JCBP

# Journal of Consent-Based Performance

## Consent is an Access Issue: Rethinking Disability, Accessibility, and Consent-Based Theatre Practices

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## Consent is an Access Issue: Rethinking Disability, Accessibility, and Consent-Based Theatre Practices

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This issue was collaboratively edited by Amanda Rose Villarreal and Guest Editor Catherine Peckinpaugh Vrtis

Front Cover:
*Squishy but Firm* (2024) written and directed by Regan Linton at The Kennedy Center Local Theatre Festival. Pictured (L-R, main photo): Fiona Rose Murphey, Natalie Illum, Nila Morton, Marlena Chertock, and Regan Linton. Pictured (L-R, inset): Natalie Illum, Nila Morton, Marlena Chertock.
Photo: Jati Lindsay.

## *Call for Papers*

The *Journal of Consent-Based Performance* invites artists, educators, and scholars engaged with consent-based performance—in theory or in practice—to interrogate our existing practices and propose new ideas in pursuit of increasingly more equitable, ethical, anti-oppressive, and effective consent-based practices within our field. In our endeavor to promote the work of all individuals engaged in improving the intimacy specialization fields, we invite authors to submit any writings centered upon consent-based performance practices. We encourage authors to submit essays that do the work of:

- Analyzing or interrogating current or past understandings of and approaches to performed intimacy and consent—in theory or in practice
- Questioning or commenting upon the practices that are currently being used to establish consent within performance, modeling continuous adjustment of artistic praxis
- Introducing or investigating theories related to consent and power imbalances in other fields, contextualizing these theories' potential impact upon the further development of consent-based performance
- Documenting the evolution of consent-based performance and similar intimacy specializations throughout history and our current moment
- Analyzing or responding to artistic productions and writings that engage with simulated intimacy and/or the processes that shape these works.

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# Time is Money, and Consent is an Access Issue: Editor's Comments

Our first editorial claimed that the *Journal of Consent-Based Performance* would "stand firmly rooted in the study, practice, and pedagogy of consent-based performance practices," aiming to establish "a resource for all, fueled by the intimacy community's collective input and discoveries" (Pace, Rikard, and Villarreal 2022).

This has always been a scholarly endeavor with mitigating power imbalances at its core, rendering our work inherently political. Beyond the power dynamics of people and roles in rehearsal, production, and training processes, the work and theory of consent-based performance is political in its existence as—in alignment with the keen analysis of Dr. Kari Barclay—abject labor (2023). Barclay writes that intimate encounters are abject in their capacity to "make individuals aware of their bodies and the vulnerability they have in the company of others" (18), and that performances of intimacy, as one element of the labor of the artist, are thus abject labor. Within this work, consent "helps artists set a limit on their work such that they are not pressing into the realm of injury" while also working "carve[…] out a space in which artists can experience challenging sensations onstage and explore artistically" (20). These aspirations—supporting the establishing of boundaries while fostering engagement with exploration and embracing artistic challenges—can be mis-deemed as achievements, however, if the collaborators in the room share similar sets of knowledge, life experiences, and boundaries, or if the leaders in the room remain unaware of collaborators' unspoken—and likely unmet—needs. Systematically reinforced disparities are "always present and felt by those who have been disempowered within these power imbalances, whether or not the facilitators of a space feel them" (Rikard and Villarreal 2023). Noting this, the *JCBP* committed itself to expanding our editorial board and supporting the development of themed issues curated with the guidance of guest editors who could highlight and speak to disparities not frequently addressed in the current dominant narratives of consent-based performance and scholarship.

We began soliciting work that highlighted the scholarship and practice of those whose voices are most often invisiblized within the dominant narratives of the performing arts industries, and who are most often systematically made vulnerable within the existing structures of our industry. This led to the development of our first themed issue: *Notes from the Field: Identity, Inclusion, Intimacy Choreography and Cultural Competence.* This issue's editorial (2024) builds upon the Bennet model of Intercultural Sensitivity, claiming that the threshold which is "the entry point for cultural competence" is founded upon awareness and is blocked by assumptions.

In approaching a second themed issue, the editorial board reflected upon this statement, asking ourselves: *where might assumptions most often be derailing efforts to promote consent and equity within our work?* as well as asking *whose disenfranchisement is most often assumed to have been addressed without awareness of the human's true needs and without their input?*

The performing arts industries, despite recent improvements and assumptions of monolithic problems having been overcome, continue to be structured based on ableist norms. Accommodations, when requested, are often derided as aesthetically inapposite, are granted as some benevolent boon, or are responded to with the provision of presumed accommodations (if X need is present, Y must be the solution) that are built upon forced intimacy (Mingus 2017) and leave little space for individualized support. As Catherine Peckinpaugh Vrtis, our guest editor for this issue, writes: "an ableist ideology claims that adaptive resources are special privileges exploited by those unwilling to work hard rather than morally neutral adjustments necessary to allow the work to be done" (2025). Similarly, the idea that if mandated accommodations are insufficient, the person experiencing need is at fault, rather than the system which fails to serve. Take, for example, an accommodation which is perhaps awarded frequently for written work, but rarely in the realms of rehearsal and performance, within theatre classrooms: additional time.

Consent-based practitioners ought to be aware of the connection between power and time; the *time is money* adage, especially when fueling behavior and treatment of collaborators, skews power imbalances that already exist further in the benefit of those that sign the checks. Perhaps due to the limited scope of impact any one person, or due to the self-maintaining nature of systematically structured processes and procedures, consent-based practices continue to exist within the production calendar. The *Journal of Consent-Based Performance* must then consider how researchers and practitioners of consent-based approaches to artmaking can "recognize time as a form of power that can be critiqued and transformed" (Miller 2020), interrogate how normative temporalities and timelines within our production and education processes are often imposed upon all participants, and consider how our acceptance of these temporal expectations impacts access to our creative processes, as well as the nature of communicating consent within them.

Consent cannot occur without adequate time, space, and resources to receive, process, and respond to information—without these, a person cannot be considered 'fully informed' regardless of whether someone else presented information to them in some way. Knowing this and noting that access needs are common within both classrooms and creative communities—let alone the human population—we turned to Crip Theory to guide our interrogation of how time impacts accessibility and consent (Kaefer 2013; Miller 2020). Knowing that our combined areas of expertise could not adequately curate Notes from the Field or Articles that analyze the intersection of practice-based research and the fields of Performance Studies and Crip Theory, the editorial board of the *JCBP* is incredibly grateful to Dr. Vrtis, who extended their knowledge, time, energy, and expertise to guiding the formation of this issue and the included works.

This issue opens with Notes from the Field by Kaitlin A. Kerr-Heidenreich, Grace Thomas, and Sabrina Zanello Jackson. Kerr-Heidenreich shares her experiences as a disabled artist serving as director, cultural consultant to nondisabled actors, and intimacy choreographer. Reflection upon these experiences provides readers with insights into how production companies can aim to become more accessible. Kerr-Heidenreich hones in on accessible intimacy choreography practices for audio drama and the value of working with a cultural consultant to inform non-disabled actors' performances of characters with disabilities. Dr. Thomas's "Interweaving Accessibility into Theatre," then, details the devising process behind a verbatim piece titled *Living with… FiBrOmYaLgiA* while discussing steps taken to make the process, as well as the resulting performance, accessible and inclusive. Notable is Dr. Thomas's development and use of nonlinear choreographic phrases—movement vocabularies built to be employed based upon the performers' daily needs and decisions in such a way that the choreography may never be the same, ensuring each performer maintains agency over their movements during the performance while ensuring that all creative collaborators onstage are informed of the possibilities and understand what may occur in space around them. Finally, Zanello Jackson recounts her process in creating "Commons-Based Approach to Harm Reduction in Theatre" by creating a digital repository of crowdsourced content guidance for different productions. Zanello Jackson walks readers through the extensive and iterative process of creating such a resource; introduces readers to the pitfalls of early versions of this database and theory behind its evolutions; and reflects upon the impacts of this project. This project's trajectory illustrates its usefulness to our field and invites further contributions, a call echoed in this Note from the Field.

Dr. Krista Miranda's "Sensing Dance: Finding Access Intimacy with a Dysmorphic Bodymind" opens up our Research Article section, engaging both theoretical and practice-based research in her examination of the ways in which dance pedagogy has functioned. Dr. Miranda asks readers "what would it do to shift agency from instructor to student, and for the tyranny of the visual to be replaced by a more phenomenological felt sense" (53) to create more inclusive and accessible spaces for both performing and witnessing dance. Dr. Miranda's work engages a variety of Disability Studies and Crip Theory scholars, introducing readers who may not have encountered these fields previously to this work through her keenly accessible authorial voice and by grounding readers unfamiliar with these theories in autoethnographic examples. Her writing processes this scholarship through PAR methodology, crafting an article that introduces these concepts to scholars, students, and practitioners of consent-based performance alike. Further, Miranda examines the use of audio description in *Telephone* as well as the facilitation of dance spaces, identifying methods for teaching and participating in dance that can inspire scholars and practitioners in our field to reconsider not only the tyranny of the visual, but the imposition of our socially normalized exclusive ways of working.

Nicolas Shannon Savard's "Queer, Neurodivergent Access Intimacy" reminds, or perhaps informs, readers of Crip Theory's origins in Queer Theory (Abrams et al 2024), analyzing the work of a consent-based performance artist through concepts from each of these theories. Savard analyzes their experience directing JC Pankratz's *Seahorse* while specifically investigating how accessibility, intimacy choreographic practice, and tenets of consent-based performance impacted each stage of the production, laying out a clear argument that access intimacy must be considered as an artistic impulse, a community norm, and an ongoing, continuously adapting, imperfect-yet-transformative practice. Throughout their PAR-fueled reflection on this process, Savard shares interviews with artists and scholars to further guide readers in connecting the theoretically grounded analysis to broader artistic practices.

Melissa Bondar's "Micro-Events: A Potential Tool for Navigating Consent and Accessibility in Immersive Theatre" interrogates the role of consent and access intimacy within the moments of "Unscripted Intimacies" (Villarreal 2021) that occur between performers and audience members within immersive performance. Bondar builds upon Jorge Lopes Ramos's concept of micro-events, arguing that this methodology supports the development of more accessible and inclusive interactive and immersive productions. Bondar argues that by creating effective micro-events for orientation and throughout productions, accommodations can be more clearly communicated and addressed–even prioritized. Bondar builds on Kuppers' argument that accessibility and artistry are not at odds, and that disability culture can both inform and enrich the creative process and aesthetic outcomes, applying this concept to immersive performances and the development of parallel tracks in nonlinear ambulatory performance.

Regan Linton's "Consent of Creation," then, brings this issue to a close, highlighting the ways in which intimacy is inherent to all steps of theatrical production and in which the assumption of awareness often derails consent when artistic collaborators presume to know how a disabled artist's needs can serve the aesthetic of a production, rather than prioritizing how the artist's needs can be met to elevate their creative process and performance. Presenting case studies from her own life and career to illustrate the current state of our field, Linton then analyzes the production process behind *Squishy but Firm: Sexcapades of a Crip Girl,* a new work which debuted during the Kennedy Center Local Theatre Festival in order to highlight ways of working that can foster new theatrical paradigms that posit disability as an element of expansion and enhancement in creative processes that seek to communicate human experiences.

Amanda Rose Villarreal, PhD—Managing Editor

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# Cripping Consent: A Note from the Guest Editor

This is a year of important anniversaries. July 26, 2025 will be the thirty-fifth anniversary of the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and September 27 will mark ten years since Ali Stroker made her Broadway debut in Deaf West's revival of *Spring Awakening*. Five years ago, a group of disabled theatre scholars began discussing ideas for a new organization, one that would unite theatre scholars, educators, artists, and activists working at the intersections of disability and the performing arts. Those conversations led to the founding of the Disability, Theatre, and Performance (DTaP) focus group for Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), the first academic organization dedicated to this field in the United States. 2025 will be DTaP's third year participating in ATHE's annual conference, and as I write this introduction, we are working hard to finalize our application for 501c3 nonprofit status so we can expand our offerings to this active and growing community. Things are slowly getting better for disabled theatre workers, who have long been systematically excluded from the field as creators and barely tolerated as consumers. Only a tiny fraction, usually cited as 3%, of explicitly disabled characters are played by disabled performers; the rate at which disabled performers are hired for roles not explicitly described as disabled – not to mention the hiring rate of disabled directors, choreographers, designers, technicians, dramaturgs, teachers, researchers, and other workers in the field – is even more dire. As Ryan Donovan explains in his award-winning study *Broadway Bodies: A Critical History of Conformity*:

> Performers with non-conforming bodies face the double bind of being expected to only be able to represent their own identity and then not even being considered for those roles…Lack of representation translated into different life outcomes for actors [and other theatre workers] denied work because of aesthetics; this lack means little or infrequent access to health care and insurance, reliance on low-wage and part-time jobs, and dreams deferred. (Donovan 2023, 11–12)

The advances of recent years, while real and significant, are just the beginning of the ways the industry needs to adapt in order to achieve disability justice.

These issues are further compounded by the ableist norms of the theatre and performance industry, as well as the broader dominance of ableist and eugenic ideologies and cultures in the US and beyond. These issues are multifaceted and mutually reinforcing via the interlocking bands of environmental, attitudinal, and systemic discrimination recognized by the Social Model of Disability, and are further complicated through the manifold intersections of disability discrimination with all other ideologies and systems of power and oppression, including but not limited to bigotry on the basis of race, ethnicity, and color; nationality including post/colonial status of the nation of [family] origin, immigration status, language(s) spoken, and skill and style of speech in written and spoken English, including dialects, accents, and regionalisms; real or perceived gender or sexuality and obedience to patriarchal gender expectations; wealth, income, and class; education including length, degrees, and exclusivity of institutions; social group makeup and acceptance, club memberships, and other status markers; family structure and organization including definitions of core family members and approaches to housing; and so on. Even the exact forms of debility, the underlying diagnoses, causes, and real or perceived possibilities of "cure" shape the complex matrix of experiences unique to every disabled person and their interactions with cultural systems and opportunities for employment, and not just within the theatre industry. Fixing these issues will be slow and challenging, even where the will to change is strong and persistent.

That said, I'd like to offer two vital intercessions into this conversation. The first is simple and applies in all situations: listen to the experts. Specifically, begin by looking up the "disability justice-based movement building and performance project" Sins Invalid and their "10 Principles of Disability Justice," and then implement these principles in your home institutions. However, do keep in mind that – to paraphrase and expand on the popular slogan – there must be no theatre and performance about us, the many brilliant and highly qualified disabled artists, scholars, educators, and other professionals within the field, without us there to guide the work. Without the academic *and* autobiographical insights of disabled experts, there is a significant risk that the best intended and best supported efforts to create a more inclusive future in the performing arts may end up reinscribing the same biases, stereotypes, and exclusionary systems that currently exist. This consideration is, of course, not unique to the work of Disability Justice, but it remains a mandatory part of changing the status quo. My second offering requires more explanation, but it is also specific to this journal, its readership, and this special issue on disability and consent. It is also worthy of particular attention here due to its direct impact on the education and employment conditions for disabled people.

My second call is for the end of Forced Intimacy in the theatre – and by that I mean all theatres, whether community, educational, pre-professional, or professional, from the tiniest local space to the heights of Broadway or the West End. Forced Intimacy, a term first used by disability rights advocate and writer Mia Mingus, describes an ideology of disability, disability access and accommodations, and disabled people that is innately hostile to justice, to consent, and to the core humanity of those living with disabilities. As Mingus describes, this term:

> Refers to the common, daily experience of disabled people being expected to share personal parts of ourselves to survive in an ableist world. This often takes the form of being expected to share (very) personal information with able bodied people to get *basic* access, but it also includes forced physical intimacy, especially for those of us who need physical help that often requires touching of our bodies. Forced intimacy can also include the ways that disabled people have to build and sustain emotional intimacy and relationships with someone in order to get access—to get safe, appropriate and good access. (Mingus 2017)

The widespread, entirely normalized culture of Forced Intimacy demands disabled people surrender all boundaries, continuously and cheerfully, always prepared "to do the work of opening [themselves] up for others' benefit, education, curiosity, or benevolent oppression" (Mingus 2017).

Perhaps its most visible manifestation is the ideology is the expectation of adversarial approaches to students and professionals who dare request accommodations. As ableist ideology claims that adaptive resources are special privileges exploited by those unwilling to work hard rather than morally neutral adjustments necessary to allow the work to be done, it is common to demand detailed revelation, extensive documentation, and "proof" of need before allowing – much less providing – appropriate accommodations. This enculturated impulse to interrogation innately positions disabled students and workers as suspect; it interpolates the abled into acting as agents of the eugenic biomedical order of diagnosis and treatment, applying carceral discipline to the unruly bodyminds arrayed for judgment of legitimacy and worthiness:

> Forced intimacy is a cornerstone of how ableism functions in an able bodied supremacist world. Disabled people are expected to "strip down" and "show all our cards" metaphorically in order to get the basic access we need in order to survive…People are allowed to ask me intrusive questions about my body, make me "prove" my disability or expect me to share with them every aspect of my accessibility needs. I learned how to simultaneously shrink myself and nonconsensually open myself up as a disabled girl of color every damn day. (Mingus 2017)

After all of this, once the trial is over and the verdict is rendered, Forced Intimacy says that the disabled aspirant must accept whatever insufficient crumbs of support are offered – if any accommodations are offered at all – with a performance of gratitude for the "gifts" granted. To resist any element of this daily violation is to invite ableist retaliation, from loss of vital opportunity to outright violence, and those experiencing multiple intersecting marginalizations are subject to the most intense scrutiny and the most explosive backlash when resisting this policing of their debilities.

The near-universal prevalence of Forced Intimacy makes changing the paradigm deeply challenging, but it can be done. It requires building an approach to making theatre with disabled people that assumes the work is better because of our inclusion, and that treats accommodations as the reasonable cost of ensuring our participation. It means assuming good faith and expertise in our own needs, rather than demanding the "objective" assessment of medical or legal notions of disability. Most of all, it demands an approach to access built on creating a welcoming space where all are safe to take the risks innate to artistic work supported through the knowledge that their needs will be met without resistance or resentment, rather than through checking off the minimum requirements to avoid violating the ADA. In short, it means embracing what Mingus calls Access Intimacy as both ideal and praxis:

> Access intimacy at once recognizes and understands the relational and human quality of access, while simultaneously deepening the relationships involved. It moves the work of access out of the realm of only logistics and into the realm of relationships and understanding disabled people as humans, not burdens. Disabled people's liberation cannot be boiled down to logistics…It demands that the responsibility for access shifts from being an individual responsibility to a collective responsibility. That access shifts from being silencing to freeing; from being isolating to connecting; from hidden and invisible to visible; from burdensome to valuable; from a resentful obligation to an opportunity; from shameful to powerful; from ridged to creative. (Mingus 2017b)

Changing the ableist expectations of profession and culture will not be easy, but it is absolutely necessary; consent is an access issue, there can be not Disability Justice without it.

Catherine "Katya" Vrtis, PhD—Guest Editor

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# Disability Justice: Case Studies from a Disabled Intimacy Coordinator

**Kaitlin A. Kerr-Heidenreich—***Food for Groundlings*

**About the Author:**

Kaitlin A. Kerr-Heidenreich (she/her) is a Pittsburgh native actor, director, intimacy director, and poet. As a disabled artist-activist and nurse educator, she holds degrees in English Literature and nursing. Kaitlin's primary passion in theatre is Shakespeare which she lives out by serving as Co-President of the Shakespeare Company Food for Groundlings, for which she directed two full-length audio dramas. She also recently directed Macbeth for The Heritage Players. Kaitlin has completed Heartland Intimacy Design's Core Curriculum; Level 1certification from Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC); and multiple workshops with IDC, Theatrical Intimacy Education, and Intimacy for Stage & Screen. Recent intimacy choreography credits include *Radium Girls* at Heritage Players, *Romeo and Juliet* (Youth Shakespeare Society of Pittsburgh), and *The Wedding Singer* at East Allegheny High School. Otherwise, Kaitlin enjoys resting at home with her husband, Jonathan, and their four cats.

When determining whether certain practices are truly serving the disability community within the context of intimacy direction, I reflect on a quote that has been a guiding light to my approach to disability equity in the arts and in life: “If you aim for justice & equity, you'll hit diversity. If you aim for ‘diversity,’ you'll hit tokenism & justification of the unjust status quo.” (Berry 2021). This quote from teaching pastor Rasool Berry has guided me when navigating the intersection of lived experience and art, especially as a disabled intimacy director with chronic pain and rare diseases working as a disability nurse educator outside of the theatre. In my working framework, the moral underpinnings of disability-related considerations in theatre are closely tied to “disability justice”: a concept whose strategies are focused on dismantling the *causes of* systems of inequity and which understands that each body is unique, essential, and has both strengths and needs (Berne 2020).

I believe that intimacy directors and choreographers can ethically aim for, and get closer to achieving, disability justice within the artistic profession by centering accessibility in our care for artists’ boundaries and by considering inclusion, rather than simply checking a box for “diversity.” I believe my experiences in both directing able-bodied actors in their performances of disabled characters and in choreographing intimacy pertaining to disabled characters may lead to insights that other intimacy directors can weave into their own practices. This contribution to the field stands against the historic erasure of the work of disabled artists in consent-based practices, as those “whose work has gone unnamed” in this field are largely “artists of color, women, disabled individuals, trans and nonbinary individuals whose own experiences of disempowerment in society and in the performance industry forced them to forge practices to protect themselves” (Villarreal 2022). By sharing my experiences as a director, intimacy director, and disabled artist, I hope to continue in “the aim of strengthening and growing the accessible body of knowledge of intimacy professionals, practitioners, and educators” (Pace, Rikard and Villarreal 2022) and add to our collective professional work as we “shift our focus to creating spaces of acceptable risk” and do the very best we can to implement structures and practices that support participants (Rikard and Villarreal 2023).

## The Praxis of a Disabled Intimacy Director

The first consideration I make as a disabled intimacy director is whether or not a theatrical space is as accessible as possible to actors and crew members with various disabilities. It is rare that a theatre company or venue wants to *avoid* being welcoming. However, it means little to say "You are welcome here" or "You won't experience discrimination here" if the person in question cannot get in the door and is either dismissed or relegated to disabled-only roles. The concept that intention-to-include does not itself create a positive impact has been discussed broadly, including by Laura Rikard and Dr. Amanda Rose Villarreal, who write: "Simply stating that a creative process or environment is a 'safe space'...does not actually make safety the reality" (Rikard and Villarreal 2023). With the goal of continually working toward disability justice, I will discuss ways in which intimacy directors can create spaces and employ practices that facilitate "acceptable risk" (Rikard and Villarreal 2023), including how to be as inclusive and accessible as possible for actors with disabilities.

Professional spaces and companies can set themselves up for success by offering to receive–while not demanding–disclosure of access needs as early as possible. An intimacy director (ID) can do so through simply asking *each* person–as invisible disabilities exist–what supports they need to function and work optimally. For example, in a physical space, one might make sure that the entrance is accessible to someone with a physical or mobility disability or facilitate and offer an alternative accessible entrance. One can ask each cast member, from pre-audition planning on: "What would you like us to know or provide so that you can participate fully and confidently in this space and process?"

I have found that it is also important to consider breaks. While union break guidelines exist, these were largely established without disabled artists in mind, and do not serve every artist's needs. Some individuals could benefit from a place that is separate and quiet where they can go to rest (due to pain or exertional needs) or a space that is quiet and private (for Autistic and neurodivergent individuals to tend to their sensory needs). If the ID has inquired about needs early in the process as described above, they will be prepared to advocate and advise other staff in considering provision of water, snacks, etc. while also noting food and material allergies that may come into play with props, costuming, etc. Staff may also need to know if an individual needs to regularly break for food or drink.

A list of questions for theatres to ask themselves to ensure access for all actors is available in a 2019 blog post *"Inclusion and Accessibility for Performers with Disabilities"* by Wendy Duke. This list includes, but is not limited to, making sure that there are enough accessible parking spaces close to the entrance; ensuring access to all areas for actors who cannot use steps; considering stage access from both the wings and house; and ensuring that there are restrooms close to the stage for performers who may need them (Duke 2019). I believe that this supports the opportunity for production staff to ask actors, possibly on a pre-audition casting sheet, if they prefer to play a character whose identity as written aligns with their own, as well as asking whether actors would like elements of their lived identities—including disabilities—to be highlighted in their interpretation of the character.

Design choices may also influence the accessibility of the rehearsal and performance space. Lighting may affect sensory and vision considerations (Duke 2019). Set design may benefit from similar considerations, such as designers making sure that actors with physical, vision, hearing, and sensory access can move around the stage easily and safely (Duke 2019). The costume department can accommodate wheelchair users and users of other mobility aids, as well as actors with sensory needs. If an actor needs visual, mobility, or hearing accommodations, the whole production will run smoother when those needs are considered and addressed. Another possibility is working with a specialist whose training includes how to make spaces accessible in order to ensure that the space is as accessible as possible (Sylvester 2021).

The above considerations may also assist in determination of optimal approaches to intimacy direction of actors with disabilities. I only recently began implementing specific disability notes into boundary exercises with actors. It is also now my practice to consider disability when navigating boundaries and consent in exercises and choreography. During a boundary exercise, I now encourage actors to discuss their boundaries, using the language introduced by Pace and Rikard as "fences" and "gates" (2020) related to any of the following: mobility aids such as a cane, walker, or wheelchair; vision and hearing aids; as well as areas of their body that may be painful to touch or move in a certain way or that are simply off-limits. A specific area may have a "gate" related to pain or function. For example: "My left shoulder cannot be moved backward further than 45 degrees" or "My left upper outer shoulder has a gate for levels of touch. Skin-level touch is accessible to me; however, I have a fence around muscle-level touch or greater."

I also recommend that casting directors carefully consider prioritizing casting disabled actors in disabled roles. This provides opportunity and avoids engaging in some call "cripping up" or "disability drag" (Brown 2021). It's not as if disabled actors are not out there! And if they aren't engaging with a certain theatre or production, I as the ID want to ask myself why not, and consider how to improve invitation and engagement, as well as how to best create an environment that supports disabled actors and meets their needs. I would be remiss if I did not also mention the importance of considering and prioritizing, when possible, casting disabled actors as characters originally written as *non*-disabled, as well. Allison Cameron Gray, an actor with cerebral palsy and a speech disability who uses a walker and a wheelchair, says: "It's very important that we don't have to play characters with disabilities, because disability is natural…and I think it would help destigmatize the disability community if we could just be people" (qtd.in Brown 2021).

## Insights into Disability and Intimacy Direction from Audio Drama Production

During the height of COVID-19, to facilitate actors' work when actors could not share space and to solidify income flow for institutions, many attempts to make "pandemic-accessible theatre" established ways of creating and viewing theatre through digital means. While the original goal was to solidify income flow for institutions and artists, these efforts increased accessibility to opportunities to participate in, and to watch, theatrical production. As the pandemic waned, the practices which had boosted accessibility were stripped away to re-prioritize bringing audiences and actors back into theatre buildings, returning to practices that exclude disabled artists. This left many disabled artists feeling left behind. After all, it was proven that efforts to promote accessibility *could* be done, and they could be successful.

Directing an audio drama production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* recently, several experiences led me to develop new insight into the intersection of disability and intimacy direction. Before discussing one of the most notable disabled characters from Elizabethan theatre, however, I will note one reason that audio drama can be uniquely accessible in the context of disability theatre discourse: it allows artists and audiences to engage from their personal spaces, which are already adapted to accommodate their needs.

