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Learning-disabled theatre is often perceived as giving a voice to the voiceless or empowering those marginalised in society. But how can this voice and power avoid becoming co-opted by neoliberal, racial, colonial capital merely to produce the entitled, self-possessed, autonomous individuals that late capitalism needs, but the production of which is destroying the planet? Does the political efficacy of this work consist in the mere presence of learning-disabled artists in these contexts, or is it not rather in the negotiation of the terms of their presence and participation? Interesting answers to these questions emerge in the exploration of the multimodal negotiation of voice, presence, representation and mediation in learning-disabled performance *as performance*.

I have been working for 18 years helping to create self-devised performance with Different Light Theatre, an ensemble of learning-disabled artists in Christchurch, New Zealand. The unique characteristics of the company mean that we have been prompted to develop multimodal ways of working in creating, presenting and researching performance. The company emerged from a city council initiative to include learning-disabled people in theatre that funded my leading an eight-week series of workshops within Hohepa Canterbury, a residential institution. At the conclusion of the workshops, I did not wish to walk away and, with the help of drama students from NASDA,[1] where I work as a tutor, I established a performance company. The company comprises between ten and 20 learning-disabled performers, some with Down Syndrome, some diagnosed with autism, some with cerebral palsy, some with additional physical disabilities. It has included a small team of never more than three or four non-disabled participants. We have operated in roles that include 'organiser' (organising transport, schedules and spaces and times for the learning disabled artists); 'coach' (providing ongoing training in basic aspects of theatre); 'framer' (providing a creative structure within which the learning-disabled artists are free to create); 'filter' or curator and editor of artistic ideas; 'artistic collaborator;' and the more nebulous role of 'creative enabler,' seeking to accommodate access, support and artistic process at the same time.[2]

The subsequent journey of Different Light has encompassed very different models of creating and presenting learning-disabled theatre. These have included an initial model of naive community theatre, followed by an attempt at conventional dramatic theatre. The company then experimented with strategies of theatrical storytelling, moving away from conventional theatrical spaces and the conventional momentum and duration of rehearsal and performance. The next turn was toward performance art and performance research. This was in part prompted by the need to rethink theatre in response to the Christchurch earthquakes, the continuing climate crisis and the global pandemic. Each shift, each variation in mode of performance was a different attempt to a) accommodate the learning-disabled artists; and b) find new aesthetics to challenge and stimulate them as artists and new ways of engaging audiences in the performance event.

The meaningful participation in theatre of learning-disabled artists depends upon two often conflicting demands: a) the need for sufficient support and care to include people who have been subjected to "epistemic injustice"[3] in education and training; and b) the need to offer learning-disabled artists opportunities to be challenged and to develop practices characterised by artistic rigour.[4] This tension has been explored by Margaret Ames of Cyrff Ystwyth,[5] who has written eloquently of the aporia or gaps characteristic of learning disability coming into contact with the meaning-making "disciplinary formations" of theatre. Bruce Gladwin of Back to Back Theatre[6] has, with characteristic understatement, referred to the company's "issues with theatre," out of which it nonetheless makes ground-breaking learning-disabled theatre. In my experience, this need to explore the complex relationship between accessible participation and forging new aesthetic and political possibilities leads necessarily to the adoption of multimodal processes of creating and presenting theatre.

Members of Different Light Theatre have diverse and disadvantaged access to the conventional building blocks of theatre. In terms of voice, we have performers who stammer, who have speech impediments, or, in the case of Glen Burrows, who accesses his 'voice' in a range of ways: through a Dynavox, iPad text or speech-to-text software, laminated sheets containing certain key phrases and illustrations, and his own distinctive vocal articulations. We have attempted to include all of these different voices in performance, as well as theatrically deconstructing the concepts of 'voice' as a clear, resonant actor's instrument and as unproblematic, neutral access to the lived experience of the learning-disabled artists. We have investigated what acting, stage presence and *kairos*[7] or good timing mean in live performance by using live-feed and pre-recorded video, captions, voiceovers and digital vocal manipulations. In the group's performances, multimedia approaches intertwine with the need for care and access intimacy,[8] and this often results in a mix of "intermediality" in performance.[9] Intermediality is itself a multimodal approach to performance that does not prioritise any one medium: screen, live, digital or immersive. The performance event becomes a kind of assemblage within which affects are transmitted between human participants and theatrical and digital techne. Access intimacy seeks to afford a flexibility and ease of access and connection for all bodies in a particular space. Taken together in learning-disabled theatre, these factors render political – at a fundamental level – the audience's processes of perception, understanding and affective engagement with the performers and the performance.

