.

Miguel and I meet on Hinge.

He's a nerd with a dark-and-handsome exterior.

He teaches me about his home country of Mexico. I feel great respect for him.

And he wants to care for me. Clean my bathroom, push me up hills, bring me food...the usual things partners do for each other.

For nearly 20 years, I had done all these things almost entirely on my own. Quasi-militantly. In some way, it was how I proved I could hack it. Survive.

Now he wants to do it...and it messes with my head.

We ALL NEED CARE. To give and receive, regardless of who we are. It's how the world goes round.

But somehow, the care that I want and need? I feel like I have to refuse it...in order to prove I'm worthy of it.

What a mindfuck!!!

I can't help but wonder if all my hacking it, doing it on my own...has left me incapable of finding symbiosis with someone. Giving – and also receiving – care.

Miguel and I break up.

(beat)

A few months later I'm working on a show in New York. A fellow castmate, Benjamin, and I are getting close. He's lived: prison time, a head injury. He also has a girlfriend, but we connect as buddies.

As we move along the sidewalks in New York, he stays close, just behind me or off to the side. I take the lead, set the pace, but he's always ready to run interference.

As we cross streets and head up curb cuts, I begin to notice the slightest pressure pushing the backrest on my chair.

At first I'm pissed. I want to scream, "101! Ask a person before you push their chair!" A couple of times his pressure throws off my balance.

But it's clear he knows I can do it myself. He doesn't break our conversation, or look for recognition. He doesn't insist on anything...including pushing me.

He's clearly seen that the curb cuts strain my shoulders. And that sometimes I'm just...tired. From all of it.

With his power assist, we settle into a beautiful rhythm, gliding, like slopes don't exist. Somehow he knows the exact moment he should place his hand, and the exact moment he should remove it. I feel cared for, but also completely in control.

And he feels safer with me to trust and share.

We aren't disabled or nondisabled, caregiver or patient. Just two humans with a subtle awareness of each other, in synch. A beautiful symbiosis.

It's one of the most intimate experiences I've ever had.

Crip Girl Power

One of my most important charges was endowing the Crip Girls—both the actors and the characters—with power from the very start of the play. Power to tell these intimate stories. To be funny. To share gravitas. To set the tone of the room. To invite the audience to take part. To roll or walk off the stage at the end and feel like badass rockstars, and have people WANT to approach them. To be larger than life, not shrink.

No matter where the script would go in the future, I wanted the Crip Girls to unequivocally claim the space and own attention, while also making room for the spectator participants. The Crip Girls acknowledge the audience from the start, breaking the fourth wall, establishing a space of welcome and giving the audience explicit presence and agency in receiving the play. This includes a moment for the audience to actively consent to what the Crip Girls propose. The consensual creation extends, in some part, to the audience, and the audience is invited to interrogate their own assumptions of pleasure, intimacy, and feeling.

And Choice

The Crip Girls also express choice and agency from the beginning about how they are representing themselves, indicating that they are not bound by any conventions or limitations in challenging the very premise of the script, and potentially of theatre itself, from the start.

The Crip Girls are the ones inviting the audience to take part. They are the ones telling the stories, setting the narrative. Deciding how comfortable or uncomfortable they want to make it with their choice or performance delivery. And yet, again, because it is not their personal story, they can make these choices without the additional layer of pressure to be putting themselves and their personal narrative out for scrutiny.

The following is the introductory scene of the play:

CRIP GIRL 1

(smiley and presentational) Hello, good evening, everybody, and welcome to...

ALL

Squishy But Firm: Sexcapades of a Crip Girl.

CRIP GIRL 2

I don't really call myself that.

CRIP GIRL 4

Ugh can we get past the first sentence?

CRIP GIRL 2

What. I don't use that term.

CRIP GIRL 3

Squishy?

CRIP GIRL 1

Firm?

CRIP GIRL 2

Crip Girl.

CRIP GIRL 4

Ohh-kay.

CRIP GIRL 2

I just think it's important starting out that we say who we are. It's what this piece is about.

CRIP GIRL 4

It's about a LOT of things.

CRIP GIRL 2

I'm just saying that right now I identify as disabled and femme-presenting.

CRIP GIRL 3

I prefer stylin' boss bitch.

CRIP GIRL 1

Dry-wit intellectual.

CRIP GIRL 4

Well, "Squishy But Firm: Sexcapades of a Disabled Identified Femme-Presenting Boss Bitch Dry-Wit Intellectual" might be a little long for the Instagram post.

CRIP GIRL 1

I kinda like it...

CRIP GIRL 4

Okay, can we agree for the next hour that we're ALL Crip Girls – ISH – and that means we're affirming everything that's unique and wonderful about every person in this room?

CRIP GIRL 2

I can do ish.

CRIP GIRL 3

Whoop whoop! Crip Girls, ISH!

CRIP GIRL 4

(to audience) You all cool with that?

(Audience agrees?)

CRIP GIRL 4

Great, got that settled.

CRIP GIRL 1

What about "sexcapades"?

CRIP GIRL 4

Oh Jesus...

CRIP GIRL 3

Well, we ARE gonna talk about sex stuff...