For the past couple of years, I have had the pleasure of serving on the board of a theatre company that has produced audio dramas of Shakespeare's works with the explicit goal of disability accessibility and COVID-related safety. Through thoughtfully designed and fully-produced audio dramas, complete with sound effects and music, we aim to create an experience that feels equivalent to listening to a well-produced a movie. Rehearsals and recordings can take place from the comfort of one's home with one's usual accommodations and without additional physical limitations.

Even in this physically distanced art form, there are possibilities to create solid practices and helpful considerations for abled actors who are playing disabled characters. The actor playing Richard and I–as the director–discussed disability at length; he does not identify as having a physical disability. The conversation with this actor delved deep into disability discourse. He was conscious of the potential to stray into ableist stereotypes and tropes, and he wanted to avoid doing so in his performance; of equal consideration was the fact that neither he nor I wanted to *ignore* the centrality of disability to his character. Consulting with someone who has a physical disability themselves can add insight and provoke disability-consciousness for an actor portraying disability with which they have no lived experience; in this case, it was myself as the director–someone with a physical disability–who conversed with the actor playing the titular role.

In an audio drama, the audience cannot see Richard's physical disabilities, such as the "crookback" and "withered" arm that both *Henry VI, Part 3* (1.4.75) and *Richard III* (3.4.70) describe, much less observe how these disabilities intersect with intimacy in storytelling; therefore, additional work must be done to clarify the importance of these aspects of the character to the narrative. In rehearsing Act 1, Scene 2 and Richard's exchange with Lady Anne, the actors and I acknowledged that, if we doubted that Anne would ever actually have romantic feelings for Richard, it might be useful to ask ourselves *why* we think so, and whether that reasoning is based on his actions or on the audience's presumed biases based on socialized perceptions of physical appearance, ability, and other-ness.

We also had to deal with navigating boundaries and consent in the audio medium. My experience has led me to the conclusion that audio productions benefit from considering boundaries and consent, making the experience "safer" for the actors, recognizing that the terms "safe" and "safe space" have been historically insufficient and utilized as a misleading marketing tool for ID/IC services. Rikard and Villarreal (2023) examine the origin of the term "safe space" and the ways in which this term has been appropriated from its origins in queer communities by higher education administrators and theatre artists, resulting in 'safety' being defined by the comfort of the leader in the room. As faculty members of Theatrical Intimacy Education and as scholars of consent-based performance and leaders in performance pedagogy, Rikard and Villarreal analyze "safe" spaces as aspirational, something artists can continually strive for, rather than being an achievable state, writing: "safety is subjective... Facilitators of spaces can never know exactly what any particular person will need in order to perceive themselves as 100% safe" (7-8). However, they conclude that artistic facilitators "can acknowledge that no space is truly 'safe' due to the power imbalances that are ever-present and can acknowledge that being asked to remain 'brave' is a difficult task that requires more effort from those whose identities have been historically marginalized. We can provide time, space, and actionable tools that can facilitate the process of caring for the needs of those who are concerned about their safety… and we can ensure that these tools are practiced, modeled, and used. By using these tools, we support those who need care in asking for it without fear of retaliation, and without requiring them to do the unpaid labor of educating" the leader of the space about their needs (8). Aligning with their analysis, my working definition of "safety" is "existing and operating within established boundaries," which requires supporting actors in communicating their boundaries. While IDs cannot achieve a "safe space," what IDs *can* do is understand that it is a collective and communal responsibility for people to care for one another's safety; clearly communicate that "the construct of safety is dependent and built upon each individual's perspective, privilege, and life experiences" (Rikard and Villarreal 6); provide time, space, and tools to meet the needs of those concerned about safety; and inform participants of identified risks. "Safety" is also often marketed as the ID's sole purpose, and I have heard many versions of "We wouldn't need intimacy professionals if there weren't problematic people (i.e. potential boundary-breakers) in theatre." I want to address this as, at best, incomplete. The intimacy discipline *would* still be needed, in my opinion, even if we had assurance of the good will and character of everyone in the room, to facilitate meaningful art through communication of boundaries and consent and through the consent-based creation of choreography. Furthermore, as movement specialists with training in the detailed movement-based performance of intimacy, the work of an ID can enhance performances even when the cast and creative team are already working in a consent-based practice. Safety is a factor to be considered, but there is danger in painting IDs as "responsible for everyone's mental health and safety," as some IDs have done in the past (qtd in Rikard and Villarreal 2023).

How might creating "spaces of acceptable risk" work in the audio/vocal space? I found that one way for the actors to foster communal responsibility to and understanding of each other was to establish a shared understanding of the imagined blocking of the show. This was especially helpful during Act 4, Scene 4, during which Richard is trying to strong-arm Queen Elizabeth into giving her daughter (also named Elizabeth) to him in marriage.

An issue we ran into in this process was the lack of opportunity for the actors to “play off of " each other: to see their actions and words effect a response in their scene partner. I expect this challenge in such a medium, but the actors highlighted this limitation’s impacts in the scenes between Richard and Lady Anne and between Richard and Elizabeth due to the intensity and violence of the storytelling in these exchanges. Because of the modality in which we were working, character discussions, line notes, and rehearsal still left us feeling like something was missing; without in-person energy exchange and the capacity to respond to one another in shared space, the scenes lacked momentum and fell a bit flat. After workshopping the Richard/Elizabeth scene one evening, we found ourselves suggesting blocking using tools that would typically be employed by an ID in-person. What was initially an experiment turned into something I continued to practice from that day on: we collectively suggested ideas, experimented with options, and agreed to a shared understanding of the imagined blocking in the scene.

On Elizabeth’s line “But thou did’st kill my children" (4.4.445), our imagined blocking had the actor playing Elizabeth slowly close the distance between herself and Richard. Richard replies to the line about Elizabeth’s murdered children with, “But in your daughter’s womb I bury them.” (4.4.446). Here we decided that Richard completes the closing of distance between himself and Elizabeth until his face is inches from hers in a moment of physical and positional domination. This line is deeply disturbing, and therefore, supporting the actors with choreography for their *characters* was found to be a valuable tool. We also imagined Elizabeth backing away on her last line of the scene, and after her exit, although Richard got what he wanted, it was not without great frustration and perceived insolence. We imagined (and supported with sound effects), Richard violently throwing and breaking a glass on his line “Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!” (4.4.454). Within the shared imagined blocking, we also agreed to uphold each participant’s boundaries, including *auditory* boundaries. For example: does an actor have a boundary around being “yelled at" (even in character)? It was also effective and beneficial to conduct regular check-ins before and after scenes to ensure the actors felt supported. By establishing imagined blocking, we upheld actors’ boundaries while enriching their performances of the scenes. Imagined blocking allowed actors to share an understanding of what was occurring and what they were using breath and voice to react to, while increasing the actors’ artistic agency and sense of control, safety, and trust in the process, in one another, and in the product they were collaborating in creating. This process aligns with the concept of the “agentic gaze” as introduced by Villarreal (2021), expanded upon by Villarreal, Poynton, and Martineau (2021), and further defined by Villarreal (2024) as: “an adapted directorial practice in order to create a dialectic among collaborators characterized by agentic symmetry.”

This approach was effective not only in meeting the actors’ expressed needs for clarity of what each other’s responses and actions looked like, but also in achieving responses from listeners that were incredibly engaged and invested. I observed several listeners pause and quite literally drop their jaws, something I’ve certainly never observed in response to an audio drama. The actors’ creativity, teamwork, and commitment to communal well-being was the catalyst for this approach and is absolutely what I credit for the beautiful outcome of this recorded scene, among others.

Such an approach differs from other techniques for staging audio drama in that it grew out of both a creative desire to engage with the characters and given circumstances as well as the actors’ concern for each other’s well-being. We checked in with each other before and after the scene; we communicated using the tools and language I use in physical intimacy direction; I asked the actors about physical boundaries in the imagined playing space and vocal boundaries, something we began to do at each rehearsal and recording, and we communicated if anything had changed or needed to be modified each day. We also prioritized respect for the portrayal of a disabled character that should not, in my opinion, be separated from his disability as it informs so many of his choices and behaviors. The performers were more secure, and a disabled voice was on board to support and facilitate dialogue, which I was honored to do with these committed and creative performers.

In addition to the above, I found it helpful to offer descriptions of self-care practices for audio drama actors, as well as to employ a de-roling practice, tools IDs often offer to support actors’ mental and emotional boundaries. I communicated what I as the director could offer in terms of support and offered suggestions for self-care and de-roling practices, especially as separating oneself from a character may be potentially *more* difficult in a home recording space. I invited actors to participate in a guided de-roling process, as well as offering solo practices for actors, including “Stepping Out” or the “Alba Emoting Method” (Bloch 2017); Layer Separation; Name Reclamation; and lists for Character Differentiation (Pace and Rikard 2020). All of this was done to prioritize actors feeling supported and respected in the space– even if that “space” is entirely online, and a metaphorical collective creation. The suggestions for self-care during and after recording included: repetition of lines, vagal anchors, and Springboard Gestures. Repetition of one's lines alone can help create self-regulation (qtd. in Schreyer 2022, 57). We embraced the metaphor of "Vagal Anchors," a concept introduced by Deb Dana of the Polyvagal Institute to support individuals in seeking to manage their nervous system responses and pursue regulation (Schreyer 2022, 57). Springboard Gestures, a concept developed by Laura Rikard and discussed in Staging Sex (2020) and in Theatrical Intimacy Education "Best Practices" workshops, were identified as tools that could be used as vagal anchors (Schreyer 2022, 57). Such a gesture is a specific movement or sequence that lives in the world of the art piece to assist with mentally "exiting" a given action (Schreyer 2022, 57). Within our recording process, it was suggested that actors could decide on a movement to do by themselves when finished with a scene.

Finally, practices for dealing with elevated subject matter related to disability, even in the vocal-only space, were considered, as the actor's performance may still elicit the stresses, challenges, and sensations that occur in other modalities of performance. In audio drama, I considered that actors can benefit from familiarity with their fellow performers, as while the final performance is only heard by audience members, rather than seen, the actor's process still involves the combination of gestures, facial expressions, and physical impulses, as well as vocalizations, fueled by the given circumstances and their character's fictional intentions. These performed movements and words can have physiological effects, impacting the actor's thinking and bodily response. This is one reason why establishing boundaries and other consent-based practices are so important. By engaging in these practices, actors are better poised to achieve artistic freedom without unintentionally facilitating physiological distress in themselves or others.

## Insights Regarding Non-Disabled Actors' Representation of Disabled Characters, from a Disabled Intimacy Director

Disabled people are underrepresented in all aspects of life, and those few representations are overwhelmingly stereotyped and minimized. Many theatres attempt to check the box of "diversity" by way of representation. Yet representation alone is not enough to create and ensure "disability-attentive artistry," a term defined by Busselle et al. as being "alert to the artistic possibilities that emerge when we practice care for our bodies" (2022). It does the artists and the art no good to provide opportunities for people with disabilities if theatre companies do not also embrace the access needs of performers. As noted in the beginning of this piece, it does not matter how many people are invited into the room if the room is completely inhospitable to them once they get there (Johnson 2022; Rikard and Villarreal 2023). Intimacy directors can, however, unlock insights that facilitate powerful performances of intimate scenes by being attentive to artists' bodies and needs, and to disability in particular. Although this section will discuss how a group can best facilitate a non-disabled actor in playing a disabled character, it is important to both welcome and fully consider disabled actors during the casting process.

The example I engage here comes from insights I recently gained in the role of intimacy director in the play *Radium Girls* (Gregory 2015). Discussions with actors explored the situational reality of non-disabled actors playing disabled characters, and also discussed internalized ableism, asking some questions prompted by my own experience. *Radium Girls* is a play inspired by a true story which follows the story oif Grace Fryer and other young girls who worked as dial painters, using radium-laced paint in the early 20th Century. "In 1926…the girls who painted the dials began to fall ill with a mysterious disease," most of them developing conditions that came with severe chronic pain and eventual death (Gregory 2015).

My experience choreographing and directing intimacy in this production largely involved the actor playing Grace Fryer, who does not identify as disabled, and our conversations about Grace's acquired (and progressive) physical disabilities and pain, led to several key insights. As a disabled person, I am hesitant to co-sign non-disabled actors portraying disabled characters; however, our production took the position that it is not always morally wrong for an actor without a specific disability to portray it. We took this position in the case of characters with radium poisoning, a historical disability that has been minimized due to government regulations in the handling and use of radium that limit the public's exposure to radiation today. Furthermore, due to the importance of the character's journey with the sudden onset and progression of a new disability, casting actors without a disability could support the storytelling by highlighting Grace's experience as someone without a disability before showing her journey with disability. In cases in which the actors do not share the character's specific disability, it can be helpful for the actor portraying that character to gain insight from someone who is disabled or experiences symptoms and/or pain similar to that of the character. In this case, I happened to be both. In my opinion, it is walking a tightrope to do this without being inherently exploitative, therefore, we all agreed to check in with each other regularly to avoid that as best we could.

The character's disability and pain impacted how I choreographed moments of intimacy in *Radium Girls*. Many of our questions and insights as a collective arose during discussion of scenes involving intimacy between the character Grace and her fiancé, Tom. Grace experiences physical pain from almost the beginning of the play due to her exposure to radium. The radiation poisoning that is beginning to affect Grace has already claimed the lives of several of her former co-workers, and Grace realizes that she does not have long to live. She also knows that, for the rest of her life, she will continue to experience increasing physical disability and pain, a co-occurring reality and lived experience for many disabled individuals.

In one scene, Tom asks Grace for a kiss and she is reluctant. Once she does kiss him, it becomes obvious that Tom notes some expression of pain, as his first line after they break from their kiss is to ask Grace "Is your tooth hurting?" (Gregory 2015). Later in the play, Grace breaks off her engagement with Tom. While working on this scene, I–as the ID–asked the actor how much internalized ableism–feeling like "I will be a burden", or "I will ruin my partner's life by being disabled"–played into Grace's decision to end her relationship. After I inquired, the actor noted that she had not yet considered that for her character, and very respectfully asked if it would be ableist for her, as a non-disabled actor, to portray such a thing. That led me to ask for consent to self-disclose and when given permission, I discussed how it can feel to have internalized thoughts about one's body as a "burden" to one's partner, as well as how associated feelings can manifest differently in different partnerships. That led to another insight: that ableism, especially internalized ableism in relationships with others, can *itself* be deeply painful and even traumatic–not just the diagnosis or disease process causing the disability and physical symptoms. These two scenes prompted important discussion of subjects acutely familiar to many in the disability community, including how physical pain and disabilities affect our ability to be physically intimate with, and express physical affection to, a significant other, and the broad range of feelings that often arise from such circumstances.

The reality that ableism can be deeply traumatic, and the fact that acting out trauma can cause distress (Burgoyne 1999), and therefore actors can benefit from tools such as de-roling and debriefing. Discussion about Grace's evolving frame of mind in relation to her disability, especially at the end of the play, informed how the actor could portray Grace throughout her journey, and the progression of her disability, with respect. The more the group considered disability-related questions, the more complex, beautiful, and truthful the scenes of intimacy appeared.

## Conclusion

When carefully considering the above case studies in light of recommendations and best practices from practitioners and scholars in the field of consent-based performance, we as intimacy directors can confidently advise each other and guide ourselves. I have discussed how theatre spaces and the intimacy direction process can become more inclusive and accessible for actors with disabilities by employing inclusion and accommodation practices; relayed insights into how audio dramas can be a robust way to create and disseminate theatre that is accessible to disabled actors and audience members; examined important considerations about intimacy direction that can and, I believe, should be employed when directing an audio drama; and finally, reviewed how facilitating disability-informed conversations and sharing relevant lived experience with actors can create effective performance and unlock insights that allow complex and beautiful expression of intimate scenes with disability in mind. I offer again the direction from Rasool Berry to "aim for justice & equity" when considering disability in the performance industry and in life. With this as our true north, we as intimacy professionals can discover many safe and artistically effective ways in which to weave together disability and intimacy praxis.

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# Interweaving Accessibility into Theatre: Working with Disabled Creatives for Disabled Audiences as a Disabled Theatre Maker

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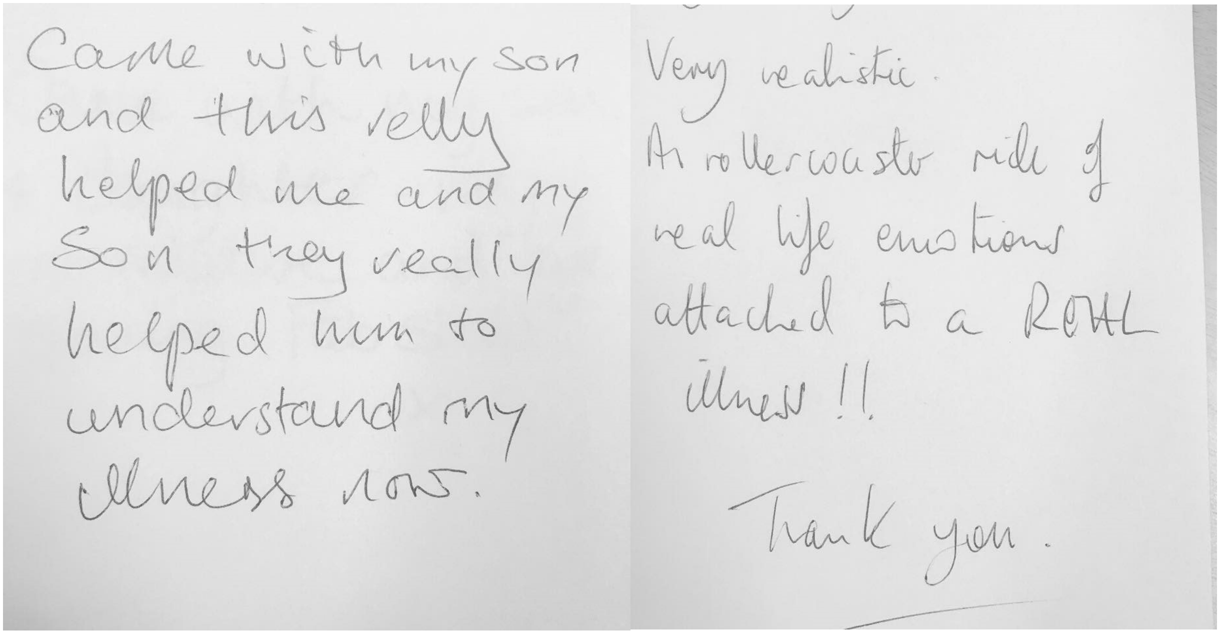
## Introduction

In 2016, while attending a conference, I had an idea for a new creative project. I was heavily pregnant and struggling with mobility problems, and my accessibility needs were unmet or ignored in most public spaces, perhaps because I didn't 'look' disabled. It dawned on me that invisible disabilities were a subject that required investigation through a creative medium. The project I started to formulate would be titled *Living with…* and would produce four different public events, each one exploring a health condition or disorder that isn't visible. The events included a multi-media exhibition, a site-specific performance installation, and interdisciplinary arts workshops. However, in this note from the field, I want to examine and reflect on just one of these events–a performance installation entitled *Living with…FiBrOmYaLgiA (WordForWord Arts, 2018)* that used poetry, verbatim interviews, medical research, video projections, and intricate sound design to explore the painful condition of fibromyalgia. This note from the field is a reflection on how, as a disabled artist, I developed a production with accessibility at the forefront of my practice. This will also include a reflection on how consent and disability, alongside representation, was woven into the production throughout the creative process. Lastly, it will include a discussion with disabled actress Esther Ridgway (who co-devised and performed in the production) on her experience of *Living with…FiBrOmYaLgiA* (WordForWord Arts, 2018) and her experiences of being a disabled performer in the arts industry.

## A Brief Overview of my Long-Term Illness

Fibromyalgia is a somewhat controversial topic. The condition–which I have lived with since 2015–causes symptoms that include chronic fatigue, widespread pain, and anxiety (Goebel et al 2021, 1). It is one of the most common pain conditions that has no cure but is often met with derision. The condition cannot be diagnosed through a medical test, but through a process of elimination–when other conditions are ruled out, you are told you have Fibromyalgia. I have directly experienced skepticism regarding fibromyalgia including one individual who, after I shared my diagnosis with them, responded by asking "isn't that the illness that doesn't exist?" The ferocity of the skeptical lashing out towards this condition and those who endure it cannot be understated. In fact, during my research process for of *Living with…FiBrOmYaLgiA,* I came across a website called fibromyass.com. It is thankfully no longer available, but in 2017 it was a multi-page website dedicated to mocking the condition and those who suffer from it. During the production we heard many anecdotal examples of negative experiences from interviewees and audience members. In fact, the latter had often brought their family members to see the performance because they didn't take the condition seriously.



Came with my son and this relly helped me and my Son they really helped him to understand my illness now.

Very realistic.
An rollercoaster ride of real life emotions attached to a REAL illness!!

Thank you.

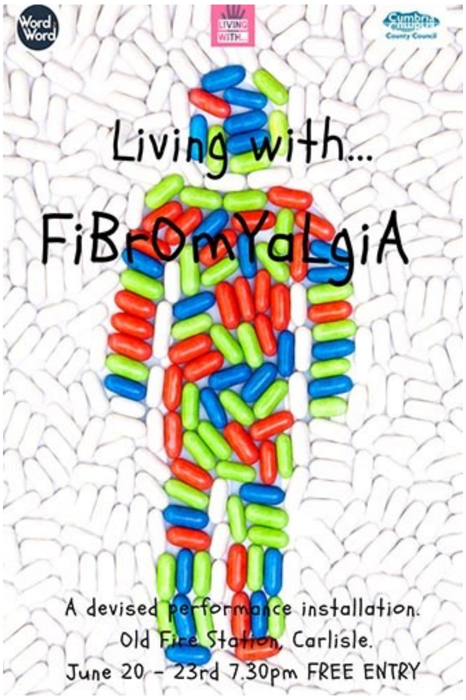
*Anonymous feedback from audience members.*

In 2021 a new study at King's College in London showed ground-breaking evidence that fibromyalgia is caused by antibodies that affect pain-sensing nerves (Goebal et al 2021, 7), although whether this scientific discovery will alter the public perception of the condition is yet to be seen.

There have been previous projects that investigated the value of theatre to those who experience Fibromyalgia, such as research studies examining the impact of dramatherapy on Fibromyalgia patients (Horwitz, Kowalski and Anderberg 2010, 13-19). The focus of these projects has been on improving the wellbeing of those with Fibromyalgia, while *Living with…FiBrOmYaLgiA* was focused on offering a platform to sufferers and having a direct impact on audience members regarding awareness and perception of the condition.

## The Project

The show was performed in 2018 at The Old Fire Station in Carlisle, Cumbria in the United Kingdom. It was conceptualized as an embodiment of life with Fibromyalgia, exploring the physical symptoms, the negative perceptions of the condition, the trauma of navigating the UK's disability benefit system, the loss of identity felt by sufferers, and the frustration of a medical system that struggles to help Fibromyalgia patients. It wasn't quite a manifesto. It made no demands other than for the illness to be taken seriously and for the experiences of those who live with it to be seen as valid. It was a plea for the simple dignity of acknowledgement.



*Poster design for the production.*

The show was a thirty-minute performance that was performed three times per evening across four evenings. There was a thirty-minute break in between each performance and an informal aesthetic to the event–there was no backstage area, and the technical aspects of the show were very visible. The cast and crew relaxed on the set or audience seats during the break. The performance was created collaboratively with a group of ten actors with poetry, medical information, and interviews with Fibromyalgia patients used as devising materials. Some excerpts of text found on the now-defunct fibromyass.com were even incorporated, showing the vitriol Fibromyalgia sufferers can receive from others. The production was interdisciplinary and included physical theatre, choral work, and a movement sequence choreographed to an intricately designed soundscape by Finn Drude. It also included live streamed video of actor Aimee Irwin's face from a go-pro camera onto one of the performance space walls.

The set was made of duvets, blankets, cushions and pillows, and the cast were dressed in their own pajamas. Approximately 50% of the cast and production team had a disability of some kind, including 25% who live with Fibromyalgia.

*During rehearsals*

The verbatim content initiated some interesting discussions among the cast as the interviewees' answers occasionally showed hypocrisy or contained opinions that cast members didn't agree with. For the able-bodied members of the cast, it appeared to be revelatory that disabled people can be flawed, judgemental and even unpleasant at times; this helped us to recognize the ways in which ableism creates monolithic images of those with disabilities, often casting disabled people as either monsters or martyrs. As well as negative ableist views towards people with disabilities, well-intentioned infantilisations are also prevalent in society (Robey et al 2006). The contradictory sections of verbatim text, when used in performance, established truthfully flawed and multifaceted individuals; this made the use of verbatim text vital to offering nuanced, authentic representations of the experience of living with Fibromyalgia.

We also discussed the responsibility required when using others' sensitive experiences in generating public performance; because the verbatim text had been sourced from arguably vulnerable individuals, we questioned established practices related to verbatim text, reflecting upon the ethics of using other peoples' stories. Were the standard consent forms provided and signed before the interviews sufficient to protect interviewees? There is ongoing debate about how consent and disability intersect. While infantilisation is egregious, exploiting those with a disability is harmful and can be easily done without intent. Unspoken power imbalances between disabled and able-bodied individuals can be felt consciously or subconsciously by a disabled person, making consent difficult to navigate (Boettcher et al 2022, 5). Mia Mingus writes that “disabled people get told we must shrink ourselves and our desires to settle for living in the wake of an able-bodied parade” (2017), conveying the pressure disabled people may feel to please or to conform to expectations so they will be included. This pressure could be felt by an interviewee who is keen to please the interviewer and give the answers they suspect the interviewer wants. Noting these complicating factors, we determined that it was important to ensure that interviewees for this project could withdraw their interviews and statements at any time, and that these materials were used respectfully in a performance crafted by those with shared lived experience.

### Inclusivity in Practice, Not Just Principle

Inclusivity was a priority throughout our production process, informing all decision-making. The devising process was designed to be collaborative, with open discussion about the topics and how they were being communicated to an audience. With this in mind, I sought to a cast and production team (technicians, designers, and a dramaturg) who could bring different perspectives and lived experience with disability to the rehearsal room. While this choice was important for representation, the inclusion of disabled creatives added complexities with consent that needed to be navigated. Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard write “when an actor doesn’t know how a director will feel about them establishing clear boundaries, with their reputation potentially on the line, they will say yes, knowing that ‘yes, and’ is the safest choice” (Pace and Rikard 2020, 8). If this is true of able-bodied actors, then disabled actors may feel further compelled to agree to staging, dialogue and choreography that they aren’t comfortable performing. In 2020, 95% of disabled characters were played by able-bodied actors (Kataja 2020) and the scarcity of employment for disabled actors may cause them to prioritise pleasing directors, producers, and fellow actors over their own well-being for the reasons established by Pace and Rikard. We chose to combat this during our production; consent was promoted through all actors having autonomy regarding their movement choices on stage. We collectively created a vocabulary of physical actions to use during the movement sequence that could be used in whatever order and speed the individual performer chose.

*Actors Chloe Lobley and Esther Ridgway exploring their movement vocabulary.*

There was no requirement for synchronization with the rest of the cast or for maintaining the same pattern of movement from one performance to the next. The performers' choices did not impact other cast members or the meaning of the production, eliminating pressure. Creatively, the use of a shared movement vocabulary added a sense of commonality within the cast, demonstrating a shared physical language that inferred the similar experiences of those with Fibromyalgia. At the same time, the lack of uniformity and synchronization also visually illustrated individuality and variety in relationships with the condition. Through enabling the cast to alter their delivery of the movements for each performance, it also allowed the production to evolve creatively. From a practical, consent-minded perspective, this approach allowed those with disabilities in the cast to decide where their level of discomfort or 'acceptable risk' (Rikard and Villarreal 2023) was during each performance. From my own personal experience, I was acutely aware of that level varying from one day to the next, as conditions like fibromyalgia can have 'flare ups' in which the severity of symptoms increases. Removing the demand to replicate exact choreography for each performance made the actors' participation in the production physically and emotionally more accessible, displayed trust in their creative choices as craftspeople, and also allowed them to push themselves when and how they wanted to.