During the 18 years of Different Light Theatre's existence, I have attempted to engage the learning-disabled performers in different modes of theatre and performance: naïve community theatre, conventional dramatic theatre, postdramatic theatre,[10] immersive, interactive, intermedial theatre, ecological theatre and performance as research. These descriptors appear abstract and academic,

but the theatrical practices they describe need to be eminently understandable, practicable and, crucially, enjoyable, for actors to participate. The learning-disabled actors of Different Light have had no problem with engaging in these different modes. They have proven more than capable of creating naturalistic characters; slipping in and out of character; collaborating in site-specific theatre; engaging audience members in immersive environments; incorporating pre-recorded and live-feed video, voiceovers and voice manipulation; participating in non-conventional performance in the streets of quake-damaged Christchurch;[11] and collaborating with disability artist and scholar Petra Kuppers in gentle, environmentally conscious performance at Waikuku Beach.[12] With each successive development, however, the performers themselves changed the goalposts in myriad practical, technical, material, unimagined and imaginative ways, shifting the paradigms and sending us, the non-disabled facilitators, back to the drawing board to reconfigure what we collectively understood as theatre and as the assemblage that consituted the group.

To give one example, in 2010-11 during the series of earthquakes and aftershocks that Christchurch experienced, the company expressed a desire to explore performance grounded in the comfort, familiarity and repetitive routine of daytime television soap operas. I introduced them to the Dutch TV web series *Downistie*, modelled on the US series *Dynasty*, in which all of the characters are played by actors with Down Syndrome. This immediately became a utopian exercise, as the conditions do not yet exist in New Zealand to allow for learning-disabled doctors, drivers and politicians. The genre of soap opera became something else in the encounter with the learning-disabled performers: a performance mix that included (and exceeded) the theatrical modes of social critique, parody and pastiche.

In 2013, the company performed a 20-minute version of a soap opera, *The Lonely and the Lovely*, at the opening of the Disability Studies in Education conference at the University of Canterbury.[13] At the end of the performance, switching their mode of engagement, the actors went into the audience largely composed of academics and teachers. They distributed a questionnaire containing three questions: 1. What is your disability? 2. Who are your support workers? 3. What makes you lonely? What makes you lovely? This was an attempt to flip the script on the expected research relationships between non-disabled researchers and disabled research subjects. Respondents were encouraged to re-assess themselves. Responses included: “My disability is my patience/arrogance.” “My support workers are my family, my whanau[14] and my students.” “I am lonely in what my work expects of me, I am lovely when I manage to connect with others.” Conversations and discussions continued after the performance in a meet-and-greet session with the performers.

MULTIMODALITY IN ACCESSING AND REPRESENTING THE ‘VOICES’ OF THE PERFORMERS

The turn to performance research has always been immanent within the company. The 2010-11 production *Still Lives* was intended to explore the difficulties of three learning-disabled young men finding their voices in the ‘recovery’ from the Christchurch earthquakes – a recovery that, it soon emerged, continued to ignore them. Whereas the earthquakes had been inclusive, the recovery clearly was not. The rebuilding of the city from the ground up neglected the opportunity to include equitable access for all. *Still Lives* explored what constituted the voices of the performers by presenting a polyphony of computerised voices, captioned video, fantasy video sequences and the contrasting spoken voices of the performers.[15] When it was presented at the Society for

Disability Studies conference in San Jose, California, it was accompanied by two ASL signers and live captioning. The production sought to problematise the presence and expression of the young men's 'voices' in the surrounding stillness of both the earthquake-damaged city and their continuing marginalisation as learning-disabled people within it. Computerised voice-overs positioned them in various narratives – disclosing (deliberately incorrectly) their disabilities, idealising them as fantasy princes and dismissing their desires – and contrasted with the contradictions, nuances and lacunae of their own spoken voices. The multimodal production suggested that the rush to dramatic or theatrical identification and meaning was in tension with the complexities and contradictions of the performers' experience and their access to expressing this.