CRIP GIRL 2

The nature of intimacy and connection...

CRIP GIRL 1

Honestly, I've always had a complicated relationship with sex...capades. And my Crip Girl body.

CRIP GIRL 2

Me too.

CRIP GIRL 3

Me three.

CRIP GIRL 4

Well maybe that's why we're doing this – so we can get some...boom!...catharsis.

CRIP GIRL 2

Heads up/trigger warning, there's a lot of sharing in this piece.

CRIP GIRL 3

Some of you are gonna think, "that's vanilla."

CRIP GIRL 4

We aren't telling our story to shock people. Rest assured, I've never done porn, or been on a month-long orgy bender. Some of you probably have...(looks around, and at the actors)...bravo to you.

CRIP GIRL 3

Get it!

CRIP GIRL 4

A lot of this is run-of-the mill.

CRIP GIRL 2

Gurrl, there is no run-of-the-mill when it comes to Crip Girl bodies.

CRIP GIRL 3

Especially with sexy stuff.

CRIP GIRL 1

No one talks about it.

CRIP GIRL 3

Acknowledges it.

CRIP GIRL 4
Celebrates it.

CRIP GIRL 1
We need a new run-of-the-mill. With more intimacy...

CRIP GIRL 2
Sex, dongs, and vadge.

CRIP GIRL 1
Connection.

CRIP GIRL 4
Oh, also we talk about disordered eating, bodily functions... so if that makes you uncomfortable...

CRIP GIRL 3
Have a drink.

CRIP GIRL 4
Take a breath.

CRIP GIRL 1
Laugh, even if it's awkward.

CRIP GIRL 2
ESPECIALLY if it's awkward.

CRIP GIRL 3
Or just...

ALL
FEEL.

CRIP GIRL 2
What a naughty idea.

CRIP GIRL 4
Alright, let's do this.

Consent of Creation in Rehearsal and Performance

I realized during the brief rehearsal and performance process of the reading of *Squishy* at The Kennedy Center Local Theatre Festival how important it was to affirm the power and choice of the actors playing the Crip Girls and meet their needs, and how the piece could not reach its full

potential without actors having the power to influence the piece in ways that made them feel comfortable.

I began with a variety of general practices I try to employ on any process. I sent the script ahead of the actors making a decision to participate so they knew what the content would be. I allowed for flexibility in scheduling. I mixed virtual and in-person options for rehearsal. I supported the actors with planning accessible transportation. I created space for expansive introductions to allow them to claim their own space in the room, express access needs, and frankly, just feel like a significant person.

I gave actors the space to express personal needs or preferences to change various elements of the text, and did my best to adjust to meet their preferences. One actor said the name given to a character in one of her assigned monologues was the name of her dad, which felt uncomfortable, so I changed it. Another actor requested changing pronouns of their character to match their own, so I did. An actor expressed a keen desire to do a particular monologue because of resonances with their sexual orientation, so I shuffled things around. Certain actors preferred slight textual adjustment for ease of enunciation and pronunciation, so I shifted the words.

All of these gave the actors a greater sense of ownership and personal resonance with the stories.

Reading Aftermath

I had attempted to create a good deal of space for conversation and personal sharing of anything the actors experienced during the piece. We completely ran out of time, because there was so much the actors wanted to discuss that they felt they had never had a space or opportunity to explore openly and honestly with other disabled folks.

It became abundantly clear that the intentional choices I made to build a narrative and process that fostered consent of creation and access intimacy were overdue and necessary. For the actors, and the audience, too.

One of the actors sent me a text following their participation in the performance, which I have received permission to share here:

I think what affected me most is how seriously you took me. Maybe that respect is a low bar, & half of what we were talking about in the play was all of us “crip girl” adjacent ppl deserve that kind of respect—to be thought of as capable of engaging in that way. But I’m still learning to take myself seriously as a theatre person, after a lot of discouragement

*both from within & externally, AND there's so much repression/discouragement/shame to wade thru around sex-related topics. But working on it has been a push to help shift how I think about myself. Despite everything, today I sat in front of ~100 ppl, strangers & acquaintances alike, & told *Sex Stories* for over an hr. 😊 More discussion to be had lol (genuinely), but suffice it to say that is the most (& the most publicly) I have ever said those words out loud in a row in my life. Felt almost like stumbling out of the closet, except no catastrophes followed this time—the opposite, in fact. I did feel a little reverb (if that makes sense?) from all the stimulation & socializing afterwards lol, but I did it, & I was okay. And then I went home & texted the girl I have a crush on, & I didn't find myself wishing to disappear from existence (or at least not as much as I usually do in that situation, lol).*

I guess what I'm trying to say is—thank you for seeing what you've seen in me. It's helped me grow, see cooler somethings in myself, & be okay (better than ok) with that ❤️

This is the effect of building processes that center consent of creation and access intimacy for artists with disabilities.

The more we are willing to challenge traditional theatre spaces—with their traditional non-inclusive expectations—and the more we can build theatre processes that posit disability as an element of expansion in our collective experiences of intimacy and consent, the more we will foster truly transformative experiences for artists and spectators alike, not limited by identity or ability or any human reality.

References

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