The set and costumes were selected to represent the large amount of time that many Fibromyalgia sufferers spend in bed due to their symptoms. For costume, cast (and crew) could wear their favourite pajamas. The looseness of most pajamas facilitated movement, and–similarly to the movement sequence–established a shared theme and a sense of commonality while also featuring individuality.

The set, composed of bedding and blankets, was also partly supplied by the cast so there was a sense of genuine comfort when lying down in the performance space. The padding offered by a set created of bedding also served the access needs of actors with health issues such as joint pain by transforming hard floors into surfaces upon which they could sit, kneel or lie as needed during each performance, prompting rest when needed and increasing comfort.

The design team also maintained creative autonomy throughout our process, developing the sound and projection designs after discussions and research. The devising of sequences, and my direction of them, was responsive to the sound and production design rather than dictatorial. While discussions about tone and theme were key in unifying the production, the creative output of the production team informed and developed the content of the sequences. My aim was to encourage the production team to feel comfortable to voice opinions, assert boundaries if needed, and feel confident that their work would be respected.

During the logistical planning of the production, accessibility was built into decisions regarding the length of the show, the performance times, the venue, and the cost to attend. The performances were free, enabling those who may struggle to work due to health issues an opportunity to engage with theatre without the cost being a concern. The venue that was chosen had been renovated recently and met accessibility standards. The performances were devised to be a maximum of thirty minutes long, as longer than this would potentially be painful for someone with a condition such as Fibromyalgia to sit. By repeating the performance three times per evening with thirty-minute gaps in between, we created flexibility for those attending. Leaving the house to arrive at a specific time can be stressful, painful, and simply impossible for many disabilities including chronic pain conditions. We offered free hot drinks in between performances so if someone was late for one performance they can have a cup of tea or coffee while they wait for the next one. This also gave audiences the opportunity to reflect on the production after viewing a performance, offer feedback, and even wait to watch the next performance if they wish. Even with these alterations, some potential audience members (including some interviewees) were too unwell to attend any of the performances. To provide access to these individuals (and those situated far from the venue location), we livestreamed the final performance on our social media pages, receiving almost two thousand views.

## A Reflection with Esther Ridgway

When writing this reflection, I consulted one of the cast members from *Living with…FiBrOmYaLgiA*, Esther Ridgway. Esther was born with Noonan Syndrome and Periventricular Leukomalacia, and she provided incredibly valuable insight during the production process. I asked her for her reflections on the production and her thoughts on being a disabled actor. The following is a transcript of our reflection during this conversation.

**Grace Thomas:** Six years on, what are your thoughts on Living with…FiBrOmYaLgiA?

**Esther Ridgway:** It was a great show to bring people awareness of what life with a hidden disability looks like. Even though, at the time, my disability was hidden - I didn't need to use crutches or sticks as I do now - I felt like a fraud if I said that I had a disability.

This show lets people realise the hardships that people who don't look disabled but have long-term health conditions go through. I felt that working on this show gave me that sense of belonging as well that I could work with a theatre company and express the needs I had during rehearsals but also for the show, making sure that I had extra blankets and pillows, so I didn't hurt myself. The show and everyone working on it gave me that voice so I can say what is working for me and my body and what isn't, which is crucial for me.

**Grace Thomas:** So, does having a disability sometimes affect how you behave in the rehearsal room? Do you feel like consent and saying "no" is impaired?

**Esther Ridgway:** We are now hearing in both the theatre and film and TV world how intimacy coordinators help make the actors feel safe when doing things due to incidents in the past with #MeToo. I think things like intimacy coordinators need to exist with disabled actors, especially if they work with a director that has never worked with people with disabilities before. That way people can say what is working for them, what isn't, and see if they can work around it. Especially as we know what our bodies are like and what we can handle, and most of the time, we can handle a lot.

**Grace Thomas**: Do you worry about employability as a disabled actress?

**Esther Ridgway**: Years ago, I never classed myself as a disabled actress because even though I had a disability, it was never really an issue. I was fit and healthy, and I was able to walk long distances and go running without any issue to my body. But as I got older, things changed. I noticed years ago that when I applied for roles and I'd say I'm a disabled actress, I rarely received a response for an audition. When I removed that information, I was asked to audition. However, this is changing. For example, DANC (Disabled Artists Networking Community) has been excellent. They bring together people from all over the UK to network with casting directors, directors, theatre companies, producers, writers etc.

**Grace Thomas:** So, in your opinion, is there an improvement is disabled representation?

**Esther Ridgway**: Ten years ago, if there was a disabled character on TV, it was more than likely a non-disabled actor playing that role. It’s improving but only slightly. There have been actors who have said, "I don’t see the problem because it’s called acting, and that’s what we do." But it’s one less role that someone with a disability is missing out on!

**Grace Thomas:** And adaptations can be easily made to include disabled performers and crew members, surely?

**Esther Ridgway**: My first TV role was in *Doctors* on the BBC where I played a character who had a disability. The crew and director were terrific. They made sure I was ok. When I got the part, I told my agents what my needs were, and I said that if there were long times waiting around, I needed a chair to sit. I had that. The minibus taking me to the location was easy to get in and out of and my dressing room was downstairs, so I didn’t need to worry about climbing loads of stairs.

**Grace Thomas:** That’s wonderful. Are there any particularly negative experiences you’ve had as a disabled actor?

**Esther Ridgway:** One negative experience I had was when I was training at university. I was the only student who had a disability, and I loved to dance. But my tutors didn’t want to help me adapt the dances, they expected me to do them as choreographed. I’m not a natural dancer or a choreographer. I couldn’t get the lines or shapes right, my arms weren’t straight, and I felt like I was in a losing battle every time I was in the dance room.

But I feel and hope that there is now more support in place in higher education facilities when it comes to the arts, both with physical and hidden disabilities but also with people who are neurodivergent.

**Grace Thomas**: Still a long way to go! Thank you for sharing with me, Esther.

## Conclusion

When reflecting on my own practice during this production and listening to Esther, I become frustrated with the on-going battle for accessibility and inclusion within the arts. When creating this production, the adjustments and adaptations made increased the accessibility of the production for those making it and performing it, and for audiences watching it. However, it also enriched and informed the content, structure, and aesthetic of the production, offering new insights and complexities to my initial concept. Inclusivity and accessibility should be a consideration for every theatre maker because, as well as offering meaningful creative experiences to everyone, the theatre maker broadens their creative possibilities. Through working with disabled creatives and making theatre for disabled audiences, our view of the world broadens.

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# Crowdsourcing Content Guidance: A Commons-Based Approach to Harm Reduction in Theatre

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Sabrina Zanello Jackson (she) is an Argentinian-American dramaturg, researcher, text editor, director, teaching artist, and arts administrator. She was raised across U.S. cities and abroad and currently lives on Tohono O'odham and Pascua Yaqui land (Tucson, Arizona). Guided by an ethos of anti-oppression and Transformative Justice, her work aims to examine cycles of history, envision transformative civic engagement, and foster healing. Her research interests span consent work, Disability Justice, Mad Studies, interactivity and performance, archivism, and non-carceral responses to harm. Sabrina graduated with a BFA in Dramaturgy and a minor in Literature and Culture from Carnegie Mellon University in 2022. Recent work includes the hybrid musical *How the Light Gets In* (Project Manager), *Sharp Needle* at The Mercury Store (Dramaturg), and education and community engagement at Olney Theatre Center. To share ideas or get involved with the Crowdsourcing Content Guidance project, contact her via her website at www.SabrinaZanelloJackson.art.

## The Problem: "Suffer for Your Art"[1]

In the three years before my mother passed of cancer, I became more careful about engaging with stories of death. In 2021, I read Julia Izumi's *miku, and the gods.* (2021). I had heard so many praises of the play that I didn't bother to review its Subject Matter Keywords[2] on the New Play Exchange (NPX), which prominently include "grief" and "coming to terms with death." When the folkloric comedy about friendship, adventure, and Sumerian gods that I had anticipated turned out to be a profound exploration of death, grief, and ancestry, I was shaken. I sobbed all night and woke the next morning to eyes swollen half-shut. I don't regret reading the play, but I do regret not reaching out to friends for content warnings beforehand. Bracing myself before reading would have let me engage the text dramaturgically while shielding myself from the ultra-personal.

Content guidance—alternatively called content "warnings," "disclosures," or "advisories"—can benefit anyone, including artists. A fellow dramaturg, GG,[3] confided: "I cannot stand stories where an animal dies. When possible, I search DoesTheDogDie.com beforehand. If there's a chance of that happening but I don't know for sure, I won't engage with the narrative at all." Content advisories empower GG to engage with *more* content and do so with *greater* attentiveness, rather than be distracted by their anxieties about the unexpected.

Have you ever turned down watching a horror movie because it was too late at night? Content guidance can guide our choices based on mood or readiness. "I don't have any specific story, other than that every time I go to see a show, I feel empowered by content warnings," Stephen,[4] an actor, told me. "For example, am I prepared to see the embodiment of a sexual assault? Is that something I want to see on my Friday night?" While the discourse on content disclosures often focuses on ableism-ridden descriptions of survivors or neurodivergent people, content warnings are useful *regardless* of ability or trauma.

More theaters are recognizing the value of content warnings for audiences, but their importance for theatre-*makers* is still overlooked. The "tortured artist" myth persists. Great art is born of greater suffering. On the contrary, storytellers can benefit from content guidance as much as spectators. By not providing content guidance from the impetus of creative work, theatre institutions and educational theatre programs alike exclude artists with Madness[5]/mental illness, neurodivergence, sensory differences, and trauma and subject them to unsafe working conditions.

When arts organizations do not routinely provide content guidance in advance, they require individuals to come forward and request it. This can mean someone having to explain their trauma or come out as disabled for their request to be validated. Writer and Disability Justice organizer Mia Mingus describes this as forced intimacy: "the common, daily experience of disabled people being expected to share personal parts of ourselves to survive in an ableist world," (Mingus 2017). Until arts and educational institutions normalize content warnings as a tool beneficial for everyone regardless of ability, and provide them proactively, artists with disabilities and/or trauma will be "expected to 'strip down' and 'show all of our cards.'" In other words, discarding harm prevention/reduction methodologies makes it difficult for everyone to communicate consent—doubly so for disabled folks.

In the educational setting, requiring students to individually request content warnings can be a monumental access barrier due to the power dynamic between instructors and students. Students may fear retribution from their professors. This is doubly true for students of marginalized identities who face higher levels of scrutiny under ableist, white supremacist, and cisheterosexist systems. Just as Mingus asserts that "able-bodied people will not help you with your access unless they 'like' you," *Minor Feelings* author Cathy Park Hong emphasizes that students of color often feel obligated to achieve at higher standards than their white peers (Hong 2020, 32). If a student felt pressured to project "anonymous professionalism," and not "take up space nor make a scene," they would likely feel discouraged from proactively bidding for care.[6] We must remember that institutional hierarchies remain intact as long as they are structurally powered, whether in a professional or educational context. If those in power wish to counteract these hierarchical pressures, providing content warnings before being asked is an excellent way to demonstrate openness and compassion.

In response to the premise that the impacts of Madness/mental illness, neurodivergence, sensory differences, and trauma are not "severe," I contend that we shouldn't only care about people's wellbeing when there is risk of serious physical or psychological damage. When interviewed for a video on Transformative Justice,[7] Mia Mingus expressed:

> I think a lot of harm that happens is like death by a thousand cuts. And we often don't pay attention until there are so many little cuts that we're bleeding out. And then we rush… to the crisis and the emergency and we drop everything. But what if we started dropping everything when the little

> cuts happen? (Project NIA and the Barnard Center for Research on Women 2020)

Content warnings represent this exact opportunity. Let's move to a culture of care from the beginning of our theatrical processes, whether that be uploading a new play to NPX, writing script coverage, or kicking off a production timeline. Granted, content guidance is only one small part of harm prevention/reduction, but it is a worthy place to start treating those "little cuts."

*What if submitting content warnings only meant a few extra clicks?*

I believe one way to address our problem is to build a living, crowdsourced database of script content warnings for the theatre community. A recurring sentiment from critics is that implementing content disclosures requires unreasonable time and effort, at the expense of other work. Some script readers include content warnings in their coverage, but coverage is an inherently closed-door practice and varies by organization. With a crowdsourcing tool, content guidance could make it out of the rooms where literary management and season planning happen and into public service. The work is already happening, so why not put it to sustainable use?

In 2012, Gwydion Suilebhan dreamed up a centralized script repository to connect playwrights with producers (Suilebhan 2012), which catalyzed the birth of the New Play Exchange (Loewith and Suilebhan 2016). Similarly, this note from the field seeks to function as my concept for a crowdsourced content guidance database, exploring my prototyping process thus far and laying out the strengths and gaps of the current vision. I encourage readers to reach out with feedback or to get involved.

## A New Future: Crowdsourcing Content Guidance

I envision this commons-based approach being used on a global scale, making content warnings accessible online as easily as a plot synopsis. The intention is to provide a four-fold solution:

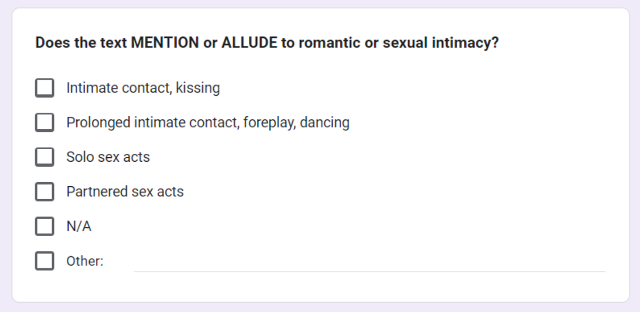
1. Provide support before the need arises, modeling access intimacy (Mingus 2011)
2. Archive this labor to reduce redundancy
3. Allow for multiple perspectives on the same play, modeling a culture of abundance
4. Cultivate a shared vocabulary for discussing sensitive content

The crowdsourcing tool has had two conceptualizations to date: the first practically, the second theoretically.

## A Brief Summary of Iteration 1.0

In 2021, I prototyped a database of playscript content advisories crowdsourced by and for my conservatory theatre program. All students, faculty, and staff were encouraged to (a) submit content warnings for a script they read for any reason (education, work, or pleasure) and (b) search the database for a play before reading it.

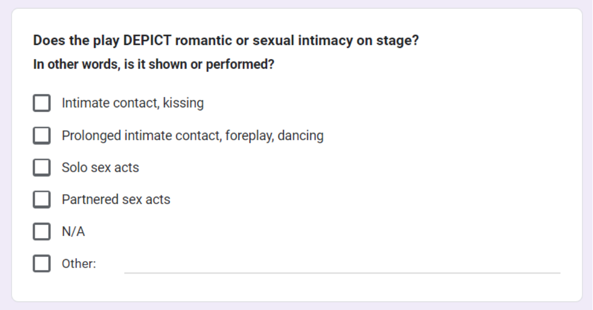
Content guidance was submitted via a Google Form, which organized content into six major categories: (1) strong or insensitive language, (2) nudity, (3) romantic or sexual intimacy, (4) sexual violence, (5) graphic violence, and (6) illness or trauma. Categories were meant to make it easier for people to submit warnings and to expedite database navigation. Each category was subsequently divided into "mentioned in the text" and "depicted on stage" (Figures 1–2).



**Does the text MENTION or ALLUDE to romantic or sexual intimacy?**

☐ Intimate contact, kissing
☐ Prolonged intimate contact, foreplay, dancing
☐ Solo sex acts
☐ Partnered sex acts
☐ N/A
☐ Other:

*Figure 1: Question about sexual content mentioned in the text from the Content Advisories by Play Google Form.*

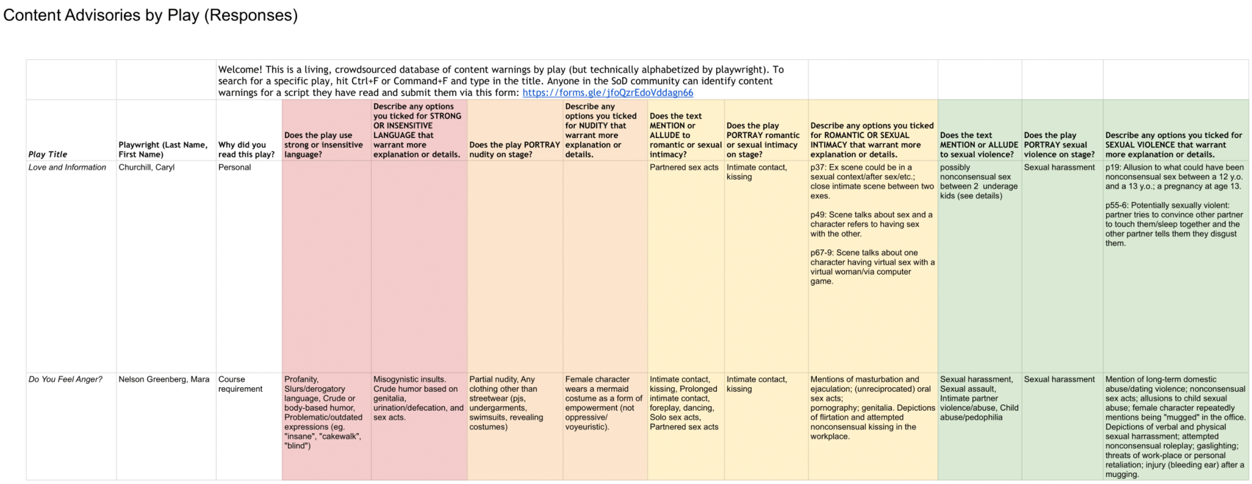


**Does the play DEPICT romantic or sexual intimacy on stage?**
**In other words, is it shown or performed?**

☐ Intimate contact, kissing
☐ Prolonged intimate contact, foreplay, dancing
☐ Solo sex acts
☐ Partnered sex acts
☐ N/A
☐ Other:

*Figure 2: Question about sexual content depicted on stage from the Content Advisories by Play Google Form.*

Form responses were automatically added to the Google Sheet (Figures 3–4). The Sheet was alphabetized by playwright's last name, making it easy for users to search via the hotkey Control+F or by scrolling.

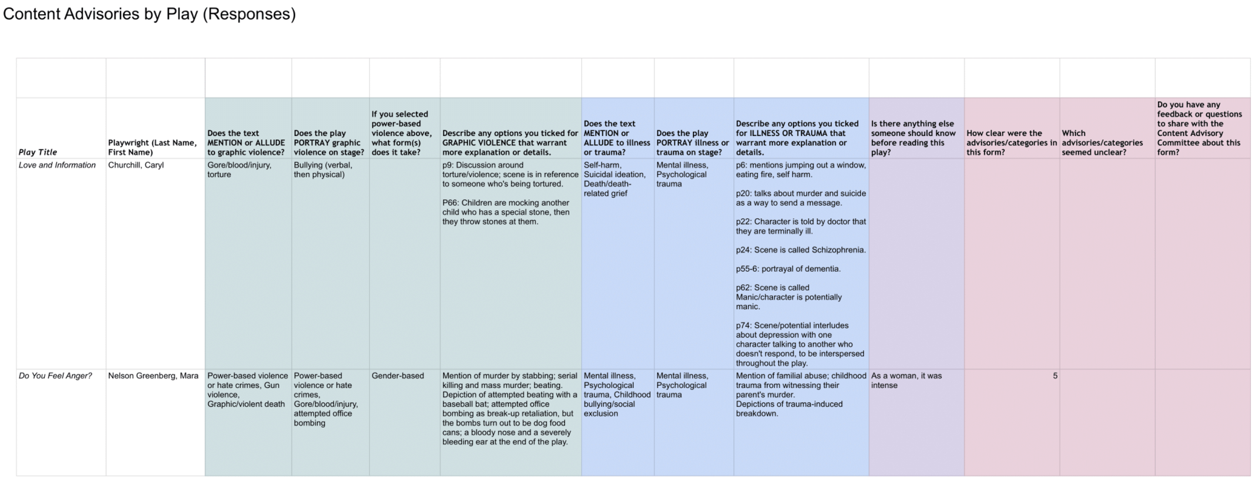


Content Advisories by Play (Responses)

Welcome! This is a living, crowdsourced database of content warnings by play (but technically alphabetized by playwright). To search for a specific play, hit Ctrl+F or Command+F and type in the title. Anyone in the SoD community can identify content warnings for a script they have read and submit them via this form: https://forms.gle/jfoQzrEdoVddagn66

| *Play Title* | Playwright (Last Name, First Name) | Why did you read this play? | Does the play use strong or insensitive language? | Describe any options you ticked for STRONG OR INSENSITIVE LANGUAGE that warrant more explanation or details. | Does the play PORTRAY nudity on stage? | Describe any options you ticked for NUDITY that warrant more explanation or details. | Does the text MENTION or ALLUDE to romantic or sexual intimacy? | Does the play PORTRAY romantic or sexual intimacy on stage? | Describe any options you ticked for ROMANTIC OR SEXUAL INTIMACY that warrant more explanation or details. | Does the text MENTION or ALLUDE to sexual violence? | Does the play PORTRAY sexual violence on stage? | Describe any options you ticked for SEXUAL VIOLENCE that warrant more explanation or details. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Love and Information* | Churchill, Caryl | Personal | | | | | Partnered sex acts | Intimate contact, kissing | p37: Ex scene could be in a sexual context/after sex/etc.; close intimate scene between two exes.<br>p49: Scene talks about sex and a character refers to having sex with the other.<br>p67-9: Scene talks about one character having virtual sex with a virtual woman/via computer game. | possibly nonconsensual sex between 2 underage kids (see details) | Sexual harassment | p19: Allusion to what could have been nonconsensual sex between a 12 y.o. and a 13 y.o.; a pregnancy at age 13.<br>p55-6: Potentially sexually violent: partner tries to convince other partner to touch them/sleep together and the other partner tells them they disgust them. |
| *Do You Feel Anger?* | Nelson Greenberg, Mara | Course requirement | Profanity, Slurs/derogatory language, Crude or body-based humor, Problematic/outdated expressions (eg. "insane", "cakewalk", "blind") | Misogynistic insults. Crude humor based on genitalia, urination/defecation, and sex acts. | Partial nudity, Any clothing other than streetwear (pjs, undergarments, swimsuits, revealing costumes) | Female character wears a mermaid costume as a form of empowerment (not oppressive/ voyeuristic). | Intimate contact, kissing, Prolonged intimate contact, foreplay, dancing, Solo sex acts, Partnered sex acts | Intimate contact, kissing | Mentions of masturbation and ejaculation; (unreciprocated) oral sex acts;<br>pornography; genitalia. Depictions of flirtation and attempted nonconsensual kissing in the workplace. | Sexual harassment, Sexual assault, Intimate partner violence/abuse, Child abuse/pedophilia | Sexual harassment | Mention of long-term domestic abuse/dating violence; nonconsensual sex acts; allusions to child sexual abuse; female character repeatedly mentions being "mugged" in the office. Depictions of verbal and physical sexual harrassment; attempted nonconsensual roleplay; gaslighting; threats of work-place or personal retaliation; injury (bleeding ear) after a mugging. |

*Figure 3: Content Advisories by Play (Responses). The first half of the Google Sheet database. For easier navigation, color-coding groups the columns into the categories of strong or insensitive language, nudity, romantic or sexual intimacy, and sexual violence.*



Content Advisories by Play (Responses)

| *Play Title* | Playwright (Last Name, First Name) | Does the text MENTION or ALLUDE to graphic violence? | Does the play PORTRAY graphic violence on stage? | If you selected power-based violence above, what form(s) does it take? | Describe any options you ticked for GRAPHIC VIOLENCE that warrant more explanation or details. | Does the text MENTION or ALLUDE to illness or trauma? | Does the play PORTRAY illness or trauma on stage? | Describe any options you ticked for ILLNESS OR TRAUMA that warrant more explanation or details. | Is there anything else someone should know before reading this play? | How clear were the advisories/categories in this form? | Which advisories/categories seemed unclear? | Do you have any feedback or questions to share with the Content Advisory Committee about this form? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Love and Information* | Churchill, Caryl | Gore/blood/injury, torture | Bullying (verbal, then physical) | | p9: Discussion around torture/violence; scene is in reference to someone who's being tortured.<br>P66: Children are mocking another child who has a special stone, then they throw stones at them. | Self-harm, Suicidal ideation, Death/death-related grief | Mental illness, Psychological trauma | p6: mentions jumping out a window, eating fire, self harm.<br>p20: talks about murder and suicide as a way to send a message.<br>p22: Character is told by doctor that they are terminally ill.<br>p24: Scene is called Schizophrenia.<br>p55-6: portrayal of dementia.<br>p62: Scene is called Manic/character is potentially manic.<br>p74: Scene/potential interludes about depression with one character talking to another who doesn't respond, to be interspersed throughout the play. | | | | |
| *Do You Feel Anger?* | Nelson Greenberg, Mara | Power-based violence or hate crimes, Gun violence, Graphic/violent death | Power-based violence or hate crimes, Gore/blood/injury, attempted office bombing | Gender-based | Mention of murder by stabbing; serial killing and mass murder; beating. Depiction of attempted beating with a baseball bat; attempted office bombing as break-up retaliation, but the bombs turn out to be dog food cans; a bloody nose and a severely bleeding ear at the end of the play. | Mental illness, Psychological trauma, Childhood bullying/social exclusion | Mental illness, Psychological trauma | Mention of familial abuse; childhood trauma from witnessing their parent's murder.<br>Depictions of trauma-induced breakdown. | As a woman, it was intense | 5 | | |

*Figure 4: Content Advisories by Play (Responses). The second half of the Google Sheet database. Color-coding groups the columns into the remaining categories: graphic violence, illness or trauma, free response, and user feedback.*

As the length of the spreadsheet shows, balancing thoroughness with expedience was difficult. I made every question optional except for the first three—play title, playwright name, and in what context the script was read—but the length still proved a barrier. Of the twenty-some individuals who graciously beta-tested the database, many found the form overwhelming and felt discouraged from completing it.

In summary, 1.0 was limited. Its clunky format and narrow, transient user base of university members rendered it unsuccessful. Although Google Sheets is beneficial because it is accessible to anyone online, it can only handle so much data and its opportunities for data visualization are few. Above all, the fact that it was isolated from the platforms on which people read and review scripts made it ineffectual.

### Concept for Iteration 2.0

This iteration takes a new approach as a tag system built into a custom website. This way, the database would be easy to access and quick to use. A tag is a nonhierarchical keyword that describes the data that it is assigned to. Tags are useful for classifying information in multiple ways simultaneously. Ideally, the tag system would be also integrated into existing cloud-based script libraries such as the New Play Exchange, Drama Online, and Alexander Street Drama.

2.0 is largely inspired by two highly trafficked platforms that crowdsource content guidance, among others (see the end of this field note for a list). Firstly, the community-driven website and smartphone application Does the Dog Die? houses an extensive database of warnings for film and television, among other media (Wipple 2010). It is remarked for its democratic Upvote/Downvote feature and for making detailed spoilers and even time stamps available to site visitors (Lindbergh 2020). Secondly, The StoryGraph, a data-oriented book tracker and competitor to Goodreads, prominently offers users the ability to tag content when submitting a book review and filter for content when searching for new reads (Herman 2021). The latter is particularly exciting because of its similarities to the New Play Exchange: powered by metadata, encouraging dialogue, and inviting the engagement of authors themselves (Odunayo and Frelow 2019).

The StoryGraph also models a cautionary tale. Recent discourse highlights how content warnings have been weaponized to censor books by writers who are of color, LGBTQ+, or otherwise marginalized. In 2021, author Sylvia Moreno-Garcia sparked debate on X by pointing out how books by authors of color are tagged for sensitive content more often than books by white authors on The StoryGraph (Figure 5; ad astra 2021).

**Silvia Moreno-Garcia**
@silviamg

Replying to @silviamg

The other book I remember comparing was Gone with The Wind with Their Eyes Were Watching God. Their Eyes has more TWs, but also more people tag it as 'racism' (10) than GWTW (5). People also tag Their Eyes as having racial slurs more often than GWTW.

3:16 PM · Jun 13, 2021 · Twitter Web App

**31** Retweets **5** Quote Tweets **176** Likes

*Figure 5: A Tweet from a thread by Silvia Moreno-Garcia, with the screenshots of The StoryGraph content warnings for the two books she mentions side-by-side. (Moreno-Garcia 2021)*

Unconscious bias plays a hand in this double standard. A white script reader may fail to pick up on underhanded manifestations of racism or *over*estimate race's prevalence in a story. Science fiction author Octavia Butler wrote an entire afterword to *Bloodchild* to address that the extrasolar short story is not about slavery, contrary to popular interpretation (Butler 1995, 55-57). But Moreno-Garcia sees this as not only an individual issue, but one systemically reinforced by data-collecting cyberspaces. "Review spaces are not free of such biases. Neither are TWs. I'm not going to say this means there are 'bad' and 'good' reviewers because that's not what I was going on about," she elaborated in a follow-up tweet (Moreno-Garcia 2021). The ensuing debate prompted The StoryGraph to launch author-approved content warnings and a summary smart filter, which we'll explore later (The StoryGraph 2021). Given this backdrop, we must consider how crowdsourcing content advisories for plays might affect marginalized playwrights.

With the insights and a notable dilemma of these platforms in mind, let's explore possible features of the 2.0 crowdsourced database.

### Submission

Following The StoryGraph's methodology, there would be two sections of content guidance: playwright-approved and reader-submitted. Allowing playwrights to add advisories gives them agency over the narrative being constructed about their work without censoring the perspectives of readers who may experience the text differently. If built into NPX, it would bolster the platform's commitment to amplifying playwrights' voices (Loewith and Suilebhan 2016). Readers would submit advisories as part of their script recommendations or via an independent function, increasing engagement on the platform.

### Types of Content

Moving away from categories to a singular alphabetized list of tags, as The StoryGraph models, holds space for specificity and intersectionality. Both qualities bolster consent work. The list of tags below was mainly sourced from The StoryGraph, with some language pulled from the Trigger Warning Database (Lilley and Typed Truths 2017), Does the Dog Die?, Unconsenting Media, "Defining Mental Disability" (Price 2017), and harm reduction best practices (National Harm Reduction Coalition 2021):

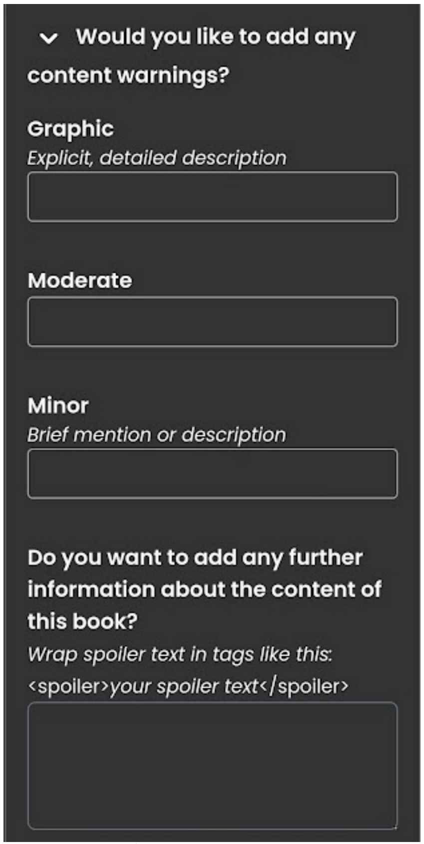
- Abandonment
- Ableism
- Abortion
- Acephobia/Arophobia
- Addiction
- Adult/minor relationship
- Alcohol
- Alcoholism
- Animal cruelty
- Animal death
- Antisemitism
- Biphobia
- Blood
- Body horror
- Body shaming
- Bullying
- Cancer
- Cannibalism
- Incest
- Infertility
- Infidelity
- Injury/Injury detail
- Intimate partner abuse
- Islamophobia
- Kidnapping
- Lesbophobia
- Mass/school shootings
- Medical content
- Medical trauma
- Mental illness
- Miscarriage
- Misogyny
- Murder
- Nudity
- Outing
- Pandemic/Epidemic

- Car accident
- Child abuse
- Child death
- Chronic illness
- Classism
- Colonization
- Confinement
- Cultural appropriation
- Cursing
- Deadnaming
- Death
- Death of parent
- Dementia
- Deportation
- Disordered eating
- Domestic abuse
- Drug abuse
- Drug use
- Dubious consent scenarios
- Dysphoria
- Eating disorder
- Emotional abuse
- Excrement
- Existentialism
- Fatphobia
- Fire/Fire injury
- Psychiatric institutionalization
- Gaslighting
- Genocide
- Gore
- Grief
- Gun violence
- Hate Crime
- Homophobia
- Incarceration/Imprisonment
- Panic attacks/disorders
- Poverty/Houselessness
- Pedophilia/Grooming
- Physical abuse
- Police brutality
- Pregnancy
- Racial slurs
- Racism
- Rape
- Religious bigotry/persecution
- Schizophrenia/Psychosis
- Self-harm
- Sexism
- Sexual assault
- Sexual content
- Sexual harassment
- Sexual violence
- Slavery
- Slurs/Derogatory language
- Stalking
- Suicidal thoughts
- Suicide
- Suicide attempt
- Surveillance/Being watched
- Terminal illness
- Torture
- Toxic friendship
- Toxic relationship
- Trafficking
- Transphobia
- Unstable/shifting reality
- Violence
- Vomit
- War
- Xenophobia

In addition, the crowdsourcing system could meet individual needs by allowing users to flag tags for content they particularly wish to avoid in their profile settings (Odunayo and Frelow 2019).

Intensity and Staging Fields

When submitting content warnings on The StoryGraph, reviewers select tags from three drop-down lists, each representing a tier of intensity: Graphic, Moderate, and Minor (Figure 6). For the theatre community's purposes, let's keep this system and add a fourth, independent field called "Staged." This would classify content that requires on-stage depiction for the audience to follow the story. There is a vast emotional difference between a character describing a death and a performer acting out death on stage. And while nudity may not be inherently sensitive in literature, it *is* when staged before a live audience. For example, consider *How to Defend Yourself* by Liliana Padilla. Seven college students gather for a DIY self-defense workshop after a sorority sister is raped (2020). Sexual assault and processing its aftermath make up the emotional core of the story, but the audience is never witness to a simulated sexual assault. The system would allow the same tag to be input into the Staged field and an intensity field, giving perusers a fuller impression of the content.



Would you like to add any content warnings?

Graphic
Explicit, detailed description

Moderate

Minor
Brief mention or description

Do you want to add any further information about the content of this book?
Wrap spoiler text in tags like this:
<spoiler>your spoiler text</spoiler>

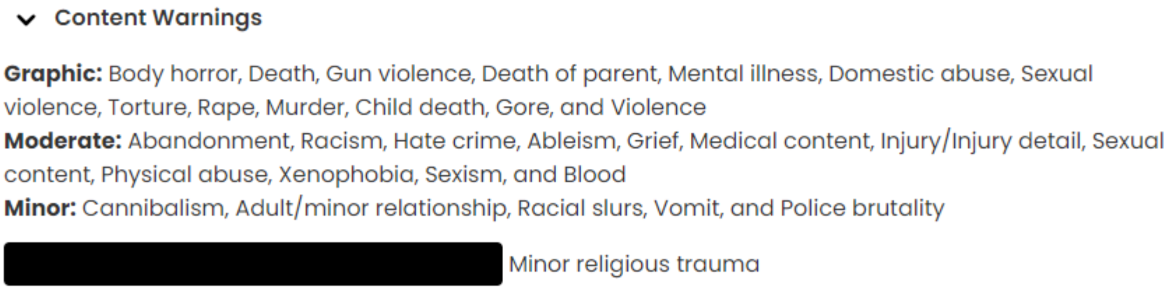
*Figure 6: The content warnings section of The StoryGraph's book review form. (Odunayo and Frelow 2019)*

Specifying what content is depicted on stage would fit well with the benefits that users reap from the New Play Exchange's robust search-and-filter mechanism (National New Play Network 2015). Many use the platform to find scripts to produce, and filters allow them to search with their unique production parameters and resources in mind. Tagging content that must be staged for the audience to follow the story—whether nudity, violence, sex, etcetera—would allow readers to proceed knowing they should plan for an intimacy choreographer and other production safeguards, or else creatively circumvent a direct portrayal. If someone can't manage that, they can use the search filters to *exclude* plays with certain Staged tags. Best of all, this would reduce the cases of such content going unnoticed and unaddressed until it is too late in the production process.

Custom Details and Spoilers

If any content falls outside the existing tags or warrants qualification, submitters would be able to add detailed descriptions as comments attached to relevant tags. DoesTheDogDie.com users can toggle in their settings whether they wish for comments to default as visible or hidden (shown on click), so they can avoid stumbling upon spoilers unintentionally (Staublin 2022).

The StoryGraph goes a step further, requesting that users wrap any spoilers in programming tags as follows: `<spoiler>your spoiler text</spoiler>`. Once one's review is submitted, the spoiler text appears blacked out and is revealed only if a user clicks on it (Figure 7). This is an elegant solution for one of the most common concerns voiced by opponents of content guidance.



**Content Warnings**

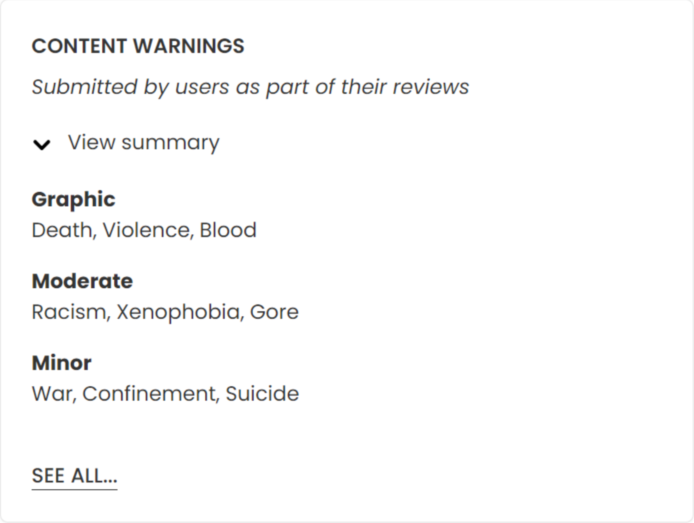
**Graphic:** Body horror, Death, Gun violence, Death of parent, Mental illness, Domestic abuse, Sexual violence, Torture, Rape, Murder, Child death, Gore, and Violence
**Moderate:** Abandonment, Racism, Hate crime, Ableism, Grief, Medical content, Injury/Injury detail, Sexual content, Physical abuse, Xenophobia, Sexism, and Blood
**Minor:** Cannibalism, Adult/minor relationship, Racial slurs, Vomit, and Police brutality

[redacted] Minor religious trauma

*Figure 7: An individual reviewer's content warnings for* Parable of the Sower *by Octavia E. Butler. A spoiler is blacked out. (Odunayo and Frelow 2019)*

Data Amalgamation

Displaying the tag system's aggregate data would encourage a nuanced critical discourse among users about potentially intense or triggering material. It would also foster a culture of abundance in which all opinions are valued. Balancing brevity with completeness, The StoryGraph provides a summary and a complete list of content warnings. Figure 8 shows how the platform automatically smart-filters the top three most selected tags for each intensity tier.



CONTENT WARNINGS

*Submitted by users as part of their reviews*

**Graphic**
Death, Violence, Blood

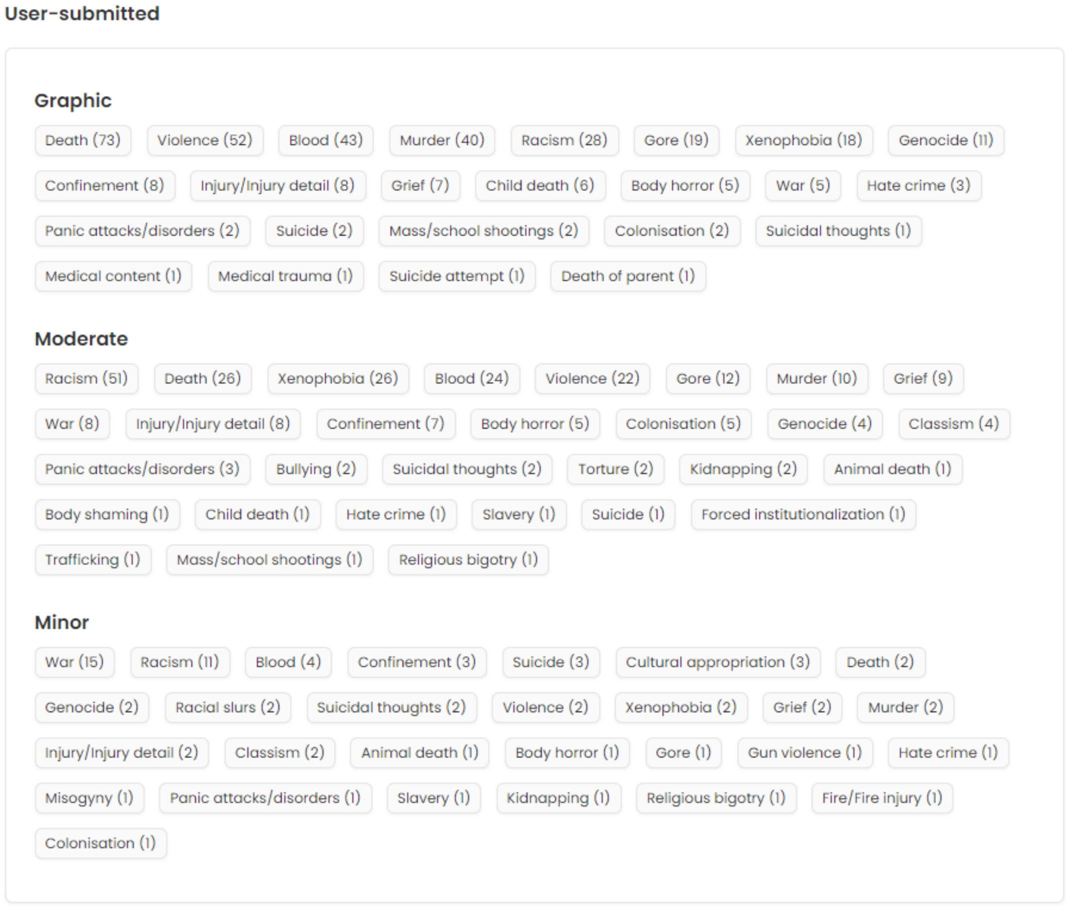
**Moderate**
Racism, Xenophobia, Gore

**Minor**
War, Confinement, Suicide

*Figure 8: Summary of the content warnings for* Binti *by Nnedi Okorafor. (Odunayo and Frelow 2019)*

The algorithm is complex: it generates the summary based on the number of votes a tag receives and its comparative prevalence across intensity levels. A tag must have at least twenty votes to be eligible but cannot have more votes under another level of intensity.

Clicking "See All…" opens the full list of author-approved and user-submitted content warnings (Figure 9). Each tag includes a parenthetic number indicating how many people selected that content. These numbers would equip prospective script readers with knowledge of the majority and paint a picture of the nuances and varying perspectives on the same story. If thirty people tag war as Moderate while twenty-five tag it as Minor, its intensity may be dramaturgically debatable. Additionally, this data would make the crowdsourcing tool's inner workings more transparent to site visitors.



User-submitted

**Graphic**

Death (73) Violence (52) Blood (43) Murder (40) Racism (28) Gore (19) Xenophobia (18) Genocide (11)
Confinement (8) Injury/Injury detail (8) Grief (7) Child death (6) Body horror (5) War (5) Hate crime (3)
Panic attacks/disorders (2) Suicide (2) Mass/school shootings (2) Colonisation (2) Suicidal thoughts (1)
Medical content (1) Medical trauma (1) Suicide attempt (1) Death of parent (1)

**Moderate**

Racism (51) Death (26) Xenophobia (26) Blood (24) Violence (22) Gore (12) Murder (10) Grief (9)
War (8) Injury/Injury detail (8) Confinement (7) Body horror (5) Colonisation (5) Genocide (4) Classism (4)
Panic attacks/disorders (3) Bullying (2) Suicidal thoughts (2) Torture (2) Kidnapping (2) Animal death (1)
Body shaming (1) Child death (1) Hate crime (1) Slavery (1) Suicide (1) Forced institutionalization (1)
Trafficking (1) Mass/school shootings (1) Religious bigotry (1)

**Minor**

War (15) Racism (11) Blood (4) Confinement (3) Suicide (3) Cultural appropriation (3) Death (2)
Genocide (2) Racial slurs (2) Suicidal thoughts (2) Violence (2) Xenophobia (2) Grief (2) Murder (2)
Injury/Injury detail (2) Classism (2) Animal death (1) Body horror (1) Gore (1) Gun violence (1) Hate crime (1)
Misogyny (1) Panic attacks/disorders (1) Slavery (1) Kidnapping (1) Religious bigotry (1) Fire/Fire injury (1)
Colonisation (1)

*Figure 9: Complete list of content warnings for* Binti *by Nnedi Okorafor. (Odunayo and Frelow 2019)*

<u>Ancillary Resources</u>

An educational guide to content guidance and consent work would accompany the crowdsourcing tool. It could include a glossary of key terms, best practices, and extended explanations of the intensity tiers (Graphic, Moderate, and Minor) and the Staged field to better assist users with categorizing content (Payne and van Staden 2017). In an ideal world, this information would not be an external link but integral to the webpage as a collection of tooltips—question marks ⍰ and information icons ⓘ that reveal more details when hovered over (Rodricks 2021).

## Considerations for Future Work

Much more dreaming is needed, with many more voices, before this project is prototyped again. Below are a few quandaries at the forefront of my mind.

### Draft Updates

What happens when a living playwright shares a new draft of their script? The content warnings submitted before that upload may become outdated. How might the database account for that, or does this issue undermine the whole concept of crowdsourcing for any new plays?

### User Feedback

What metrics should we use to assess the project's success? How might end users be able to give feedback on the database once it's prototyped and even published? Providing an accessible, anonymous channel for feedback will be key to honoring the project's commons-based approach and mitigating forced intimacy.

### Anonymity

Should users have the option to submit content guidance anonymously? Although anonymity would mitigate forced intimacy, its ramifications within a transparent, community-focused platform are ambiguous and potentially troubling.

### Self-Selection Bias

Participation bias will skew the data of content tags. By what means might the tag system account for this?

### Biased Censorship

Earlier, this note discussed how the disproportionate use of content warnings inadvertently contributes to censoring marginalized authors. Censorship in the theatrical context could mean prematurely rejecting a play from option. What features could be implemented to counteract disproportionate tagging and its result, biased censorship?

## Conclusion

Content guidance is not only vital to the wellbeing of theatre-makers with disabilities or trauma, but contributes to a culture of trust, care, and consent that benefits everyone. A database of script content warnings would amplify the discourse around trauma-informed practices and reduce the labor of crafting warnings from scratch in the long run. A commons-based approach offers education and reduces shame. Gone would be the grievance among arts administrators and educators of feeling ill-equipped to write content warnings. I myself often feel unsure how to write them, but the support of a framework and language empowers me to do so. Even more, knowing that others will contribute different interpretations of a text makes me less worried about identifying content "incorrectly." Disclosing some content is better than none. Making content guidance a community effort via dialogic platforms would nuance the discourse about a play and empower prospective readers with an abundance of viewpoints.

Although this database concept is flawed and leaves gaps unaddressed, I am convinced that even such imperfect, work-in-progress efforts help gradually shift institutional culture.

### Call for Collaborators

This paper only represents the beginning of this project. To anyone reading this, thank you. A community-driven database should be designed in community, so I eagerly invite those interested to join the endeavor. Whether you share a passion for disability-informed, consent-forward initiatives, are a programmer or user experience wiz, or have a hot take, please reach out. Collective engagement propels this work forward.

### Non-Exhaustive List of Crowdsourced Content Warning Databases

- Does the Dog Die?: With over 29,000 titles, it is overwhelmingly used for film and TV, but also books, video games, comics, podcasts, YouTube, and more. Data-driven and community-run (submission automatically affects the data).
- The StoryGraph**:** Book reviewing and tracking platform with a built-in content warnings tag system. Data-driven and community-run.
- Trigger Warning Database: For books. Data-driven and moderated (site manager manually processes submissions). The administrative account is also active on Goodreads, where it 'shelves', or tags, books by content.
- Musical Content Warnings**:** A small hub on Tumblr for musical theatre. Not data-driven (submissions are free response) and moderated.
- Unconsenting Media: For sexual violence in film, TV, and more. Data-driven in a simplified way and volunteer-moderated. It also began as a humble Google Sheet (Payne 2017). Does the Dog Die? creator John Whipple helped the site get started, largely by importing DDD's structure (Norris 2022).

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[1] This work is grounded in trauma-informed practices as well as the concepts of harm prevention and harm reduction as defined by Nicole Brewer's Anti-Racist Theatre (A.R.T.) training (Brewer 2020). Harm prevention and reduction are small but key threads in the fabric of community accountability (Kaba and Lu Design Studio 2024). Such care is a never-ending practice for which we are *all* responsible. Innumerable organizers in this field have inspired me; I hope the references included adequately recognize some of them and their contributions.

It is also rooted in the principles of Disability Justice (Berne, Morales, and Langstaff 2018). Considered a "second wave" of disability rights, the term emerged from conversations among disabled queer and trans people of color activists in 2005, including Patty Berne of the performance project Sins Invalid, seeking to challenge progressive movements to more fully address ableism. Disability Justice recognizes the intersecting legacies of white supremacy, colonial capitalism, gendered oppression, and ableism in understanding how peoples' bodies and minds are labeled "deviant," "unproductive," "disposable" and/or "invalid."

Special thanks to the Carnegie Mellon School of Drama's Content Advisory Committee, with which this project was born. Committee co-chair Tina Shackleford and the following CMU students and independent artists generously gave feedback on its first iteration: Annalisa D'Aguilar, Sarah Bausch, Drew Bos, Emma Cordray, Major Curda, Liggera Edmonds-Allen, Alexander Friedland, Lily Hamilton, Alon Moradi, Viscaya Wilson, Joshua Christian Wyatt, and Katy Zapanta.

Lastly, many aspects of this concept were and will continue to be shaped in collaboration with Grace LaCarte. Thanks for being my thought partner, accountabilibuddy, and friend.

[2] Subject Matter Keywords is a tag-based search filter used on the New Play Exchange. When playwrights upload a script, they can select keywords that speak to the play's themes and topics (National New Play Network 2015).

[3] Pseudonym to protect the individual's anonymity.

[4] Pseudonym to protect the individual's anonymity.

[5] The Mad Pride movement offers "Mad" as one alternative identifier (of several) to mental illness or psychiatric disability. Its capitalization signals the work of Mad activists and Mad Studies scholars who argue that we need to problematize the stigmatic connotations of madness. (Kafai 2021)

[6] Bid for Care is a means of relationship building, connection, and liberation; gestures, actions, and behaviors between beings that signal a need for care. Bids can be verbal or non-verbal and include but are not limited to care actions like body doubling or meal support (N. Oumou Sylla 2024).

[7] Transformative Justice (TJ) is a political framework and approach to responding to violence, harm, and abuse without relying on the state or creating more violence. Deviating from Restorative Justice, it seeks to *transform* the conditions that allowed the harm to occur in the first place. TJ organizers have differing opinions on whether the term should be capitalized. At the risk of contributing to the "formalization" of TJ, I have capitalized it to honor the movement's work and discourage its appropriation away from its feminist queer of color origins (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020).

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# Sensing Dance: Finding Access Intimacy with a Dysmorphic Bodymind

**Krista K. Miranda, PhD–** *Independent Artist/Scholar*

**About the Author:**

Krista K. Miranda, PhD, is an interdisciplinary artist/scholar invested in the nuances of embodiment, imagining better futures for queer and crip life, and recuperating the figure of the nonreproducing woman. Her in-progress monograph, *Playing with Your Parts: Dismantling Bodily "Wholeness" through Queer and Crip Performance* is grounded in performance studies, critical disability studies, and gender and sexuality studies. Her work can be found in *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, *The Oxford Handbook on Dance and Theater*, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, and *Pornographies: Critical Positions*, with a forthcoming publication in *Women's Innovations in Theater, Dance, and Performance*. Miranda's artistic practices are situated at the intersections of dance, experimental screendance, miniature installation art, poetry, and collaborative work steeped in radical care.

*What would you like? What do you need? Where would you like to go?* We begin Alexandra Beller's weekly Bartenieff Fundamentals™ class—a somatic technique that facilitates functional, efficient movement—with permission to be bodyminds with a variety of needs. As we commence each class with a body scan,[1] Beller encourages us to approach our practice with a sense of curiosity without judgement. *What will my body teach me today?* Relinquishing her power as the pedagogical authority, or, more accurately, utilizing the power allocated to her due to the inherent power imbalances in the classroom, Beller gives us permission to listen to our bodies to cultivate our own embodied knowledge production.

Attending class from our home spaces due to COVID-19 lockdown, we sit facing our computers to breathe together. Beller reminds us that our chins are probably jutting forward toward our screens—a postural side effect of Zoom life. She brings our attention to the pelvis. I notice I have more weight on my left sitz bone. I feel the deep creases at my hips with my legs crossed in front of me, how the bottom of my front ribs protrude outward. I exhale to soften my front body which softens my back body, bringing me a little more upright. The process of noticing continues up our bodies. How, with my arms resting at my sides, the head of my right humerus bone slides partially out of the socket. I have to keep pulling it back into place. I notice the fold below my large belly, how I can feel the bottom of my stomach on my thighs, the bottoms of my breasts resting on top of my belly. As I inhale my stomach expands, something I allow it to do now. Many dancers my age who grew up in the studio being trained in techniques like ballet, jazz, and modern dance weren't permitted to breathe like this, full-bellied, unrestrained. We were taught to keep our stomachs in while our ribs expanded laterally as we inhaled. Accordion breaths.

Beller, whose in-person modern dance technique classes I took regularly in downtown Manhattan back in my twenties and early thirties, responded to the onset of the pandemic, like many movement practitioners, by offering online movement classes via Zoom. After my most recent extended hiatus from dance, I wanted to begin dancing again but had not been able to bring myself into a studio for fear that my eating disorders and body dysmorphia would be triggered as a now fat, middle-aged woman in eating disorder recovery.[2] Taking online movement classes at the height of the pandemic provided me with a safe way back into dance: at home, dancing with others in small boxes on a computer screen—I could even turn off my video if I wanted to, but I noticed that I never bothered to identify my particular box on Zoom. In this essay, I begin by exploring returning to dance during pandemic lockdown to discuss accessibility in dance spaces in terms of chronic mental illness, specifically regarding eating disorders and body dysmorphia. By meditating on the experience of employing technology to dance together during the onset of COVID-19 (before access to vaccinations), this essay takes dancing during lockdown as a starting point to imagine practices in line with what Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy" (2017). Access intimacy, Mingus explains, "moves the work of access out of the realm of only logistics and into the realm of relationships and understanding disabled people as humans, not burdens" (2017). Mingus argues that instead of forcing disabled people to adapt to fit into an ableist world, access intimacy "*calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our world*" (2017, original emphasis). In other words, spaces and social dynamics are created by centering the needs of disabled people from their inception. Access is not an add on, but a way of life. It's important to note that access is not just for disabled people, but for anyone on the margins of a particular environment like queer people, people of color, immigrants, parents, and, say, fat people in spaces that valorize thinness (Mingus 2017).[3]

Aside from good work being done by practitioners who attend to the reality that our bodies are bodies in difference and that a prescribed way of appearing will always be oppressive, I have yet to encounter discourse about coming back to dance as a fat body, a "twice the size than I used to be" body. Often when we think of access in dance spaces we forget about mental illness.[4] Ifasina Clear of Get Embodied, which promotes access-centered Black cultural dance, acknowledges this gap in an Instagram post, stating:

> I am observing and reconciling the reality that some people might have space to consider ways to change how they teach or create spaces that include disabled people, but not fat people. That size and fatness are hard for some people to center in their work on access and inclusion. That the dominant culture makes normalizing fat bodies and celebrating a wide range of fat bodies repulsive, uncomfortable, and outright terrifying. (2022)

*What would you like? What do you need?* I would like to feel as if my crip bodymind, my now fat bodymind that has been so many sizes over the years, is not an exception.

Aimi Hamraie, in their 2021 talk, "Disability Justice & Access-Centered Pedagogy in the Pandemic" with Mimi Khúc, argues that access should not be pathologized or medicalized because "we all have needs," needs that are individualized and constantly in flux. We must, they assert, normalize needing. Hamraie conceives of access as an ongoing collective project where structures are created to meet the needs of all students and teachers as a collective responsibility. Mimi Khúc offers us a collaborative approach to attending to this collective responsibility when she describes her commitment to a redistribution of power. Admitting that she believes her power as a professor is somewhat arbitrary, she finds ways to redistribute this power to give her students the space to fulfill their needs as humans and learners. This break from tradition may take a tremendous amount of trust on the part of the instructor. And with this change in dynamic there is also a radical affective difference between how energy is transmitted when teaching in-person as opposed to on Zoom or other virtual platforms. I'm thinking about how my body on this floor in Massachusetts cannot be seen by Beller's body on her floor in New York. About how Beller asks me to sense what my body needs, to notice without a visual—neither hers nor mine. About the ways her dexterous use of language guides me through class, allowing me to discover movement pathways in a permissive environment without being constantly corrected (unless I ask her for feedback) or being told that my body is somehow wrong. Beller is a mentor, an aide, not the type of authoritarian pedagogue that dominated so many of the dance studios of my youth.

I will never forget when I was in ninth grade at my magnet high school, my beloved history teacher Mr. Wimmers said to our class, "The dancers are generally the best [academic] students. They are the military of the arts' disciplines." This was a compliment and we all knew what he meant. We were *very disciplined*. We were (for the most part) silent, compliant, and were not in a position to say "No." It is laughable to think of the cultivation of access intimacy in those spaces, which generally requires speaking freely about your needs and vulnerabilities. In deep contrast to spaces that cultivate access intimacy, the dance studio was not a place where we were encouraged to voice our needs (or have them at all), but when we did, like when we had to "sit out" of dance class because we were injured or didn't feel well, we got "that look" of disappointment. They weren't even being mean necessarily. There was just no room for not dancing. There were no structures in place for injury or illness that were encouraged for saying "no" to dancing that day.[5]

Nicolas Shannon Savard (2023), discussing participating in Theatrical Intimacy Education's "Consent in the Acting Classroom" virtual workshop facilitated by Kim Shively, reminds us of the "importance of recognizing the power dynamics between actors and director in theatrical settings and students and instructors in classroom settings" (63), because the power imbalances embedded within these structures do not always avail students the capacity to say "no." In the thirty-ish years of dancing before pausing as I was sucked into Ph.D.-land, I learned nothing about consent or agency growing up in studio spaces. The "militarism" my history teacher half-joked about that was emblematic of our training meant that our bodies were to be put to use by others, where the Other was the Dance Teacher in service of the overarching notion of Dance. If you did not do as you were told, you would not fulfill your potential (and, when in high school, your grades could suffer). You might be wondering why I don't simply abandon Western studio, choreography-based dance classes altogether for the more forgiving, inclusive vibe of improvisation-based dance techniques. As I've gotten older, I have found myself participating more and more in forms of improvisational dance, especially when it comes to creating performance work. But truth be told, this is out of my comfort zone—learning choreography is my happy place. Improvisation-based classes give me anxiety. Because there is no blueprint for what is about to happen, I don't know what I am saying yes to. Plus, the heart wants what it wants, and what my heart wants is for my bodymind to feel welcome and safe in the forms of dance that feed my soul.

I offer the following challenges to practitioners reading this essay: What would it mean for dance pedagogy to undergo a largescale reorientation that dismantles the hierarchical structures of both the teacher/student relationship and the ocularcentrism that tends to dominate our engagement with dance? What would it do to shift agency from instructor to student, and for the tyranny of the visual to be replaced by a more phenomenological felt sense? I argue that there are valuable resources we can gather from other access-centered practices, like audio description for blind and visually impaired people, that can be employed to create inclusive dance spaces for those of us with body dysmorphia.

Dance company Kinetic Light's founder and Artistic Director Alice Sheppard expands the concept of "access" beyond the kind of "add ons" the general public is familiar with when efforts are made (hurray) when a disabled person shows up, or when building codes mandate structural inclusion: such as the hiring of an ASL interpreter who stands on the side of a stage during a lecture or performance, the addition of ramps, accessible parking, etc. Instead, Sheppard, speaking in the context of performance, explains how access can be utilized as a mindset and creative force that shapes the work itself, stating that access should be considered as "an ethic, as an aesthetic, as a practice, as a promise, as a relationship with the audience" (2022).

Access lays the groundwork for the contours of a work, its means of production, and the nature of the relationships between choreographers, directors, performers, and audience members. Access is not just about being able to get into the room (although that will always be essential), it's about relationships, about how my bodymind meets your bodymind. Access intimacy allows me to be vulnerable about how I'm feeling right now, in this moment, about what I can and cannot do, about my pain levels, about how much energy I'm willing to spare. *Access enables the conditions for consent.* Access is the starting point. This essay begins with an autoethnographic meditation on my experience taking Alexandra Beller's Bartenieff Fundamentals™ classes during the Summer and Fall of 2020 via Zoom, then discusses dance practices created in collaboration with blind artists, such as Jose Miguel Esteban and Devon Healey's duet "The Breath and Movement of Blindness" (2022) and Heather Shaw and Krishna Washburn's documentary screendance *Telephone* (2023). I argue that turning to the works and access practices, like the audio description of Esteban and Healey and Shaw and Washburn, as models can transform the way dance practitioners engage with dance as both an aesthetic and a pedagogical practice, thereby making it more accessible for chronically mentally ill bodyminds that are often neglected when we think of access.

## Dancing the Floor

There are multiple Zoom gallery pages of us, our bodies small figures in tiny worlds, or "portal[s]" as Petra Kuppers calls them (2022, 6). A few bedrooms. A lot of living rooms. Furniture positioned along the perimeters in makeshift dance spaces. Some curious, attention-seeking animals make their presence known. A dirty plate left on the table from breakfast. A partner crossing the frame. I am in my "studio," a spare room with exercise equipment positioned along the walls. After three years in this house, I still haven't hung the fat, queer, femme art created by disability studies scholar Shayda Kafai to fill this room with bodies that are large, soft, and hairy. Their framed images line the floor against the wall, out of the way. A reminder.

We transition to our backs, knees bent toward the ceiling, feet flat on the floor, grounding. This class is what my bodymind experiences as "restorative dance" because of its ease of movement and emphasis on biomechanics instead of muscular effort. Most of the class is spent lying on the ground doing floorwork: weight shifting, moving sequentially through our spine and joints, using momentum, attending to multiple forms of accessibility for my particular bodymind. Sometimes just getting out of bed feels impossible. Depression is flesh like lead, the weight of it yanking me into horizontal surfaces. Usually a couch. Right now, the wood floor. Anxiety is a tight ball of limbs pulled into the center. Dancing the floor, I've discovered, is a form of giving in to that inertia while exploring the possibilities within that space—of depression, of anxiety, of the chronic pain from a yet-to-be diagnosed set of illnesses—in an accessible way.

Arranging my computer, yoga blocks, and water bottle away from the center, I imagine the parameters of the space my body will take up. I underestimate. I am surrounded by home things I don't bring into a populated dance studio: a hot mug of tea, my phone, several abandoned dog toys. I'm in the clothes I slept in, have slept in for three days. I didn't put on a bra. My faded green hair is unwashed and messy. I have yet to brush my teeth or wash my face. This morning I woke up thinking, what can I let go of in this day?

Before learning the movement phrase, we use the pressure of our feet against the floor to rock our bodies along the axis of our spines, allowing our skeletons to respond to the repetitive movement. I feel the delayed wobble of my belly shifting with the transfer of weight. My shirt rides up. The cool air on my skin is a form of permission to the exposure it rarely gets. But I'm home, and it's allowed here. I'm allowing it here. Not only is no one here to monitor my body, but I am also finally giving my belly room to, well, exist, out in the open. Sara Ahmed describes "familiarity" as a function of how "spaces 'impress' upon bodies" as "an effect of inhabitance" (2006, 7). The familiarity of my surroundings exposes a path for extension and expansion, allowing me to return to old loves that have felt out of reach—right now, my dancing bodymind. In a traditional, in-person dance class, like a ballet or modern or jazz class, traveling across a studio floor had always been a welcome form of taking up space; but that kind of choreographic expansiveness had often been accompanied by a version of "holding," as in, holding *in*, holding my body in just the "right" way, shaping myself into the "correct" body. Even with a capacious movement vocabulary, for many of us, the space of the studio is constricted by the figure of the Dancer's Body.™

My relationship with dance studios is not uncomplicated. There are few spaces that bring me more joy, even if that joy comes with a certain amount of trauma. I grew up in dance studios. I figured out who I was as a person in dance studios. When I walk into that space, I want to run across the floor and fling myself into the air like I did when I was a kid. Or instantly lie on the ground and noodle around, limbs soft and searching, spine snaking to create space between each vertebra. My parents put my ever-moving baby body in dance class at Judy Nelson School of Dance in Miami, Florida when I was just two and a half—the combined ballet/tap classes typical of your neighborhood studio. I began jazz and acrobatics at the age of five or six. After switching studios at ten, I basically lived at Peaches School of Dance; here, contemporary dance was eventually added to my list of disciplines. Being a jazz dancer was my identity until I was introduced to modern dance—Cunningham, Limón, and Graham techniques—when I became part of the first ninth grade class at New World School of the Arts, a magnet high school in downtown Miami. While New World prioritized ballet, modern, and jazz, we also studied West African dance, forms of Spanish dance, tap, body alignment, and a little bit of composition and improvisation. At New World we had a dress code: leotards and tights only for our Western-based technique classes so our teachers had unimpeded visual access to our bodies. (Most of us piled on layers of sweatpants and baggy t-shirts during rehearsals.) In undergrad, while studying literature, creative writing, and math, I kept dancing: mostly modern, but when I couldn't find a modern class I wanted to take, I went back to ballet. This was the basic theme of my geographically diverse adult dancing life: I was devoted to modern, post-modern, and dance-theater, but would take ballet sporadically (my weakest form of dance) or if I couldn't find anything else to take that I liked.

In my twenties and thirties, when I took breaks from dance that spanned from a couple to, at one point, several years, it was generally not due to physical injury but because of some version of mental illness: "I'll get back into class once I've lost weight." The first phase of eating disorder recovery from its most extreme expression in my teens meant I finally had meat on my bones in my twenties, something that was hard for me to process. I became actually fat in my forties when chronic illness radically changed my bodily life, a time that happened to correspond with my full commitment to eating disorder recovery (this meant quitting dieting for good). For the majority of my life, I had this idea that my "dancer body" looked a certain way, and I could not enter the studio until I achieved that size again, or at least a smaller size than I currently was. Anxiety and depression were always part of this constellation of bodymind affects which shaped, or controlled, my relationship with dance. For instance, once I started my Ph.D. in Performance Studies, the anxiety tied up with perfectionism would not let me carve out time to take class. I could not imagine taking a day off of grad school work; I only did so when I crashed from burnout. This particular break from dance, while I was physically non-disabled and living in New York City, where there are countless teachers I would have loved to learn from, is, without exaggeration, my greatest regret in life. The years that followed would be marked by what felt like a massive shrinking of possibilities.

Years later, when COVID-19 took hold of New England requiring self-quarantine, I was admittedly, selfishly, a bit relieved for this massive re-orientation of bodily life and immediately began mourning what I imagined would be an eventual loss of the expansion of accommodations for being homebound. You would think us crips would be filled with gratitude because simple access requests were finally being granted. But these new widespread accommodations were not extended because of a shift in how the U.S. treats its disabled community, they came into being because non-disabled people and money-making industries needed accommodations due to a public health crisis. For instance, I had been asking for a telehealth option for therapy for years because by the time I had arrived at my therapist's office in Boston proper (I lived in the suburbs of Melrose) my body was wrecked from the commute via public transport. My yet to-be-diagnosed chronic illnesses left me breathless, woozy, and limp on my therapist's couch, needing to spend the first handful of minutes of each session simply trying to collect myself. I was refused accommodations because their billing system was only set up for in-person sessions. Once COVID hit, telehealth was widely and indefinitely available.

In the early months of the pandemic, feminist media scholar María Elena Cepeda posted on Facebook that "Pandemic Time is Crip Time." I would add that Pandemic Space is also Crip Space. Mass self-quarantine meant I was given permission to be home, and because I no longer expended so much energy being out and about, I spent the first several weeks of quarantine being more productive than I had been in years[6] and less anxious than I can remember in my entire adult life. I put a lot of care into creating what I lovingly refer to as my biosphere, a home that fulfills most of my day to day needs via my personal accommodations. Ahmed states that "[l]oving one's home is not about being fixed into a place, but rather it is about becoming part of a space where one has expanded one's body, saturating the space with bodily matter" (2006, 11). Home, if we are in fact privileged to live in a space that permits us to feel "at home," allows us to extend and expand more effortlessly throughout our space, leaving us with more spoons.[7] It also gives us permission to just be. A bodymind in a space that is not "at home"—such as a queer bodymind in heteronormative spaces or a crip bodymind in inaccessible spaces—is forced to find more circuitous ways to navigate, requiring more spoons. This may not be worth the effort, or may not be doable at all.

In "My own Private Dance Studio," Biba Bell describes how dancing in the Anna Scripps Whitecomb Conservatory on Belle Isle, a non-traditional studio space in Detroit, conjures the "strangely narcissistic characteristics of a dance studio, all mirrors and sprung floors [, …] strategically designed for the arousal of life energy, a well of creativity" (2014). Biba is a friend and colleague from my Ph.D. days at New York University. I've seen her dance in hallways and bathrooms. Bell makes a studio out of every space. No. Bell dismantles the studio, shows us the manufactured and colonized nature of its parts. In her article, Bell invites us to see "the studio as snare […] to critique the cube, its whiteness and geometry […] The sterility of its surfaces" (2014). Bell is well known for dismantling the cube by creating site-specific work, dancing with and among her environment, acknowledging the context of her locations and their histories. Alternatively, the flat surfaces of the studio, razed by settler colonialism, produce a "neutralizing" effect. In the Western dance traditions in which I was brought up, we, as dancer bodyminds, were shaped through repetitive, homogenizing discipline. Individual artistry finds its way through the uniformity of our machine-bodies created by corrective training. Maybe I'm just being dramatic, but you get the idea.

*Arc into a body half, internally rotate the bent right leg to put the sole of your foot on the floor. Pelvic shift forward to sequence through the right side body and roll to the left side fetal position. Sweep the right arm along the floor overhead to sink the left then right scapula into the floor, pulling the spine then pelvis then legs then feet back into the floor, returning to the starting position*. Pet hair accumulates against my sweatshirt sleeves as I swipe my arms up to a high V initiated from my shoulders dropping toward my feet and leading with the thumb-side of my wrist toward my ears, then down to a low V by initiating from my elbows. I hear my dog Zuppa whining impatiently downstairs. Home. (It is impossible to dance the floor while impeded by dog love.) Sometimes a kitten attacks my feet. Home. My knees falling toward each other during pauses. My sense of timing. Home. The style of my retrograde from sitting upright to slinking back down to the floor. The way my body responds to the music variations by affecting the quality and timing of the phrase. Home. My fat belly falls out of the bottom of this shirt as I slide from back body to front body and back again. Home.

Every couple rounds of repeating the combination I run into a piece of exercise equipment. I keep shoving objects further away from the center of the room. In my home, I take up more space. I'm not fixing my clothes. Or pulling my stomach in. I engage what I need when I need it for ease of mobility. Actually, I don't think about engagement. I think bones and vectors and momentum. I keep touching the edges of my perimeter, I keep pushing objects closer to the walls. I'm getting bigger here. That is the point. To take up more space, all the space I need. All the space I'm afraid to want.

I take my glasses off, which makes me feel vulnerable in any other space, but there is nothing here to see. Sometimes I float off into another dimension, but am led back to my body, into my room, into this class by Beller's lulling voice. I often close my eyes, only looking up at the screen when confused, and let my body be guided by Beller's well-described instructions spoke-sung to the cadence of the movement phrase. I am moved by sound and by the certainty of the floor underneath my body as I slide, roll, skim its surface. I dance by hearing and feeling. This displacement of senses is a radical shift for my dancing sensibilities. I worshipped the mirror as a young dancer. It aided my balance, helped me critique my shapes. But here, Beller reminds us: *There is no goal, no end result*. Dance is about the process, the fascination with biomechanics, the attention to the places where there is friction then a smoothing out. Dance is these *inside* things, a phenomenology of movement sensations *in addition to,* actually, *more important than*, the external visual trace it leaves for *someone else*. Dance is the pleasure in the way my sacrum releases after I propel myself diagonally in space by pressing the sole of my foot against the floor. Dance is my ability to remember what comes next. Dance is me milking my favorite part of the phrase. Dance is my clothing covered in dog hair.

## Dancing Breathing

The first time I publicly grappled with a version of this work was at the Society for

Disability Studies Annual Conference in April 2021. I was particularly excited to be placed on a panel with Jose Miguel Esteban and Devon Healey, presenting first, on a dance they co-created titled, "The Breath and Movement of Blindness." At this point in the pandemic, virtual conferences were the modus operandi, but this was the first time that technology failed me during a presentation. I was not allowed access to "the room" by the moderator because Zoom was only identifying me as a set of numbers. Because the conference was low staffed and virtual, there was no one for me to call, no doors to bang on, but Esteban and Healey had provided a link to the dance on which they were presenting as advanced accessibility material. With nothing to do but wait, I clicked the link, tried to be present, and danced with my co-panelists who I had yet to meet while sitting in my office chair in my flowy presenter dress and bold red lip:

> Inhale. Exhale. My ribs. My ribs. Imagine your breath. My ribs. It gets lost in the… out. Expanding. I feel it. I feel it. My exhale getting trapped. It's a cage. A nervous energy. Inhale. Exhale. Sitting crosslegged. Hunched. Open. More space to inhale. [Sound of breath in, out]. Pulling of the cage. Making space bigger for the air to slide through. My chest expands like a bird. Wings. Inhale. Arms open. Rolling. I'm in the breath. Through our voice, share a gesture. I am in this with you. (Esteban and Healey 2022)

The text—bright white for Healy, orange for Esteban—flows across a black screen, their voices clear, slow paced. I close my eyes. We are not directed to begin with our bodies in any particular position. I get to choose what works for me, what feels good for my bodymind in this moment. "Moving within the exhaled breath. Swimming, rolling. Into the exhalation of each other's breath. Floating in the exhale" (Esteban and Healey 2022). My body was in a lot of pain that day, but breathing was accessible. Breathing is accessible. I lean back with my bare feet propped on the little stool under my desk and let Esteban and Healey guide me, surrendering to a dance of respiration. My ribcage resists, stuck together like a block of concrete—it tends to do that—restricting my intake of breath. Esteban and Healey remind me of intention, leading me through the expansion of my ribs and the fascia between them:

> The spaces between my ribs. Extend up and drop into the exhale. Tightness. Tightness. Lift our arms. Wrists back. Negative space. Spiral. Negative space. Inhale exhale. Swimming with you. I gather the air and push it into my nose. Push. Propelling the air. Push. Push. Gather. Pull the air. Push out. Wanting to pull in your breath. I push my breath to share. (Esteban and Healey 2022)

Sing-speaking the language of dance, Esteban and Healey create a world of collective movement through the textual space of the screen, joining me in my office dance as they present on this same work elsewhere. Eventually Catherine Vrtis, attending the panel, reached out to me through Facebook Messenger because they were concerned about me due to my absence. They then contacted the moderator on my behalf and I was finally admitted, twenty minutes late, near panic, but a little less frantic than I would have been had I not experienced the shared moment of guided dance with Esteban and Healey, breathing together, unraveling the hard knot of my bodymind.

Esteban and Healey published "The Breath and Movement of Blindness" in *Liminalities* with an artists' statement that speaks to the type of reorientation of the senses which I am invested in for my own forms of access:

> This work does not understand sight as the sole choreographer of movement. Blindness has always-already been on stage moving, doing, performing…dancing. And yet, the reverberation of this dance is restricted on the stage of sight. Wedging open this restriction is what grounds our exploration. Our performance entangles us, one sighted and one blind, in a pas de deux. (Esteban and Healey 2022)

Esteban and Healey displace the visual from dance's hierarchy of senses, creating a form of interconnection through breath, through sound, through their curiosity about their own and each other's respiration. Removing the visual imperative fully propels me into an alternative mode of sensing dance without the impediment of fighting the urge for a mirror to adjust a limb or critique a part, or simply wondering what I look like, because there is no looking in breathing. This is "dutiful dance student" deprogramming. Here Esteban and Healey invite me into a new (for me) way of engaging with dance through sound cues and breath and text that have nothing to do with the way my body looks but everything to do with the way my body feels. The phenomenology of "The Breath and Movement of Blindness" reorients our dancerly priorities, allowing us to dream of other possibilities. The dream of the expansive inhale. The ecstasy of the collective exhale.

## ***Telephone* and the "Why" of Performance**

Michelle Mantione enters the dance studio from the street, describing their movements in real time:

> Okay, giant step, right arm right foot, left foot, left crutch. Walk, enter. Reach back with left arm, close door. Cars passing in background. Put my stuff down and get ready to warm up. Tote bag on table, crutch leans against wall. Fire extinguisher and sink in

> corner, drop sink in the corner. Next crutch. Right arm, left arm, backpack off. I made it! Arms up in the air, fists clenched. Yay! Wave arms slightly, side to side overhead. (*Telephone* 2023)

Performing the art of self-audio description, Mantione makes choices about what information is relayed to the audience, a practice in agency and consent in which dancers rarely get to participate. They tell us how to direct our attention; with their self-audio description, they are in control of shaping our engagement with them, as opposed to the choreographer or director. Delighting in their gesture of celebration, Mantione laughs as bowed instruments initiate the sound score. The screen goes white, then black. From the quiet of a dark expanse, the voice of blind dancer Krishna Washburn asks the central questions guiding her philosophies behind successful audio description[8] practices for dance: "What is performance? What is performance for?" These are the opening moments of *Telephone*, a documentary screendance[9] directed and produced by Heather Shaw and Krishna Washburn. *Telephone* is an aestheticization of access intimacy, for the film is created "for everybody, but […] especially for […] blind and visually impaired folks" (2023). Washburn speaks directly to the audience members often excluded by performance practices, like dance, that are generally deemed a predominantly visual art form: "We made this for you. You are not going to be missing anything" (*Telephone*, 2023).

Washburn, who serves as narrator throughout the film, asks us to consider a performance we've seen long ago that remains with us: "Why do you remember that performance […]? What is it that sticks in your memory? Is it a specific sequence of shapes that the performer or performers made? Or was it how the performance made you feel?" (*Telephone*, 2023) These opening prompts signal Washburn's call to dismantle the ocularcentrism that dominates both the approach to audio description in dance for its discriminatory effects, and, by extension, the way we think about dance in general. In an audio description workshop I took with Washburn from January through February 2024, she explains that "successful audio description for blind and visually impaired audiences […] de-centers sight as its origin point." Dance for blind people like Washburn, she explains, "is not a visual art form. It is an art form about sensations of the physical body, and how it connects to emotion, narrative, and our natural human empathy for one another" (2024b). As a sighted, middle-aged, now fat dancer in eating disorder recovery (there is no end to recovery) who suffers from body dysmorphia, I am encouraged by the access possibilities of engaging with dance as something other than a visual spectacle. Dance is a sensation.

*Telephone*'s concept came from Shaw, who began a "game of telephone" by creating a movement phrase in her apartment during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, filming it, then passing it along to an audio describer; their description was then given to dancers to interpret in their own style of movement. The dancers filmed their phrases then passed them along to another audio describer, who transformed the movement into language, then passed along their audio descriptions (Burke, 2023). The film is composed of a series of dance scenes which take place in home and studio spaces—all audio described, captioned, and with sign language interpreters—with fifteen disabled and non-disabled dancers of different genders, races, and sizes interspersed with Washburn's narration, culminating in a montage that revisits the dance scenes throughout the film.

The moments I feel illustrate the concept of the game of telephone most explicitly are the split screen duets with a single audio describer. Here we observe how dance is sonically and linguistically relayed to the dancers, whose individual movement interpretations alternate between synchronicity and idiosyncrasy. My favorite duet is when Davian "DJ" Robinson, in a living room with his service dog, Charlie, and Lillian E. Willis, in her bedroom, dance together via split screen. Willis also serves as audio describer in a separate sound track, her voice propelling the dance along with a sense of urgency:

> Crossing the room dragging our feet with an upright posture, we lift our right arm then our left, to cover our mouth, pensively. Now center, we lift our right leg and balance. Our foot hits the ground like a small explosion bringing us to camera with twisting leg and arm. Our body relaxes. We walk forward, shoulders tense, face alert. We walk smoothly in a circle to our left. Right hand following against the surface. It explosively initiates movement above our head and in our torso. Our limbs release before contracting in with one knee lifted. We pause. Then decidedly push our knee outward, arms stop side with flexed hands. We balance, then push the knee down and turn to our left now at attention. Turning back, we look over our shoulder intensely. We take another step initiating smooth swaying shoulders and hips, continuing in a circle with our head gazing over the shoulder, we skate on the carpet, moving energy up from the ground into our hands and torso and OUT. A push lunge to the corner, arms outstretched, we pause, pleased. Decidedly, we come back to attention, standing tall with a proud chest. We gently hang over our right side, resting. Flowing, arms initiate a light push lunge to the back. Our arm and foot pull our body upright. We walk off the way we entered, dragging our feet. Something's different. (*Telephone* 2023)

Willis's audio description[10] anchors the screendance, creating the foundation for the gestural and emotional possibilities to be discovered through the vehicles of Robinson and Willis's bodyminds. Washburn shared with me that Robinson and Willis were close friends when they studied at U.N.C. Charlotte together, and that Robinson, a blind dancer, and Willis, a sighted dancer, "had a dynamic of Lillian giving on-the-spot description of what they were dancing together in classes," (Krishna Washburn, email to author, March 29, 2024) which Shaw and Washburne sought to replicate onscreen. In order to film their section, Robinson listened to Ogemdi Ude's audio description; Willis audio described Robinson's movement, then danced to her own audio description, which is what we hear in the film.

Audio description is not simply a dictation of a series of movements, but an artistic expression in its own right, which is why I chose to include the language of this dance here in its entirety. What cannot be captured in writing are Willis's rhythm changes, her various tones of voice, the way she lengthens her vowels when the movement calls for extension, her emotional tenor. In fact, I'd like to amend my statement above, calling this a duet. It's a trio, with the third dance found in the voice of the audio describer (or a quartet if you count Charlie contrasting his human's vigor with the dance of rest). Toward the end of the film, Washburn emphasizes the artistry of good audio description, stating, "Audio description is art. Audio describers are artists" (*Telephone*, 2023). This point is driven home by the poetic choices Willis makes, such as ending the dance with, "Something's different."

But what exactly makes for good audio description? For audio description to be successful, Washburn explains in her workshop, a sighted audience member and a blind audience member should be able to discuss the performance afterward and feel as if they've experienced the same work. Washburn offers three criteria to consider when listening to audio description: "Can I dance it? Can I visualize it? Can I feel it?" (2024c). While not everyone can visualize dance, the true test of good audio description is how it affects the bodyminds of the audience. Can you sense the dance? Are you squirming in your seat? At one point in *Telephone*, Washburn encourages the audience to dance as well: "No need for proper audience behavior—if your mirror neurons are sparked, feel free to move. This is not art to be experienced passively, this is a game you can participate in." *Telephone* is an invitation. Dance is an invitation.

Washburn is deeply invested in the mirror neuron response she mentions above—how a dancing body can move a witnessing body. She explains that "according to the NIH, [mirror neurons are] a specific class of neurons that discharge not only when we move, but when someone else moves" (2024a). They can be activated by watching someone dance, or execute a gymnastic routine, for example—the body senses the movement it takes in visually. In other words, my witnessing body (as a sighted person) feels the movements of your performing body. But mirror neurons can also be activated through language. In this way, audio description is an access aesthetic that offers "an invitation to inhabit the dancer's body, and to experience the dance in a visceral way" (Washburn, 2024a). Maybe sensing leads to visualization, maybe not. I'd like to argue that the performativity of dance,[11] is about *being moved*. Dance is being moved.

Let me correct myself once more: I initially said Robinson and Willis dancing together on screen was a duet (let's consider Robinson's dog as an audience member), then trio, where Willis's voice as audio describer is the third dancer. Now, let's imagine the sound of Willis's audio description again. I would like to suggest that this split screen moment is in fact a quartet, with the dance that you, the audience (and perhaps even you, the reader) feels, in whatever way you feel dance, as the fourth dance. This is *your* dance. I spend a lot of time these days dancing in my head. I did this constantly in my youth and young adulthood, rehearsing phrases I learned in class to master choreography, or simply making things up to the music playing in the car. I often danced in my head without even noticing. Sitting on the 4 train in my twenties, dancing through Beller's choreography from class that week as my body vibrates from the subway car's friction on the tracks. This practice means something different to me now. It's a way for me to access forms of movement that are no longer available to my crip bodymind. Or, and, a choreographic extension beyond the confines of my skin. (What is a body, anyway? But that's for another project.) It's also a form of curiosity, through stillness, to explore how I might dance within my capacities in a satisfying way without using up my spoons. Sometimes I make up movement vocabularies with my crutches, extra limbs with no joints, a new bodily frontier. Dancing the first draft. Sometimes it's just a way to soothe my soul. It was not until my adulthood that I learned that "dancing in my head" was still an embodied practice, for visualizing movement affects your nervous system because it activates your motor cortex, the part of your brain responsible for voluntary movement (Knierim 2020). Sensing dance is still dancing. Thinking dance is still dancing.

When I witness *Telephone*, what I experience is possibility. There is an openness in the way that dance is performed for the audience, in a variety of registers—both visually and sonically/linguistically—that allows one to imagine an infinite number of variations of each phrase with the dancers on the screen, with the bodyminds of the audience invited to join in. Let's return to Robinson and Willis's duet/"quartet:" the differences in their interpretations of the audio description produce the tension that creates the real magic in the pairing. How the reverberation of Willis's "explosion" is a continuous sinuous echo from feet to knees to pelvis-ribcage-right shoulder punctuated by the right elbow; while Robinson's is more staccato: a twist-twist of the right leg, knee out then in, right arm opening abruptly with the rotation then softening to lower. Or how Robinson's "pause" after the release of limbs "before contracting in with one knee lifted" is an upright stance, body and face open to the camera with arms outstretched to the side, palms flexed; while Willis looks as if she's been punched in the gut, her body at an angle to the camera, pelvis reaching backward, arms-fingers-head-neck diagonally forward and upward, chest caved in.

Both dancers perform the "true" dance. And, importantly, both bodies are the "correct" dancing body. When I think about how dance pedagogy often begins with a visual example, and focuses on a visual product, one is, perhaps even just subconsciously, presented with an ideal: "This is *the* dance you are meant to dance." There is a gap between your bodymind and the example that, through repetition and rehearsal, you attempt to close. You may never (will never) be able to close this gap simply due to the nature of anatomy, biomechanics, let alone personal style.[12] By celebrating the art of audio description, *Telephone* brings attention to the questions I am most interested in when I go to a performance or watch a screendance: What does dance look like in *your* body? Let me try this again: How does your body interpret this gesture? What is the quality of your pelvis? The nature of your ribcage? Can I sense your breath in the way you travel across the floor? I want to learn about your life in the movement of your hands.

And since this film is made first and foremost for blind and visually impaired audiences, how these dancers look is inconsequential. Let's be honest: the way this movement would look on my body is going to be different than the way it looks on your body. The way this movement looks on my body today is going to be different than the way it looks on my body next week, month, decade. This is still *me* dancing. What would it mean to not have to replicate the you you once were? Or some dancer example that we all know you will never be? (What would it mean for us, as dancers, to realize that we have the power to decide who gets to have the honor of borrowing our bodyminds to perform our unique, one of a kind portrayal of a vision that can only be realized through our embodied interpretation?) As a student in dance class, I am invested in texture, dynamics, biomechanics, intension, the "why" of things. What if we consider the visual to be just an aftereffect, or yet another point of interest in an assemblage of aesthetics? I want to be guided through movement exploration without the image of someone else's body impeding the pathways that are available within my own bodymind. I want to consider someone else's dancing body as just another possibility. Dance is an array of possibilities.

When Mingus describes how access intimacy feels "like an unspoken, instinctual language between different people, like an entirely unique way of being able to communicate and connect" (2011), I cannot help but think of the language of dancers; here I am not speaking of being in on the jargon, but of the way people who move through the world *body first* have a tacit understanding of what it's like to exist as a fleshy collection of cells made for expression. In many Western studio-based dance spaces—this does not include hip hop, social dancing, etc.—being dancerly is highly exclusive: the training (the access to which is a privilege); having the right body type/shape/size/gender/race, etc.; being "talented" or "skilled" (which is highly subjective). The gatekeeping and elitism are endless. And yet, in *Telephone*, a film that includes disabled and non-disabled dancers of different genders, races, sizes, and abilities, Shaw and Washburn illustrate how audio description, which specifically decenters ocularcentricism to emphasize *dance as a feeling*, can create multiple forms of access intimacy, not only for blind and visually impaired people, but for those of us traumatized by the rampant body policing often associated with dance training. *Telephone* as a screendance was created with access as its foundational philosophy, as its aesthetic, and does the work of access intimacy by "challeng[ing] able bodied supremacy by valuing disability—not running from disability—but moving towards it" (Mingus 2017).

*Telephone* is a screendance that leaves itself wide open by asking you, whoever you are, to join the dance because it gives you all the tools you need to dance along with Mantione and

Shaw and Washburn and Cole and Ude and Robinson and Willis and Pavliska and Morton and Núñez and Ospina and Reis and Rodriguez and Mann and Meléndez and Patterson and Wethers and Lord and van Veldhuizen and Klugherz and Brown and Osborn and MacNutt and Zavitsanos and Ronkina. Which dance will you dance? Are you dancing with me right now?

## Cripping Ballet: Finding Access in Unlikely Places

I was a regular weekly Bartenieff Fundamentals™ student of Beller's until the end of 2020. My dietitian, who I refer to as my "eating disorder therapist," had to give me "permission" to stop exercising because it clearly caused me so much unexplained suffering, which eventually led me to pause all forms of movement work, no matter how gentle it was, for a couple years. It would take a move back to New York and a new team of doctors for me to learn that I was dealing with the onset of a cascade of chronic illnesses, most of which are triggered by movement, especially postural changes. Although the Bartenieff Fundamentals™ classes feel delicious at the time of execution, once I come to uprightness when the class is over, I am met with an intense headache (that can stick around for days), dizziness, lightheadedness, nausea, and incredible fatigue. In 2023, after diagnoses and medication that gives me some relief, I met privately with Beller as she composed five to seven minute phrases for me to play with on my own.[13] It was *something*, but it was not the same as losing myself in movement for an hour (which is dangerous for my bodymind), or dancing in community.

This conflict between what is and is not accessible within my own bodymind at any given moment reminds me of what J. Logan Smilges (2023) calls "access friction" (20). When Smilges discusses access friction in their book *Crip Negativity* (2023), they refer to, for instance, when "two people's needs rub up against each other" (61). Regardless of our best efforts, it is simply not possible to meet the different access needs of a diverse community at all times. And, for someone like me, our access needs are not static, can change at any given moment, and sometimes are even in conflict within our own bodyminds, especially for those of us with a multitude of chronic illnesses. This is yet another reason to shift agency to a student-directed experience in pedagogical spaces. Only I can make the choice that is safe for my bodymind.

Having to stop taking Beller's classes was devastating, not only for my musculoskeletal system, but also for my dancerly wellbeing. I keep hoping that my specialists will eventually let me increase my beta-blocker dosage or find some other solution to ameliorate the symptoms of my orthostatic hypertension, potentially allowing me to do floorwork again. But I know better than to have specific expectations regarding rehabilitation. To say that it is disorienting that the various forms of somatic work that I've always turned to when I needed to slow down, to heal from injuries, to be gentle, have more or less become inaccessible to me because they trigger my cranky circulatory and nervous system symptoms is an understatement. My movement life now remains in a state of perpetual experimentation and curiosity, which is equal parts frustrating and exquisite. This process has involved creating crip community both in-person and online grounded by practices of access intimacy to support this often perplexing new version of dancerly/bodily life.

After spending two months in Washburn's audio description workshop, I did something radical and signed up for her Introduction to Ballet class for blind and visually impaired people (Washburn allows some sighted people into class, but we are not the intended audience). If you grew up dancing with me, you'll understand that this is wild behavior—ballet has always been my least favorite *and most inaccessible* form of dance, yet I took decades of it. I was always told, if you want to be a dancer, you have to take ballet, this is your foundation. Ballet and I were frenemies. I have terrible turnout (external rotation from the legs at the hips), my extensions are not great (how high you can lift your legs), my lumbar spine is hyperlordotic (a slopey C-curve that is undesirable). I decidedly do not have a "ballet body," aside from having the kind of feet that even some of my ballerina friends envied (they are quite pointy). In ballet class, especially once I began training at my magnet high school, I was corrected non-stop, and I was grateful for it—this is what I needed to be a great dancer, right? You see, if you are not being corrected in dance class, it means that you're being ignored, it doesn't mean you are doing everything right. Being a dancer, you come to believe, means being reshaped, over and over again, from the outside in. Even while feeling absolutely brutalized by ballet, I always came back to it until my late twenties. Why? Because in all of my moving around due to graduate degrees and life changes, when I struggled to find a modern dance class that was my cup of tea, there was always a ballet class to take somewhere and at least I knew what to expect from it. Sometimes access comes in the form of predictability. And in my current crip state, ballet's uprightness is safe for my orthostatic hypertension, as long as I can take lots of sitting breaks. Ballet is programmatic and, critiques aside, allows for an unexpected form of consent as someone who tended to dread ballet class: I always know what I am saying yes to.

The space Washburn creates for her audio description workshop is a decidedly crip space, meaning, the class is taught by and for disabled people and we are expected to center the needs of our bodyminds first and foremost. While her Introduction to Ballet class is not intended for someone like me (I am a sighted person with extensive ballet training) I knew it would be a safe space for me to experiment with what ballet could feel like in my crip body at this stage in my life. Plus, during the Q&A for the online screening of *Telephone* I attended in late 2023, as I expressed my desire to be part of this community, she encouraged me to take class. When I communicated my hesitation—"I'm physically disabled, I can't stand for long, I haven't taken ballet in forever"—she said, "I'm a blind teacher, I can't see you. If you did nothing the entire class, I would have no idea" (paraphrased).[14] In Washburn's crip ballet space, I can have my stool nearby to sit while learning the combinations. I can try and fail at using my crutches at different moments if I desire. I can take breaks. A lot of them. And importantly, there are no mirrors for me to obsessively stare into, or desperately avoid. Washburn gives me the permission I need to "play around" with (as opposed to mastering) ballet, knowing that no one will judge me, correct me, or even see what I am doing. What would it feel like for ballet to not be the boss of me? To take a dance class for disabled people, taught by a disabled person who does not have visual access to correct my body in pain, but instead be available to answer questions at the end of class?

Washburn began our first class together, which assumes no prior knowledge of dance, by having us sit on the floor for an anatomy lesson to acquaint ourselves with our bodies and the movement concepts fundamental to ballet. We felt our sitz bones on the solid surface beneath us as we experienced the sensations associated with external rotation for "turnout." We then spent several minutes with our hands touching our ankles and feet to sense how when we point our feet we feel our calf muscles engage, our achilles tendons jut up into our calves, the knuckle bones of our toes push through the skin (Washburn, March 1, 2024). Within the first ten minutes of class, Washburn already exploded my brain when she spoke about where our weight should be in standing, which went against every ballet teacher I've ever had (in your heels, she said!), and I was already thinking about how that information could have radically changed my sense of balance.

Washburn's extensive understanding of anatomy and biomechanics[15] creates an "inside out" approach to conveying movement intention, as opposed to an outside in approach of coercing the body into a certain shape, which makes little sense when no two bodies are the same, and when individual bodies have a tendency to change. I am not saying that there is never a time or place for attending to the visual in dance class. But I do think that it's time that we do away with the tyrannical hold it has on pedagogical practices in many dance spaces as *the* way for people to teach others how to move. And let's be honest, once the visual takes precedence, then so do the appearances of the bodies inhabiting dance spaces.

When Washburn read a draft of this essay, she said that she clearly remembered coming across Cepeda's "Pandemic Time is Crip Time" post and "[feeling] an amazing sense of optimism" due to the crip possibilities that came with COVID-19 quarantine (Krishna Washburn, email to author, March 29, 2024). Although Washburn has a Master's in Education, a prolific performance career, and extensive education in biomechanics, it wasn't until the pandemic that she was finally able to get her online teaching career, which takes the form of the Dark Room Ballet, off the ground with regular weekly classes (Krishna Washburn, email to author, March 29, 2024). The discrimination against a blind person teaching dance—*but how are you going to fix people's bodies?*—again, comes down to dance's tendency toward ocularcentrism, as well as a lack of trust in students' ability to "evaluate" their own bodies. These impediments were ultimately undermined by the widespread access needs brought on by a worldwide pandemic. During my intake conversation for the intro class, when Washburn confided in me about the discrimination she faced as a blind dance teacher specifically regarding her inability to "correct" bodies that were not in the proper shape, we both wondered aloud, is that really the best way to teach *anybody*? As someone who has spent decades taking ballet classes from dozens of teachers, I continue to be astounded by how much I am learning from Washburn's expertly described movement and biomechanical approach to ballet, and how much bodymind healing I experience in a space that centers the needs of disabled people. A space that is not about looking.

Washburn closes class by teaching how to use tape on the floor to orient oneself in space, which evolves into a graceful circular walk while she guides everyone along with her movement cues. As if part of the choreography, she reassures us, "You belong here…You belong here…You belong here."

After just one of Washburn's classes I found myself googling ballet barre classes online, because I wanted more, but it took some serious effort for me to find a space that, even if not specifically crip, operated on the principles of access intimacy. I found what I was looking for in Ballez Class Everywhere, an intentionally queer community cultivated by ballet dancer Katy Pyle. In the introductory class, populated by people of different sizes, races, sexualities, and genders, Pyle asks the dancers to share a problem they have with ballet. Their responses include struggling with ballet's insistence on "perfecting shape" as opposed to the more nuanced approach of "feeling things from the inside"; "the sense of needing things to look a certain way"; "the emphasis on conformity"; "seeing the same body type over and over and over again"; and "the roles assigned to people, usually based on gender" (Pyle 2019). What these grievances have in common is the oppression applied by ballet's tendency toward ocularcentrism, which leaves little room for the felt sense they, as queer people (like myself), find joy in as dancers.

Pyle cultivates this joy—a joy for dance, a joy for queer community, a joy for showing up as your full self, a joy for 80s and 90s music—to create access intimacy for her online community. The inclusive care work Pyle enacts as embedded within her queer community is reminiscent of what Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha calls "a form of radical solidarity called love" (2018, 75). Here we see how access is not an add on, and certainly not a burden, but a means to build connection and create a refuge for people to practice the art they love, *because dance feels good*. Like the culminating refrain Washburn left us with at the end of our first Intro to Ballet class, Pyle too creates a space that reminds us: *you belong here…you belong here…you belong here.*

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[1] I like to think of "body scans" as a meditative way of taking inventory of how my body feels, in that moment, part by part.

[2] I intentionally use the pathologizing language of body dysmorphia because I want to own the extent to which this particular form of mental illness has shaped my crip bodymind; my way of moving, and not moving, through the world; and the way that it affected my relationship with my beloved, dance. But I

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also want to bring attention to the fact that our relationships with our bodies do not exist in a vacuum. In a different world, in a world (and an art) devoid of fatphobia, in a society, at a time that does not worship thinness, I believe things could have been radically different for me.

[3] This is because in Western, neoliberal society, most environments are created for and cater to White, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied/minded, thin or not-fat, citizens (who are usually men, but that is for another essay).

[4] To be clear, to be fat is not to be mentally ill. I am not here to pathologize fatness. Here I am referring to those of us with body dysmorphia and/or eating disorders who struggle to live as bodies *of any size*. For some of us, recovering from eating disorders means gaining weight and possibly becoming fat (if we were not already fat). Additionally, just the body changes that can come with aging, going through menopause, becoming ill can trigger relapses in ED mentality and behavior or body dysmorphia. I want to emphasize that it is extremely important to demystify the very incorrect notion that people with eating disorders are thin—most aren't. It just so happens that I used to be thin, and now I am not.

[5] One of the practices that was often required, depending on the teacher, when a dancer "sat out" was taking notes on a dancer or dancers—in other words, writing "corrections" for them. When I sat out, I would ask my friends who would like notes and what kind of feedback they were looking for, cultivating a practice of consent out of an assignment that felt like penance. Having a great deal of skill with these articulations along with having a keen eye gave me a reputation. I ended up being the rehearsal assistant to not only one of my choreographer friends but also to one of my ballet teachers, Gerard Ebitz, a former Joffrey Ballet dancer. "Sitting out" was actually an extremely productive exercise.

[6] I want to note the internalized ableism in this statement. It is difficult to cleave ourselves from the notion the we must be productive to have worth; however, there is also labor that we love that brings us joy like writing, dancing, and cooking. It's important to honor the complexity of these contradictions.

[7] Spoon theory was developed by Christine Miserandino to explain how people with chronic illness and disability only have a finite amount of energy (represented by spoons) in a day (and not the same amount each day) and must choose how to spent their spoons. Christine Miserandino. 2003. "The Spoon Theory." *But You Don't Look Sick? The Stories behind the Smiles*. https://butyoudontlooksick.com/articles/written-by-christine/the-spoon-theory/.

[8] Audio description for dance is a form of accessibility that involves verbally describing dance for blind and low vision people. This section will expound on what *good* audio description entails.

[9] Screendance is a hybrid genre involving dance specifically made for the camera that is generally site-specific and utilizes film editing as a choreographic tool.

[10] It should be noted that in *Telephone*, audio description serves as both an access aesthetic and choreographic tool, whereas in Beller's class her verbal description serves as a means of instruction for "technique."

[11] Here I am referring to the performance studies concept of "performativity" where an event, in this case dance, has a force, a ripple effect, beyond the performance of the thing itself (the execution of bodily movements).

[12] This is not the case with Beller's classes, both in terms of her somatic Zoom Bartenieff Fundamentals classes and also in the modern technique classes I took back in my able-bodied days. When Beller demonstrated, she always presented herself as a possibility and offered up other students' interpretations as illustrations to ponder.

[13] You might be wondering why it took so many years for my conditions to be diagnosed. I maintain to this day that medical fatphobia is the primary reason. Doctors—from a variety of specialties—focused on my weight gain (which occurred *after* I became sick) as the source of my suffering; they all suggested that I would feel better if I just lost weight. Once I left Massachusetts, my new team of neurologists in New York City honed in on the cause of my illnesses within several months. It should be noted that fatphobia is by no means the only impediment to receiving proper health treatment (especially when

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dealing with a healthcare system like in the U.S.). Classism, ableism, racism, sexism, etc., are all obstacles so overwhelming that people often give up on the process altogether when navigating the medical-industrial complex.

[14] Not only is this hilarious and totally disarming, but it also points to a shift in power dynamics from teacher to student that allows for students to continuously make their own choices about their bodies, with Washburn's suggestions.

[15] Washburn studied traditional biomechanical science through the American College of Sports Medicine, where she earned certifications as a Personal Trainer (CPT) and inclusive fitness trainer (CIPT), while also studying Exercise Science and Kinesiology extensively.

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# Queer, Neurodivergent Access Intimacy: Conversations with Katya Vrtis and the Cast of JC Pankratz's *Seahorse*

**Nicolas Shannon Savard**–*Independent Artist*

**About the Author:**

Nicolas Shannon Savard, PhD (they/them) is a queer-trans multidisciplinary artist-scholar, educator, solo performer, and podcast producer. They have served as conference planner, co-chair, and inaugural executive board member for the Disability, Theatre, and Performance (DTAP) Focus Group with the Association for Theatre in Higher Education. Artistically, their work as a solo performer and director presents complex narratives exploring the politics of queerness, madness, and interdependence. Their historical research focuses on the intersections of performance, queer community, and movements for social justice in the United States. Their podcasts and writing on solo and collaborative devised performance, queer and trans performance histories, disability aesthetics, and LGBTQ-inclusive pedagogies have been published in Routledge's *Milestones in Staging Contemporary Genders and Sexualities*, *HowlRound Theatre Commons*, *Journal of Consent Based Performance*, *Theatre Topics*, and *Texas Theatre Journal*.

## Introduction

The following article examines and builds upon thoughts that emerged from director Nicolas Shannon Savard's experimental approach to ensemble-based audio description in the 2023 premiere of JC Pankratz's *Seahorse.* This production was the starting point for a practice-as-research investigation into the overlap between intimacy direction, disability aesthetics, and queer storytelling. While reflections from both the director and actors involved in this production aim to model possibilities for how consent-based, trauma-informed practices can foster access intimacy in the rehearsal room and open up additional pathways to nuanced, fully human portrayals of queerness, neurodivergence, and madness on stage, this case study is framed by discussion with disability and performance scholar Catherine "Katya" Vrtis. Further exploring accessibility as an approach to creating human-centered artistic and academic spaces, this article was crafted as an audio essay, serving the access needs of potential readers as well as the author's own process. The following printed article is the transcript of that audio essay.

## The Transcript

*Seahorse* found me in March 2022, after driving through the snow to the Mid-America Theatre Conference in Cleveland. I opened my e-mail to find a message from Jennifer Mosier, the artistic director of Synecdoche Works, a Bay Area theater company, asking if I'd be interested in interviewing JC Pankratz, the queer, nonbinary playwright who had won the FMM Fellowship for Works in Heightened Language for 2021.

Hello, my name is Nicolas Shannon Savard. I am a queer-trans artist scholar whose work lives at the intersections of solo performance, LGBTQ community, and disability studies, and I directed the first production of *Seahorse* by JC Pankratz. The play straddles casual storytelling and magical realism. It's a poetic, winding, spiraling series of monologues. JC Pankratz's synopsis of *Seahorse* is:

> Reuben is a trans man, continuing his attempts to conceive a child after the death of his husband. In processing his grief and hope, Reuben turns his insemination endeavors into moments of self-recognition by donning different costumes and personas for each try. Juliet, Zeus, and Saint Francis all make appearances. Instead of a funerary parade, this one-person play seeks the purpose of life for the living, for the dead, and for the not yet arrived. (Pankratz 2024)

What struck me about the script—aside from how I found myself crying in the parking garage under the KeyBank Center in downtown Cleveland after reading the Saint Francis monologue—was the deeply intimate relationship it establishes with the audience through the stage directions, read here by two of the actors in our production, Samantha Cocco and Minor Stokes:

> **MINOR:** Deep habitable darkness of an apartment. Asleep. We can see the shapes of a bed, a table, a lamp, and somebody placing a plastic container down. And then a door closing. A smartphone lights up, illuminating the room in starry blue lights. A text.
>
> **SAM:** A moment.
>
> **MINOR:** Another moment.
>
> **SAM:** A stir, and then… stillness.
>
> **MINOR:** Then another stir, real this time.
>
> **SAM:** We are blinking awake. We are realizing it is 5:00 AM.
>
> **MINOR:** We are remembering what today is.
>
> **BOTH:** We. Are. Ovulating.
>
> (*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)[1]

The play is structured around five attempts Reuben makes at artificial insemination, interspersed with memories of his late husband Francis. In some of the darkest, most isolating moments of his story, Reuben invites us in to sit beside him in his bedroom, to sit beside him as he lies at the bottom of the deepest depths of the ocean.

I proposed to direct the piece as part of a practice-as-research project supported by the Humanities in Leadership Learning Series post-doctoral fellowship at Case Western Reserve University as well as the Baker Nord Center for the Humanities and Synecdoche Works. Live performances of *Seahorse* were presented at Maelstrom Collaborative Arts as part of the Cleveland Humanities Festival in April 2023. The production and rehearsal process aimed to explore how queer and disability aesthetics and theatrical intimacy direction may be used together to reimagine what access can mean for both the audience and collaborating artists. What I'll focus on for the purpose of this audio essay is how I, as the director, used approaches from both consent-based, trauma-informed theatre practice and intersectional disability justice-informed practices of access intimacy in tandem throughout the production process. For the cast and crew of *Seahorse*, a group made up entirely of queer, trans, and neurodivergent artists, access intimacy was a vital part and guiding principle of our rehearsal process.

In the following sections, I will break down how access, intimacy, and consent-based performance practice showed up at each stage of the production. For fellow artists, directors, and educators, my hope is that *Seahorse* can serve as a case study, modeling possibilities for how consent-based, trauma-informed practices can foster access intimacy in the rehearsal room and open up additional pathways to nuanced, fully human portrayals of queerness, neurodivergence, and madness on stage.

**Part One: Access as artistic impulse.**

Here's how I introduced our experiment to the audience:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** One of the many things that drew me to this story was the way that the central character, Reuben, even as he is experiencing some of the most vulnerable isolating moments of his life, invites us into his world. As a trans artist, and one who knows all too well how rare it is that we see trans characters rich in our lives on stage, I wanted to find a way to heighten and draw out that sense of intimacy and connection. How might we create opportunities for the audience to access Reuben's inner world in all of its messiness and contradictions?
>
> One method we've explored in this production is surrounding Reuben with an ensemble that performs live audio description, which we've adapted from the original stage directions. We hope this verbal description of visual information will serve its more typically intended function as an accessibility tool. At the same time, we've broken the rules a bit. Queered it, if you will. Our audio describers tend to stretch beyond that role, telling us what *can* be seen on stage and much more that can't… which only seems appropriate in a story that blurs the boundaries of sex and gender, space and time, what is real and what isn't.
>
> They will mostly be hanging out at the edges of the stage, describing the action and the visual landscape of the story for you. But they'll also talk to Reuben and to each other. They'll hand off props, make the set changes, and are often responsible for new elements introduced into the scene. They are characters in and of themselves. They are all in Reuben's head, and they are very real (*Seahorse: Streamed Performance* 2023).

This production was deeply rooted in disability aesthetics. To give some context to what I mean when I say that, I am building on the work of disability scholars Tobin Siebers (2010), Carrie Sandahl (2003; 2018), and Petra Kuppers (2013; 2022). Disability aesthetics is a term that describes artistic encounters that foreground and prioritize non-normative bodyminds, [2] experiences, perspectives, and ways of moving through the world. With a disability aesthetics approach to art-making, accessibility is treated as central to both the design and the experience of the work. For our show, we wanted to approach accessibility via audio description, not simply as an accommodation, but as a rich opportunity for creative exploration.

This approach invited questions like: What layers of meaning come out when the audio description becomes a character (or three) in and of itself? How might different voices describing the action add nuance to the story and deepen our exploration of queer trans embodiment and narrative? In that particular line of thinking, I am in conversation with the mentor artists from whom I've learned audio description. H. May and Liz Thompson, in particular, have greatly influenced my work on this with their approaches to audio description from an identity-conscious lens that blends perspectives from critical race theory and critical disability studies to get at the subjectivity of the people being described and lend agency to them. We have a great discussion about that on *Gender Euphoria, the Podcast* (Savard "Making Space" 2023).

Both historically and currently in pop culture, a lot of narratives featuring trans people, disabled people, and folks with mental illness, tend to be from an extremely pathologizing perspective, a highly medicalized perspective. Part of our goal with this production was to resist that. In many ways, there are elements of Reuben's story that could be read as his experience of anxiety, of depression, of trauma. There is a definite break with reality at points in the play. Part of what audio description allowed us to do was help the audience stay with Reuben in that experience, even when we are floating through the sky in a parachute or sinking to the bottom of the ocean. For the scenes where Reuben was performing the insemination, as a director, I wanted to resist a clinical, highly medicalized—or worse, sensationalized—image of transgender bodies and pregnancy. In shaping and alternative narrative, we found Theatrical Intimacy Education's process for choreography to be a useful guide (Rikard 2021; Fairfield, et. al. 2022). We started with a deep dive into the story, both for staging the insemination attempts themselves and for working through how we wanted the audio describer ensemble to function in the story as a whole.

Early table work and revisions to the draft descriptions involved questions clarifying each ensemble members' relationship to one another and to Reuben: Who are these people in Reuben's bedroom? Why are they here? When and why do they speak to the audience vs. directly to Ruben vs. to each other? How familiar are they with the process he's undergoing? How comfortable are they sharing this moment with him? Does Reuben consent to having his thoughts and actions narrated? Are there times where the audio describers reveal things he'd rather not share? We let the answers to those characterization and relationship-clarifying questions guide the choreography itself. Playing with distance, shape, touch, breath, and shifts in power, we explored questions like: Who initiates the action? Are the describers following Reuben or is he following them? Who is in control of the pace of the action? When does that shift? Who does Reuben allow to touch him? When? These questions, informed by intimacy choreography, helped the actors craft distinct relationships to Reuben, as you'll hear in the following clip from the performance. Reuben is played by Emmett Podgorski. The audio describers are Minor Stokes and Samantha Cocco.

**MINOR:** Phone is tossed to the bed. Cap of the cup is—

**SAM:** carefully

**MINOR:** unscrewed.

**SAM:** Okay, now, draw the semen into the syringe.

**MINOR:** It's up.

**SAM:** Okay, now, just lean back all the way in the bed.

**MINOR:** Under the blankets. Here. *(Pause.)* A tiny moment of mental debate.

**SAM:** There's no time. Tent your underwear with one hand, and then slide the syringe in with the other, and then…

*(REUBEN inhales shaprly.)*

**MINOR:** It's awkward.

**SAM:** It's uncomfortable for a second. Umm. Pull out. Get the Lube.

**MINOR:** He has to find it in the drawer with just one hand, and then he's got to open it up without even looking at it.

**SAM:** A practiced skill for sure.

**MINOR:** Never like this. Okay, lube retrieved!

**SAM:** Okay, both hands back in the underwear. Slide the fingers in first. Then the syringe.

*(REUBEN inhales a short breath.)*

And then push the plunger down.

*(REUBEN exhales slowly.)*

And it's done! It only takes a second or two.

**MINOR:** But it feels like forever. We can see it on his face.

**SAM:** Pull the syringe out.

*(REUBEN exhales, relaxing.)*

Bend your knees. Hug them to your chest.

Nothing left to do but wait for a while.

*(REUBEN's breath catches, a quiet sob.)*

**MINOR:** He covers his face with his hand. *(Beat.)* You have lube on your face now! You can't wipe it off with your hand.

**SAM:** Maybe a pillow or a corner of the sheet?

(*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)

Minor's description is closely attuned to Reuben's emotional experience, while Sam's offers reassuring guidance. This is contrasted with an awkward, flustered, uncertain description of Reuben's second insemination attempt. This one is described by Justin Miller, the one cisgender man, and the cast.

**JUSTIN:** Psych yourself up just a little bit.
You've got your cup, got your syringe, got your lube. You've got your—
*(REUBEN inhales.)*
Umm, *(clears his throat)* Reuben goes through the motions of the actions we are familiar with from the first try
(*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)

Justin's audio describer character has a different kind of intimacy with Reuben. The dynamic between them is playful as he helps Reuben into his Zeus costume, echoing Justin's portrayal of Francis in the previous scene.

**JUSTIN:** He dresses himself with great intention. It's sort of a toga situation.
At first it kind of starts off a bit, hmm, fraternity-party-toga-camp.
*(REUBEN lets out a soft gasp, offended.)*
Oh, but, but, but! It bumbles its way into… refinement!
Especially the with the flowers
(*Seahorse: Live Performance* 2023)

He is also able to see Reuben through the depths of his depression with a kind of familiarity and gentle nonjudgment. He knows what it's like at the bottom of the ocean and how to sit with him in the darkness. Here's that moment, the description of the choreography for Reuben's descent into the sea is voiced by Kassie Rice. For the digitally streamed and captioned version of the performance, we supplemented the original audio description with Kassie's voiceover in character as the stage manager, speaking over the headset.

**STAGE MANAGER:** Sky lights out. The parachute comes down. Light blue ocean waves rise from behind the bedroom wall. They ripple in the background with a greenish glow under the UV light from above. Yards and yards of fabric from Reuben's bed wrap around

> him, circling him as he sinks. A slow, methodical whirlpool. He doesn't fight. He lets the ocean hold him as it pulls him deeper.
>
> **JUSTIN:** Reuben sits at the bottom of the ocean. He's naked.
>
> **SAM:** It's rather lonely here and a little scary.
>
> **JUSTIN:** Suddenly, a sea creature, a bright, curvy little seahorse floats down to keep him company. The light is familiar. Nothing down here is scary anymore.
>
> **REUBEN:** Oh, hello, darling thing. Fancy seeing you here
>
> (*Seahorse: Streamed Performance* 2023)

I followed up with the actors after the production closed. Justin had this to say about our process of crafting a character from the stage directions:

> **Justin Miller:** I think that that one is a little bit more difficult than Francis because we *knew* who Francis was.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Francis was written as a person.
>
> **Justin Miller:** But with this one it was, like, we're internal monologue, but we're also like people in his life who care about him. But we had to find that intermediary part of where we *are* like that. With me, I had two different scenes of that: in the first scene, it was very distinctly clear that I was *in the room* with Reuben and helping him through this issue. And then, I had one where I was simply in the water with him, and it was very much like I am not a *person*, at least in the real sense of the word.[3]
> And I think that was interesting because I, as a person who has worked sound, I had to think in terms of "How would I have set this up as a sound [designer]?" What would I have done to help in this particular moment? I love stage directions that are very descriptive of what they want. It very much makes the job a little bit easier for everybody. But with this, it felt more like the stage direction was a character, and I think that making them characters made the show feel more real. It made it kind of just like Reuben is having an internal monologue that's also a person. And it kind of played into the surrealism of the show. (Miller 2023)

Emmett echoed this sense of care and community around Reuben that the audio describer ensemble offered.

> **Emmett Podgorski:** I really liked it, for one, from like a technical aspect, it took a lot of thinking off of me. [Laughing] What I do next? Oh, they're telling me. In the world of the show, it also made sense because Reuben is relying on these voices to help him do what he needs to do. And I also just really liked it because the way I deal with my emotions, personally, is I have little visual "people" in my head of, like, different things, like "Anxiety Emmett," "Logic Emmett," those types of things. When I need help with like figuring something out, I'll look at some of those different perspectives. It was kind of cool playing a character who kind of does the same thing. It helped me connect with the character a lot.
>
> Also, during insemination bits, it was really nice because it was a really choreography- heavy scene. Just having that guidance, I really liked that because like for

> me—for Emmett being Reuben in that moment—like, Emmett knew what to do; Reuben was doing this for the first time in the actual context. It was easier to fall into that headspace of like, "OK, cool, I'm doing this. This is hard, but I have this loving voice helping me through it." (Podgorski 2023)

## Part 2: Access Intimacy as Community Norm

While the production itself aimed for universal design, or designing with broad accessibility in mind, for the rehearsal process, we needed a different approach. Due to limited time and rehearsal space, social dynamics between campus and the broader community, the general stressors of navigating the theatre as a trans artist, and conflicting access needs, universal accessibility was not realistic. As I was making choices about whose access I'd need to prioritize, I found that access intimacy offered a useful framework for making those decisions and communicating about access needs more generally.

In one of our "Queer-Crip Theorizing" discussions, Catherine ("Katya Vrtis") gave this great explanation that aligns with how I'm using the concept of access, intimacy, and how it differs from other ways of thinking about accessibility.[4] Here's Katya:

> **Katya Vrtis:** While I draw in some ways from universal design and the universal design for learning, unlike the perspective where the goal is universality, access intimacy is all about *individuality* and *specificity*. What does this particular bodymind need in order to be safe, supported, included—and included in such a way as to create emotional and intimacy safety, where vulnerability is possible and the experience is positive? It's Mia Mingus's 2011 blog post where she first defines this term: "Access intimacy is that elusive, hard-to-describe feeling when someone else *gets* your access needs. It's the kind of eerie comfort that your disabled self feels with someone on a purely access level" (Mingus 2011).
>
> Later, she talked about [how] this can contrast sharply to the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act] approach: having access granted in a way that creates stress or even trauma, the experience of being resented. "Yes, we will meet your needs, but you are a *problem*, disrupting things for other people. Why are you making trouble?" And that is crushing.
>
> So access intimacy is the complete opposite of that. It's going into a space or community and feeling, 'we are here with you, for you.' And it doesn't necessarily mean your access needs are met the moment you enter. Talking about literally physical spaces, it can be moving the chair and getting the desk set up for wheelchair access. But it can be done in a way that's "oh, let's correct things" because the problem is the space, the room, the lack. The problem is not your presence with the need. (Savard and Vrtis, "Access Intimacy" 2024)

To expand a little bit, Desiree Valentine, building on Mia Mingus's theory, highlights the problem of only asking, "Is the venue physically accessible and were your access needs met?" A rights-based individual accommodation approach ignores the emotional, cognitive, and sometimes physical labor involved in confirming and coordinating accessibility measures. She writes, “Access intimacy is about liberatory access rather than what we might call integrationist access. It demands collective attention to reshaping the norms, values, and beliefs structuring our world” (Valentine 2020, 81). Access intimacy makes some key shifts: 1. We don't assume an able-bodied, neurotypical default where “others” can be accommodated. Access intimacy makes addressing everyone's access needs the norm. 2. Rather than the burden of ensuring accessibility falling on the disabled individual, all members of a group take collective responsibility for ensuring access needs are met. 3. Access intimacy takes the social and psychological impact of inaccessibility into account.

At the start of the rehearsal process for Seahorse, inspired by Theatrical Intimacy Education’s “Crafting Community Agreements” workshop led by Kim Shively and Suzanne Shawyer (2023), we had a conversation establishing some shared norms for our ensemble. One that I offered the group was using access intimacy as a guiding principle: explicitly addressing and taking collective responsibility for meeting one another's access needs while we're working together. Normalizing conversation about access needs began with an access invitation, a practice I learned from Margaret Price, who taught my Critical Disability Studies grad seminar at Ohio State. Here's how I described that moment to Katya:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Another one of the practices that had modeled for me is doing access invitations in a way that doesn't just invite you to share your access needs, but also acknowledges mine if I am the facilitator. So whenever I give that access invitation, I try to be really intentional about naming the things that I am also doing for myself that are meeting my access needs.
>
> I had a really lovely moment at the first rehearsal for the show I directed this spring. I have ADHD and no internal concept of time—I do not perceive the passage of time. The room we were rehearsing in didn't have a clock, so I had to bring the little tiny clock from my office with me. I kept it next to me and was like, ‘I will keep you here for four hours if I cannot see this outside of myself and my pockets are full of fidget toys. This is how I'm meeting my access needs.’ As we are going through our introductions, if there are things that you need the group to know about, how we can help you feel more fully engaged in the space, feel free to share that, but no pressure to. And as we went around the room, everybody was just pulling out all of the things from their pockets that they had been fidgeting with.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Yeah, the LMDA Disability Affinity Group, they are fantastic about that, about modeling and creating access needs discussion that is really good at just being a thing that is just part of the day and isn't a big deal that needs to be overperformed and isn't

> something shameful that needs to be shrunk down. It's just part of existing in a bodymind is we have access needs and we cover them.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Occasionally, it feels like the way that we go around and introduce ourselves in the circle where it's, like, "also say your pronouns," and it's very clear that many of the cis people in the room have never thought about what their pronouns are before. Many of the able-bodied folks in the room have never thought about their own access needs before. It feels like a very similar experience when whoever is making that invitation isn't vulnerable about it themselves and doesn't model that vulnerability. It's just like OK, now you're just asking me to, and I've got to make the choice about whether I want to be the *one person* in the room that everybody's waiting for.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Yeah, it's the creation of an "us versus them," when it should be a creation of just an 'us' together. (Vrtis and Savard, "Interview" 2024)

Reflecting on the process later, Emmett had this to say about what the access invitation and ongoing conversation about access needs meant for him as an actor:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** I really liked when at our first floor reading, I was like, "we're gonna talk about access needs," and everybody just started pulling out all of their fidget things. I was like, "Yes! Normalize this!"
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** It was such a safe space in that regard, which I really appreciated because I hate sitting still. Like with this show wasn't as much of a problem because I was constantly doing stuff.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Yeah, you didn't have downtime with this show.
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** But in other rehearsals—like, I need to be doing something with my hands—and I don't know, I sometimes feel like people are mad that I'm knitting or whatever in rehearsals. In this process, I feel like it wouldn't have mattered—if I had had time to do that. I was able to do things that I usually don't do in front of people, just like to calm myself down afterwards. Like, I had this feather duster that I would have with me for after the run-throughs, just because it would be so emotionally taxing on me. It was nice to have something with me to just touch afterwards. And I felt safe to do that, which I really appreciated. (Podgorski 2023)

To give a little bit more context, what Emmett is talking about here with the feather duster is an example of what many in the neurodivergent community refer to as stimming. Our use of fidget toys is another example of this. Stimming, short for sensory self-stimulation, is a variety of methods of engaging the senses to regulate our sensory input. The way that I like to describe it is it's sort of creating a balance between your internal and external stimuli. It can be really helpful in managing overwhelm and anxiety. It has kind of a grounding, calming, and focusing effect, and it tends to be really helpful for remaining mentally engaged and present.

To further unpack Emmett's comment about feeling safe to openly stim in this rehearsal process, as opposed to how he feels in other contexts, I'd like to bring in some of the ideas that

Laura Rikard and Amanda Rose Villarreal (2023) talk about in their essay, “Focus on Impact, Not Intention: Moving from safe spaces to spaces of acceptable risk.” In that essay, they note that we cannot guarantee that any space will be 100% safe, and so they advocate for explicitly naming the risks we are asking participants to take as part of creating a space where informed consent is possible. They acknowledge that determining what counts as acceptable risk is necessarily subjective to each individual as well as context-dependent. Where I see the connection here is, as Valentine (2020) also points out, ensuring one's access needs are met always involves some level of risk. Rarely is a space 100% inaccessible, nor is it 100% accessible. Disabled neurodivergent and chronically ill folks are constantly negotiating acceptable risk. It often takes the form of some version of the question how many spoons will this cost me? In other words, what are the demands in terms of physical and emotional energy and executive functioning to engage in this activity? Oftentimes, we're weighing the risks navigating spaces that are inaccessible to us versus the risks that come along with advocating for and getting our access needs met. With Emmett's example of stimming, in many situations he chooses not to do so because of the potential social consequences.

The majority of spaces we navigate as trans folks as neurodivergent folks remain relatively unwelcoming and inaccessible. For this show, with a neurodivergent trans man at the center, practicing informed consent meant acknowledging the risks I was asking my collaborators to take. Equally importantly, it meant being explicit about the measures I'd taken to mitigate some of the risks we often face. From the beginning, I talked with both the playwright and the actors about the boundaries I'd set for the production: You will be working with a majority, if not entirely, queer production team, and we are explicitly seeking neurodivergent artists. Trans folks involved with the production will never be asked to educate cis people about trans identity issues or bodies.

To help ensure this, I structured the audition process to include a conversation where I asked, “What drew you to this story in particular? What do you find exciting about this production artistically? What are you most interested in exploring?” For the cisgender actors who auditioned for ensemble roles, if it didn't come up naturally earlier in the conversation, I asked directly about their past experience working with trans folks in professional, community, or artistic settings. The show demanded a high level of cultural competency, and I was not about to create a situation where any of us were the first trans people someone had worked with. And that meant turning some auditioners away if they didn't seem prepared to take on a supporting role in a trans story.

Naming the boundaries I put in place, inviting discussion of access needs, and actively demonstrating that the space was safe to "unmask" laid the groundwork for building access intimacy day-to-day in rehearsals, which I'll dive into in the next section.

### Part 3: Access Intimacy as Ongoing Practice.

Desiree Valentine clarifies the purpose of access intimacy writing, "As a liberatory approach to access, access intimacy does not produce or demand specifics like an accessibility checklist, wherein if everything were checked off, access would be achieved. Rather, access intimacy is about incubating shared plans of action as a space of empowerment and intimacy" (2020, 92). Both Valentine and Mia Mingus (2011, 2017) emphasize that it's an ongoing, constantly adapting process, mostly made-up of small acts. Day-to-day in rehearsals, we found ways to use the tools I introduced from my intimacy direction training in ways that made small but significant shifts toward creating a neurodivergent-supportive, human-centered way of working.

On our first day of rehearsal, I introduced Theatrical Intimacy Education's self-care cue, "button," as a way to indicate that we needed to pause or that the boundary needed to be set (Rikard 2021; Pace 2023). Emmett and I reflected later on about one of the main ways that we used it in rehearsals.

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** I really liked how we ended up using "button" in rehearsals, like as a very gentle [way of] getting us back on track. It was nice to just be like "Okay, collectively, we're unfocused. Breathe. Come back." I think most of the time it was you or Kassie who would just [sound of 2 knocks on the table], and we could all just go, "Okay" [inhale, exhale] without anyone having to yell about it.
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** Yeah, it was a nice, quiet way. Also, I just feel rude if I interrupt people talking, even when I need to. Like, once, I think it was Justin and Kassie were having a conversation while rehearsal was going on, and I was like 'hey, guys, quiet." I felt really rude afterwards, even though I know that's okay to ask for as an actor. It's nice to have those little quiet, nonverbal things that don't cause as much of a fuss, I guess. I don't know, I just like learning about different ways of [expressing] consent and boundaries, like ways to set [them]. In my little neurodivergent brain, sometimes it can be hard to verbally communicate. There's a lot nonverbal ways of communicating your boundaries and consent in intimacy coordination. Yes, it's very useful for the theater, but also it'sstuff I use in everyday life. Like, I've used 'button' for things in life. (Podgorski 2023)

Throughout our rehearsal process, we regularly used de-roling techniques, exercises to psychologically and sometimes physically step out of one's role in the show at the end of our time together (Pace 2020; 2023). I found that creating that separation between self and character when stepping *into* one's role at the beginning of rehearsal was equally important. The primary technique we used to do this was a group check-in—a practice modeled for me by my mentors in theatre for social change, H. May and Elizabeth Wellman. The check-in is an intentional moment of taking stock of where you are and allowing the community surrounding you to provide support as you step into your role. It has three steps: 1. A question and/or an invitation for each member of the group to share. This can be as long or short as fits the needs of the group that day. 2. An acknowledgement or response from the group. Most often I like to do these in nonverbal way: things like "snap if what's being said is resonating with you," or we might mirror a sound and motion back to someone who shared their own with us. 3. A moment of collective breath. Here's my conversation with Katya Vrtis diving a bit deeper into the specifics of what the group check-in looks like in practice and how it can create access intimacy:

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** [The check-in] really makes a point to hold space for "where are you at as a person, right now?" and it's just really disrupting… In theater we've got this really strong, like, "leave everything at the rehearsal room door. Don't bring the outside world in here." And it's just really challenging that. Like, no, you're going to bring everything that you are experiencing in here, and we are going to make space for that and let you be seen.
>
> Because when you ask people how they are, they will often just say, 'fine,' and move on, I like to ask weird, metaphorical questions. I decided to try that in a regular classroom—it was a history class. Usually, I just make my actors do it because we're doing feelings here anyway. But I would just start class with like, "This is going to be a human-first classroom." Before we put on our scholarly hats, before you have to be students, before I have to be an instructor, we're just going to be *people* together for a couple of minutes. I like to ask folks, "If your general internal state today were a song, what would that be?" The students really liked the day I asked them, "If you could sum up how you're doing in a meme, what would that be?" That was around midterms time. They were all doing *terribly* but found a way to laugh about it. But it also informed, like, what is my pacing going to be like today? How can I meet you where you're at and not force you to try and come from wherever you're at into the pace that I am running full steam ahead?
>
> We get a little bit deeper about it with actors. One of the things that I like to ask about is "What is something you need from the group today?" We will fashion that as a gift for you. It will be a metaphor, but you'll feel seen. If you need warmth, we are going to make a little ball of sunshine here and hand it over to you.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** It's creating community. It's letting everybody's entire bodymind, entire being, be welcome and not clipping off parts so that you're just your mind, or you're just your ability to form the exercise or just your writing. It's welcoming and centering wholeness and building a community together.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** With, also, layers of consent built in. Because you can *just* give the answer to your thing; you can choose to give an explanation for that or not. And

> sometimes people choose not to, and you can tell like they're going through something. We understand we need to hold space for you. You don't need to talk about it yet or ever.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** It's creating the possibility for them to bring in themselves and not creating the forced intimacy of trying to break through when there is a wall, or they're not there today or ever. Consent I think is built in. You know, some of the greatest harms in theatre, I think, happen when there's the effort to force intimacy that is not yet there. (Vrtis and Savard, "Interview" 2024)

For the cast of *Seahorse*, this check-in process, this moment of collective care, was a positive force in the rehearsal room. We used it as an opportunity to communicate access needs, adjustments, and ways we could support one another. Here's what the actors had to say about this practice. First, you'll hear from Justin and then Emmett.

> **Justin Miller:** I think that one of the things that really helped me was when you would tell us, like, "you can put your whatever is bothering you that day… put it in the center [of our circle]" and be able to work through it. And I think I was able to get through the week of tech because of that. Just because, as you know, I was going through a very particular *moment*. But you were all so very kind, very gentle. It made it easy to actually do the job that I needed to do. There's been days where, like, I'm dealing with something, and I don't want to come in. I don't want to act. But when you did that, I'm just like I can act *because of this*. (Miller 2023)
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** It was really nice coming into rehearsal and having the check-ins [inaudible] instead of being like, "okay, now forget everything else." Professional theatre requires so much dehumanization of the actors involved, and it's ridiculous because theatre is such an intimate artform. You're expected to go on stage, expose your soul to an audience. How are you going to do that if during the rehearsal process, you have to leave everything that makes you human outside?
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Which realistically means just pushing all of it down. Then, how are you supposed to access those emotions if you're blocking off half of them? I feel like it just lets us be more responsive to each other. In one of our early rehearsals, you'd had a terrible day, but were excited to be there and focus on the work. But also that let me know to be like, okay, we're going to spend a little bit more time in the warmup on grounding and connecting to our bodies.
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** Oh yeah, that day, it was just so nice to come in and do that.
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** And we'll make sure we're really intentional about the process of becoming present.
>
> **Emmett Podgorski:** It also makes it more productive because I would go into those rehearsals being, like, I'm so excited to go in there and use what I'm going through to make my performance better with the support of these people around me. Versus other shows where it's like, oh, I'm going through all this stuff, and now I have to pretend I'm okay to go do this musical. (Podgorski 2023)

## Part 4. Access Intimacy as Messy, as Imperfect, as Transformative Practice

For all the ways the cast and crew of *Seahorse* worked to address everybody's access needs every day, as many successes that we had in doing so, we had just as many failures. There were days we forgot things. We got distracted and sidetracked for too long. Actors forgot face masks at home. I was slow to type up notes I'd offered to send via e-mail. We always wish we had more time in rehearsal. But access intimacy is not about doing access perfectly. It's about continued engagement and adjustment and commitment to continue working towards greater accessibility for the people in the room. I want to return to my conversation with Katya to wrap up with some thoughts about. The broader benefits that we see in applying access intimacy in artistic and educational spaces. Here's that conversation.

> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** Something I really like about access intimacy, just as a way of creating space and moving through the world, is also this sense that it's *not a burden* to meet your needs. We're going to expect everyone in the room to have access needs and explicitly make space for it. And, also, not ask you to justify or prove it.
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Oh my gosh, yes!
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** We'll just *believe you* when you say you have a need. It should not be as radical as it feels. But I think so many spaces I walk into—all of my disabilities are invisible disabilities, so if I'm going to advocate for any access needs, it is also going to be disclosing and all the layers of things that come with that. I just think about, like… how rare is it that I expect that that need will be believed and met? And seen as, like, of course, we can make this adjustment?
>
> **Katya Vrtis:** Yeah. Desiree Valentine in an article, "Shifting the Weight of Inaccessibility: Access, intimacy as critical phenomenological ethos" in the journal *Puncta* has a really great quote about access intimacy:
>
> "Fundamentally, I propose that access is not a practical and isolated thing or event. It is not about what one person or institution can do for another person but involves an ongoing interpersonal process of relating and taking responsibility for our inevitable encroachment on each other. At base, access intimacy invites attention to our fundamental intersubjectivity, our inherent vulnerability, and the asymmetries of power in any relationship." (Valentine 2020, 78)
>
> And I think that is a really great way to sum it up. It's this ongoing process of [acknowledging that] bodyminds rub up against each other in physical space, in psychological ways, intellectually in the classroom, in all of the many myriad modes that humans exist in. And [we] try to take off the corners that poke and create a space that is soft and welcoming and allows everyone to come in and be a part of it. And part of that is knowing that no amount of universal design will ever be complete, that access is something asymptotically approached and never completed. And that when something previously overlooked comes up as somebody comes in and joins a physical space, social group, classroom, what have you, with a need that is not already met, the response is "let's fix that." Not "I did my best. How dare you complain?"
>
> **Nicolas Shannon Savard:** It's rooted in being in relationship with other people. I want to continue having a relationship with you as a person. And I want you in this space. So these

are the things that I need to do so that you can have your needs met here… Which is, really, I think a lot more approachable than memorizing all of the practices [for] every hypothetical person that *could* come.

**Katya Vrtis:** Right, it's trying to achieve universality and, then, just not…

**Nicolas Shannon Savard:** And then beating myself up about it when I inherently [inevitably] forget *something*.

**Katya Vrtis:** One of the core things about access intimacy is, like you said, it's relational, and so [it's] that assumption of best faith. Because if it isn't good faith, if someone's not acting in good faith, they'll prove it later. But [it's about] trying to assume good faith, that everybody is doing their best. [It's] creating and building a community, whether it's a classroom community, a department community, a community of the performers and crew of a show, what have you, where when somebody makes a mistake—or just doesn't even think of something; I don't want to frame that as a mistake so much as it's an ongoing process; we all live with privilege blinders, so realizing that something has been overlooked is just an ongoing process—we work together to fix it and move on. Then, keep including that [practice, consideration] you know to make sure that that person, or those people, or that group is now included.

And then, [it's] trying to really remove the adversarial "us vs. them," you know, "you have failed me in these ways and I have failed you in these ways" and we're both angry. Sometimes it happens. We're all human—and of course, with that, it is very key to keep in mind that power relationships are a factor. Be mindful of relative position and power when doing so. [It's] trying to build a space that is as collectively created and honed and equitable as possible.

Access intimacy is about creating an ideology, an approach, a pedagogical philosophy, that is about bringing people in and seeing them as individuals with an individual matrix of needs and identities. Because this is highly intersectional. Mia Mingus, in her 2017 writing on this—her Longwood lecture that's been published on her blog—expands a lot on the intersectional issues and her matrix of identities as a queer, physically disabled, transracial and transnational Korean adoptee raised in the Caribbean. Whether it's queer spaces that reject disability—either by not including access or shutting down conversation about disability—or disabled spaces that continue to recreate hetero-cis-sexist and white supremacist ideologies, and so on and so forth… Any group or space that welcomes only *some* parts of a person's identity is actually rejecting their full self because all of our alignments and identifications are simultaneous (Mingus 2017). We can't just opt in and out, and asking that is creating harm. It's mapping the problem onto the bodymind rather than building a space of inclusion and welcome. And it's a huge goal to work towards because *inclusion* isn't good enough. *Access* isn't good enough. It isn't enough to pick a season that features characters that are appropriate to your performers and make sure your classroom and tech spaces are fully accessible to everybody. And as long as the Otherized individuals are not experiencing welcome, then, the ideals of diversity, equity, inclusion, access, justice… [Those] are all really, really important, but *safety* and *intimacy* and the chance to be there with their whole person and without any experience of "cut off the edges to fit the box" is an ongoing process.

It also allows for the best art because when we're working from defensive, protective places, it is very hard to take risks. Even artistic risk that is hypothetically separate from risk to self. Because walls up and defensive is a very rough place to create art from, period. It is really, really hard to be able to allow that vulnerability and bring one's whole self into the process. The harm it does to people is more than enough reason to try and fix it. But our theaters, our art forms, our performances are harmed as well.

Perhaps the key thing, and maybe a closing thought, is, again, access intimacy is a *drive to wholeness,* instead of breaking out: What are our access needs? What are our needs for gender respect? What are our needs for physical access? What are our needs to be safe and vulnerable and creative? It's: how do we create space and community that allows for the totality of being simultaneously and without division?

**Nicolas Shannon Savard:** How we account for safety can look drastically different depending on your positionality in the body you are moving through the room with. And [it's] just creating the space to acknowledge that that's the case. And committing to building it together.

**Katya Vrtis:** Yep, because it's never done. An empty space doesn't have access intimacy. It's about community.

**Nicolas Shannon Savard:** That sounds like a lovely thought to end on.

**Katya Vrtis:** Awesome. This was a pleasure. Thank you so much. (Vrits and Savard 2024)

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[1] In adapting Pankratz's stage directions for audio description, I edited some phrasing for concision, clarity, specificity to the real visual landscape of our production, and timing of onstage actions. This adaptation from the original text was made with JC Pankratz's permission, and they participated (via Zoom) in the early read-throughs as we refined the audio describer ensemble's script.

[2] Bodymind, as feminist disability studies scholar Margaret Price defines it, is "a socio-politically constituted and material entity that emerges through both structural (power- and violence-laden) contexts and also individual (specific) experience." It is a way of thinking about physical embodiment and mental processes together, as inextricable and interdependent, and always in relation to the broader social context. (Price 2015, 271)

[3] Notes on transcription style: My transcription of these conversations is not precisely word-for-word. I have made small edits for clarity in translating the recordings into a written format. Italics indicate the speakers' emphasis. Phrases in brackets are my own insertions for clarity. I have removed filler words and repetitions, except in instances where the speaker uses them to modify tone or emphasis.

[4] Part of this recorded conversation was published as a podcast episode titled "Access Intimacy in Academic Spaces" as part of the series, *Pedagogy in Process*, in February 2024. The previously unpublished sections of the recording are labeled "Interview" for clarity.

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# Micro-Events: A Potential Tool for Navigating Consent and Accessibility in Immersive Theatre

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Melissa Bondar holds a BA in Theatre Production and Literature from Stockton University and an MA in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Sheffield. With professional experience as a stage and production manager, Melissa's academic interests merge theory and industry, particularly focusing on experimental and participatory performance. Her doctoral research examines the limitations of risk assessment in immersive theatre, proposing care ethics as a framework to address unregulated aspects of audience management. Continuing her career as a stage manager and technician while teaching undergraduate technical theatre modules, her work reflects a commitment to bridging academic inquiry and practical application in performance contexts.

As an immersive theatre enthusiast and scholar, I have often been surprised by how performers navigate moments of interaction with me in unexpected ways. This recurring dynamic has piqued my interest, particularly as my academic research focuses on the intersection of risk management and care ethics in immersive theatre. Early in my studies, I encountered Jorge Lopes Ramos' (2015) concept of micro-events, which reimagines how performances can be segmented. Unlike traditional frameworks like French scenes, Ramos' approach emphasizes aesthetic beats, creating a more nuanced system for understanding participatory moments. This paper explores how breaking down immersive performances into micro-events can become a practical tool for achieving both aesthetic and accessibility goals. By analyzing these moments in detail, immersive productions can meet the needs of diverse audiences, fostering inclusivity while maintaining artistic integrity.

Immersive theatre refers to performance experiences where the audience plays an active role in shaping the narrative, often through direct engagement with the environment, actors, or story itself (Bucknall 2023; Machon 2013). Micro-events are the individual moments within these participatory performances, broken down into smaller, manageable segments for analysis. Jorge Ramos defines a micro-event as a "quadrangular relationship at any given time in the event – between four key elements: the guest's role, the host's role, the use of physical space and the fictional moment (or context) it represents" (2015, 59). This definition underscores the essential components of immersive theatre: the roles of the performer (host) and audience (guest), the dynamic use of space, and the narrative context. In immersive theatre, where boundaries often blur, understanding how these elements interrelate is crucial for assessing audience engagement and overall experience.

By breaking a performance into micro-events—from audience arrival to their exit—this framework allows for more specific assessments of risk and inclusivity focused on maintaining the highlighted artistic moment of that micro-event. It provides a means of understanding how audience participants interact with space, performers, and the evolving narrative. This approach mirrors the traditional French scene breakdown used by directors and stage managers to divide performances into smaller segments for rehearsal. However, rather than breaking the show into smaller segments based on when people enter and exit the stage, which is the approach to segmentation in French scenes, micro-events identify and divide the show into the core aesthetic beats, often the key moments of performer/audience interaction. By identifying and analyzing micro-events, the core artistic moment of the micro-event can become the focus of what needs to be upheld and translated equally in any parallel event. This also calls attention to "the use of the physical space" (Ramos 2015, 59) and the moment it represents, highlighting that this is also a key construct that needs maintenance and consideration across any parallel tracks that are developed.

Research at the intersection of theatre and disability, often termed disability theatre, typically emphasizes logistical needs over aesthetic concerns. This prioritization reflects a larger issue: the lack of research addressing the experiences of audiences with disabilities within immersive contexts. Betty Siegel, Director of Accessibility at the Kennedy Center, highlighted in her 2022 Event Safety Alliance Summit talk that one in seven adults will experience a disability during their work life, with 84.7% of those being mildly disabled and many disabilities being invisible. While audience scholarship has expanded significantly in the twenty-first century, little attention has been paid to how immersive theatre can better support audiences with disabilities (Hadley 2015).

This oversight is unfortunate, as many accommodation considerations align with the objectives of immersive and participatory experiences. In sorting accessibility considerations, the focus moves further onto the spectator, with an interest in how the spectator perceives and interacts with both the experience and other spectators in the experience. Drawing on principles from crip studies, this paper reimagines accessibility in immersive theatre not as a logistical challenge but as an integral aspect of artistic expression. This perspective echoes Alison Kafer's assertion that accessibility must be understood not merely as compliance but as a "visionary act" that reshapes cultural norms (Kafer 2013). Rather than layering multiple accommodations onto a single track, I propose that breaking performances into micro-event beats can reveal opportunities for creating parallel accommodation tracks. These tracks, while offering different accommodations, can preserve the core aesthetic interactions of the performance for all audience members—a quality often absent in current practices. Parallel tracks are already a common aesthetic tool in immersive theatre, making them a compelling framework for exploring accessibility innovations.

When discussing risk in theatre, it's easy to default to traditional Health & Safety assessments, which often focus on regulatory compliance, including basic accessibility mandates. While compliance is important, it does not inherently guarantee true accessibility or inclusion. As Bree Hadley (2015) observes, functional accessibility barriers—such as narrow entrances and stair-only access—are among the primary factors preventing spectators with disabilities from fully engaging in theatre. The other factors include frustration with stereotypical representations of disability and the lack of authentic portrayals by disabled authors and performers. While these definitions of risk are valid, they are inherently limited. Drawing from disability justice principles, the concept of parallel tracks proposed here seeks to transcend compliance-based accessibility. As Sins Invalid (2019) emphasizes, access must be holistic and attentive to intersecting identities, creating experiences that prioritize disabled agency and autonomy. In immersive performances, known for their deeply interactive and participatory nature, additional psychological risks arise from the intimacy these experiences often demand.

Intimacy in immersive theatre manifests in various ways, ranging from heightened physical closeness, such as direct touch or shared moments of eye contact, to psychological and emotional engagement, such as vulnerability or personal reflection. While such connections often aim to deepen the participant's immersive experience, they do not rely solely on physical or emotional closeness. Kelsey Jacobson and Bethany Schaufler-Biback (2024) contend intimacy is multifaceted and subjective, defined not merely by touch or emotional bonds but by “spontaneous relation and engagement with the other” (56). These elements of intimacy, whether physical or abstract, invite participants to connect personally with the performance while introducing unique risks to both physical and emotional safety—risks that extend beyond the considerations of conventional performance settings.

Adam Alston (2013) shares the psychometric paradigm for considering risk within immersive theatre, which correspondingly emphasizes the technical/physical considerations, though also stresses consideration of the social/psychological aspects. When engaging with audience on such an intimate level, risk assessments need to expand beyond the practical and into the emotional and ethical. The breakdown of a performance into micro-events helps clarify needs that arise at each different step of the performance, especially in the realm of more ambiguous emotional or ethical triggers, than merely looking at the performance from a meta view.

### Orientation Micro-Events as Gateway Accessibility Moments for Audiences

A key element of successful participatory experiences is clear audience onboarding, or the process of introducing the audience to the performance, its environment, and the expectations surrounding their participation (White 2013). Amanda Rose Villarreal (2021) emphasizes the importance of consent during orientation or onboarding, ensuring participants are aware of what to expect and can make informed decisions about their involvement. Cody Page (2024) expands on Villarreal's work, applying this idea to the context of role-playing games as "Session 0" (74), a preparatory phase that aligns participants' expectations and establishes boundaries.

This approach can also be applied to immersive theatre, where orientation serves as a critical tool for clarifying accommodations and setting expectations, especially for disabled participants. The orientation micro-event, which is the first interaction the audience encounters upon arrival, is pivotal in creating a supportive and inclusive experience. Onboarding is crucial because, as noted by Ramos (2015), it begins with an intentional engagement with the physical space and should be integrated into the overall narrative of the experience. While orientation does not necessarily need to be embedded directly into the story, immersive productions that push boundaries or require a significant suspension of disbelief could greatly benefit from an orientation micro-event that helps ground the audience in the world of the performance. This could involve introducing the audience before they even enter the venue, providing a neutral entrance space, or guiding them step-by-step into the performance's fictional world.

To clarify, micro-events are small, interactive segments within a performance that serve as a moment of engagement or transition. These moments, often tied to the interaction between the performer and audience member, can help guide participants through the narrative while ensuring that accessibility and inclusion are prioritized. In immersive theatre, these micro-events help bridge the gap between the audience's real-world identity and the roles they are invited to play within the immersive world. For example, Rose Biggins (2020) describes a performance where repeated consent warnings, though necessary, felt at odds with the hedonistic tone of the show, leaving the audience feeling uncomfortable. In this case, the delivery of these necessary messages could have been more effectively integrated into the performance's world, creating a smoother transition for the audience.

Embedding orientation tasks within a world-specific or adjacent setting can help ease audiences into their roles without disrupting the flow of the narrative. A strong example of this can be seen in ZU-UK's *Hotel Medea*, where the character of o Capitão interacted with the audience as they arrived at a world-adjacent setting, such as the docks near the training camp, and then continued the orientation process once they entered the camp (Ramos 2015, ix). This approach, which integrates both the physical environment and the performance’s narrative, allows for an immersive introduction that sets the stage for further engagement and establishes a shared understanding of roles, including accommodations for diverse audience needs.

Good orientation micro-events also have the potential to become a key moment in manifesting accessibility, ensuring that all audiences have equal access to the experience without undermining the aesthetic goals of the production. Cody (2024) highlights a useful technique for ensuring inclusivity in role-playing games: the use of a pre-game boundary sheet that outlines accommodations and helps players set expectations for the game, as well as a verbalized follow-up during Session 0. This proactive tool could be similarly embedded in immersive performances, allowing audience participants to share their access needs before the performance begins. A tailored orientation micro-event, built into the early stages of the experience, could provide a space for performers (hosts) to address and verbalize accommodations, ensuring all participants feel comfortable and prepared. This would not only help ensure that access is seamlessly integrated into the immersive experience but would also allow for a more personalized engagement where participants have the autonomy to voice their specific needs. Additionally, sharing these broader announcements of accommodation during orientation, without singling out specific audience members, may encourage any audience members who may have been hesitant to ask for any desired accommodations to make a request at that time as well.

Integrating access needs early in the orientation phase allows performers (hosts) to communicate specific accommodations clearly, addressing accessibility without disrupting the performance’s flow. For instance, employing parallel accommodations—such as sensory modifications, clear instructions, or choice-driven paths—can meet a diverse range of needs while preserving the agency and decision-making central to immersive theatre. Jane Ensell highlights that the traditional approach of segregated accessible tracks often limits choice and undermines inclusivity; instead, the goal should be to design open-world experiences where disabled participants can exercise choices alongside others (Immersive Experience Network 2023). This ensures that accessibility enhances rather than diminishes the agency and personal connections that define immersive performances. While pre-game boundary-setting and orientation strategies can aid in creating parallel tracks for tailored experiences, crip theory prompts us to critically examine whether such measures inadvertently uphold compulsory ablebodiedness by privileging normate standards in the primary track (McRuer 2006). To counter this, these tracks must actively challenge, rather than reinforce, ableist assumptions about performance and participation. Micro-events can help frame these accommodations within the performance, allowing each audience member, regardless of ability, to engage fully with the narrative on their terms—whether through sensory or cognitive accommodations or through ensuring that the experience doesn't inadvertently coerce participants into a specific role or reaction.

Crip aesthetics reject the separation of artistic and accessibility concerns, proposing instead that disability culture can inform and enrich the creative process (Kuppers 2011). This perspective reinforces the need for parallel tracks to be designed not as afterthoughts, but as co-equal narrative pathways that reflect diverse embodied experiences. This approach calls for planning from the outset, incorporating accessibility consultations and considerations into the rehearsal process so performers are prepared to adapt without disrupting the story or performance flow. The goal is to develop a structure that doesn't isolate disabled participants but rather weaves accessibility into the very fabric of the production, ensuring both inclusivity and artistic integrity are prioritized from the start. Micro-event breakdowns allow for a systematic evaluation of each of these moments.

### Adopting Micro-Events for Diverse Participant Needs

As we look to risk assessing micro-events, a possible framework to apply to each event is to look at it through two lenses: physical and psychological. Adding to this the caveat that experimental theatre continues to grow in such unexpected ways that presently unseen lenses may need to be added in the future per the needs of new productions. Physical assessments include typical Health & Safety concerns such as clear paths, proper emergency exits, functional first aid, and firefighting measures, which fall under the basic compliance standards required for public spaces. However, compliance alone does not equate to true accessibility. To create genuinely inclusive spaces, productions must also consider the audience's experience beyond compliance. Following Kafer's critique of inclusion as a retrofitted solution, accessibility can be woven into the artistic fabric of immersive theatre from the outset (Kafer 2013). By designing with disability at the core, performances can move beyond token gestures to truly transformative experiences. For example, what are they being asked to do? Do they need to sit? Do they need to lay down? Do they need to run? And if they can't, what is the plan for the performer (host) to not only continue the narrative cleanly but also ensure that the audience (guest) feels included and respected within the performance?

A significant number of participatory practices that I've personally encountered love to involve the use of hands, likely because many devisers perceive it as a relatively safe way to initiate intimacy. I use intimacy here to mean fostering a connection between the performer and audience—in this case, through physical means—that encourages a more profound engagement with the performance and its story. A very quick way for a performer to disrupt that connection is to falter when they haven't prepared for a moment where they extend their hand hoping I'll reach out, only to realize I have a limb difference. This lack of preparation often leads to discomfort for both parties, particularly when the performer proceeds without acknowledgment, holding my hand and unintentionally making the interaction feel forced. In these moments, my focus shifts entirely to whether I'm making the performer uncomfortable, likely detracting from the artistic intent of the interaction. The issue here isn't my existence in my body but the performer's unprepared response. Conversely, the few performers who have acknowledged my difference with a simple added request for consent not only eased my discomfort but also created an opportunity for genuine intimacy, capturing what Mia Mingus describes as "access intimacy" where the embodied stress of managing the situation dissipates because "someone else 'gets' your access needs" (2019, para. 11). These moments, where I grant permission for the performer to touch a part of my body that doesn't often receive touch, feel profoundly personal and meaningful. Building this kind of flexibility into rehearsals—through invitations rather than rigid choreography—can allow performers to approach interactions with multiple modalities that prioritize audience agency. Such an approach supports individual needs while reducing the risk of imposing biases or predetermined expectations on audiences' experiences. Crip Studies foregrounds care and interdependence as central values, challenging the neoliberal emphasis on individualism (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018). Applying this ethic to immersive theatre demands collaborative design processes that honor diverse access needs without prioritizing efficiency over inclusion. An extra minute, sometimes even just a beat or two, despite the interaction potentially being in a tightly choreographed moment, can make a big difference for inclusion.

Issues like this are potentially avoided by developing micro-event breakdowns for performance. In a situation like the one above, a key narrative beat is the performer (host) taking the audience's (guest) hands. Rather than trying to assess for every disability imaginable, a micro-event breakdown exercise would allow performers to ask "what if I can't take someone's hand?" in a more relaxed rehearsal setting. This not only provides them with the opportunity to brainstorm alternative ways to uphold the artistic and aesthetic impact of the moment, but also opens the performer to a more adaptive mindset, a non-catastrophic response to these differences.

## Balancing Accessibility and Artistry: Strategies for Parallel Track Implementation

Immersive and participatory practices offer a unique flexibility that allows for improvisation and personalized responses, creating an ideal environment for the implementation of parallel tracks designed with accessibility in mind. However, as accessibility needs often conflict from one disability to another, it may not always be possible to accommodate every individual. Nevertheless, by conducting a risk assessment for each micro-event and asking the crucial question, "Who does this leave out?" it may be possible to create parallel tracks that allow for the artistic goals of the performance to be conveyed in multiple ways. The key challenge here is ensuring that each parallel track is equally developed and fulfilling artistically, without reducing the experience for any participant.

Hadley (2015) highlights that accessibility work is often approached on a logistical level, neglecting aesthetic, symbolic, or social access, which are essential to fully inclusive artistic expression:

> Most disabled spectators can describe the blank look of the attendant wondering why a disabled person would want to burden or disrupt the rest of the spectators by, for example, leaving on their own timetable, leaving a device on, talking, failing to move during a promenade part, etc. when they had already been 'helped' so much by an ad hoc solution provided to deal with the problem of disabled people wanting to attend at all. (160)

A primary challenge in creating parallel tracks lies in the time and financial resources required. Developing alternate tracks that maintain the same depth of immersion and narrative integrity as the original production necessitates additional rehearsal time, space, and potentially more performers or crew. However, the investment in carefully evaluating micro-events for accessibility can help avoid the ineffective ad hoc solutions that Hadley (2015) describes as the prevalent mindset of how to do "enough" (Hadley 2015, 161) to get through the one performance, again often limiting the accessibility considerations to only the logistical level and often creating temporary separation from the performance for the audience member. Rather than offering “opt-out” areas where disabled participants are segregated or excluded from parts of the show, parallel tracks can offer alternative experiences that allow everyone to engage with the performance in a way that aligns with their needs and preferences.

Additionally, incorporating accessibility measures into the ticketing process, as suggested by Siegel (2022), can further streamline the planning and delivery of these accommodations. Asking about accessibility needs during ticket purchase allows production teams to pre-schedule accommodations for specific performances, making it easier to deliver a seamless experience for all attendees. This proactive approach enables more thoughtful integration of accessibility measures into the overall design, rather than relegating them to logistical concerns for a few performances or participants.

Parallel tracks are not a new concept in immersive theatre. A notable early example comes from the company Talking Birds and their production *Solid Blue* (2002) at a medieval monastery. When a lift broke, rendering the primary performance space inaccessible to people with mobility impairments, the company devised an innovative solution. They set up a live video and sound link to a downstairs cloister, complemented by live visits from actors when they were not performing upstairs. This solution, while inexpensive and reliant on existing resources, successfully maintained the aesthetic and narrative integrity of the production. Audience feedback indicated that the downstairs experience felt exclusive and engaging, underscoring how thoughtful accessibility solutions can enrich the production for everyone, not just those requiring accommodations (Anonymous 2014; Nisbet 2020).

However, the implementation of parallel tracks must be handled with care to ensure they do not inadvertently segregate the audience in a way that undermines the overall experience. Instead, the aim should be to craft tracks that reflect diverse needs while maintaining artistic integrity, ensuring that every participant feels included in the full narrative arc, which is where micro-events shine as a system for segmenting and analyzing the performance. For example, if parallel tracks are created for themes or interactions that might be difficult for some participants, it is essential to provide equally engaging options that do not compromise the narrative's impact. Audience members should not be pushed into or sorted onto tracks based on biases or assumptions about their preferences. Instead, creators could consider how parallel tracks can be designed to allow participants to choose the type of experience they feel comfortable with, ensuring that the artistic goals remain intact across all tracks.

Drawing from my own lived experience, I attended a performance of Houseworld Immersive's *Bottom of the Ocean* in Brooklyn, which featured a segment centered on redemption and absolution. Following an emotionally intense prior encounter, the segment faltered for me when the performer attempted to absolve me by washing my hands. The interaction was awkward; the performer hesitated, took only my left hand, and performed a half-hearted wiping motion. This incomplete gesture left me feeling uncomfortable and disconnected from the intended emotional resonance of the moment. Through the lens of Disability Justice, this moment highlights the limitations of existing paradigms in immersive theatre that fail to account for diverse participant needs and responses. The act of handwashing, while symbolically powerful, assumes a universality of touch as a medium for connection, potentially alienating individuals for whom touch is either unwelcome or inaccessible. A more inclusive approach would incorporate pre-planned options for expressing absolution—such as verbal affirmations, symbolic gestures, or interactive objects—ensuring the experience remains meaningful without unintentionally othering anyone. Additionally, clearer communication between front-of-house or stage management and performers could better equip them to anticipate and adapt to participant needs, reflecting the Disability Justice principle of fostering environments that honor diverse embodiments and modes of interaction.

## Towards a More Inclusive Future: Embracing New Tools for Improved Accessibility

Immersive theatre has the unique potential to model crip futures—a vision where accessibility and artistic innovation are seamlessly intertwined (Kafer 2013). By expanding the tools and frameworks used during the development process to prioritize accessibility, immersive theatre can lead the way in dismantling ableist paradigms and creating spaces where all participants can engage meaningfully. This is not merely about compliance but about embracing the transformative potential of diverse perspectives to enrich the creative process. As Bruce Barton (2021) noted in a discussion on accessible practices, "Even if something you add into [a performance]… only two people out of a hundred will have the sensibility or the condition to experience it in some ways, I think it enriches the work… it's thicker, it's denser, there's more going on in it" (23). Accessibility, approached as an integral part of artistic design, deepens the artistic experience for everyone.

Micro-events emerge as a particularly powerful tool in achieving these adaptable futures. With their inherent flexibility, micro-events allow creators to conduct detailed risk assessments and implement accessibility measures without sacrificing aesthetic integrity. This granular approach provides a framework to guide the planning and rehearsals necessary to develop immersive theatre experiences that are not only inclusive but also innovative. By centering accessibility in this way, immersive theatre can adopt a generative model of creative problem-solving, where challenges are reframed as opportunities for artistic growth and richer audience engagement.

In conclusion, immersive theatre makers have an unparalleled opportunity to lead the cultural shift toward accessibility as a foundation of artistry. Tools like micro-events provide the structure and adaptability needed to craft performances that celebrate interdependence, equity, and the diversity of lived experiences. By integrating accessibility as a core creative principle, immersive theatre can help realize a future in which performance spaces not only accommodate differences but actively thrive on them—modeling crip futures where creativity and accessibility are inherently linked.

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# Consent of Creation

**Regan Linton–** *Independent Artist*

**About the Author:**
Regan Linton (she/her) is an actor, director, writer, voiceover artist, and disability advocate originally from Denver, CO. She is an avid creator of work that humanizes disability. Regan is former Artistic Director of the preeminent disability affirmative performing arts organization, Phamaly Theatre Company. She co-directed the award-winning documentary *imperfect* about professional actors with disabilities, and the short film *Jack and the Beanstalk* as part of Warner Bros/Discovery Access' Reframed: Next Gen Narratives series. Regional acting includes performances at the Arena Stage, The Kennedy Center, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Mixed Blood, Denver Center for the Performing Arts' Off-Center, Phamaly, and The Apothetae. Her eclectic creative and leadership experience includes original plays (*FDR's Very Happy Hour*; *The Menagerist*; and TYA shows for DC's National Theatre); accessibility coordination on David Byrne's immersive experience *Theatre of the Mind*; voiceover for Audible audiobooks; featured columns for New Mobility Magazine; and guest lectures at academic, government, business, and nonprofit institutions across the world. MFA in Acting UC San Diego, Master of Social Work University of Denver, BA from USC. www.reganlinton.com

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 allows 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 the 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.

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