In part due to the post-quake damage to existing structures in Christchurch, the next phase of the company's activities was undertaken outside of conventional theatrical spaces. Different Light operated, and still operates, in the interstices of a tertiary educational institution, the NASDA drama school within Ara Institute. This affords access to theatre and rehearsal spaces in the downtimes of the institution, and the opportunity to repurpose the props, costumes, part-built and completed sets and lighting plots of the drama school, while respecting the health and safety requirements of the Different Light and the drama school performers. The absence of an imperative to perform an annual production meant that the performers were able to access the techne of conventional dramatic and musical theatre performances, observe them in a different light and put them to uses for which they had not been intended. In *The Undercommons*, Moten and Harney write of the need to "sneak into the university and steal what one can. To abuse its hospitality, to spite its mission, to join its refugee colony, its gypsy encampment, to be in but not of ….".[16] This period of the company's praxis was an exercise in undercommons 'study' – a speculative practice not necessarily undertaken as a means to knowledge and qualification, or, as Jack Halberstam articulates it, "a mode of thinking with others separate from the thinking that the institution requires of you."[17]

The group pursued 'study' in the backstage and rehearsal spaces of a theatre without the pressure to produce completed projects or performance for a paying public. Different Light performers started making appearances in masks in and around civic artworks in the city. A group of performers in larval masks sat outside and interacted silently with each other at the tables of a cafe abandoned during the quakes. On another occasion, 15 learning-disabled actors staged walks through the road cones, scaffolding and fences of the city in transition, adapting their formation to the temporary, often inaccessible, constraints on public space. At times they stood and looked at what had previously been a space occupied by a building that was important to them. Passersby looked on, equally bemused by the confusion of the rebuild.

In 2019, Different Light Theatre company members responded to my prompt to devise a performance for the Christchurch Arts Festival, giving their take on the 15 years of the company's existence. Company member Isaac Tait's immediate response to the idea of a history of the company was a wish to speak of the "people who had disappeared" in that time. Disappearance became the focus of the whole production. This encompassed the dis-appearance of disability, the dis-identification of theatrical representation, as well as referring to Fred Moten's formulation: "The conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is performance's condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of reproduction."[18]

This idea of disappearance included the death of two key company members, John Lambie and Louise Payne, but also those performers who had joined the company and moved on over the years, and others whose family and living circumstances had changed, preventing their continuing with the group. This idea of disappearance began to permeate the process and the performance. It led the performers to question what appears and disappears in a 'history' as a series of events, what appears and disappears in memory and in performance, and what disappears only at some stage later to reappear unprompted. In *The History of Different Light*, the performers were encouraged to revisit scenes, memories, characters, lines of text and objects from previous productions, at times connecting with videos of their younger selves in rehearsal or in performance and exploring what had been gained and what had been lost during 15 years of working together. It was an invitation to examine the life of the company by means of a self-reflexive performance.[19]

For some, this meant an uncomfortable or alienating return to their past selves in performance. Ben Morris chose to revisit a devised scene from *Ship of Fools* in which he had appeared to disrobe, take a shower and entertain dreams of sirens dancing and singing around him. When this was performed in Horsham, Victoria, at the Awakenings Disability Festival, one showing included a schools audience which reacted raucously to the suggestion of his disrobing (behind a sheet of blue cloth). Morris frequently referred to this experience and the 'buzz' he got from this theatrical sleight of hand. When in *The History of Different Light* video of this scene was projected alongside the live performer onstage 12 years later, his response was ambivalent. He introduced the scene to the 2019 audience with some comments about how he felt so much less free now, but at the same time he also mimed along with every word he had spoken in the scene as he looked at his younger self. It was his choice to include this archive, as was the ambivalence of his response.

In debriefing this and other scenes in which live performers appeared alongside archive video footage, we discovered that the celebration of the group's being together for 15 years was tinged with a sense of disappointment. In conversation with the performers, it was apparent that this disappointment encompassed the realisation that the promissory note of inclusion toward which the company had aimed – inclusion in (professional) theatrical performance, inclusion in tertiary education and inclusion in a more meaningful social life – had not yet been redeemed. In addition, we were all 15 years older. These discussions gave new meanings to what Isaac Tait had characterised as "people who have disappeared." These now included past selves and hopes.

To try to capture the diversity of the company's activities that range across theatrical performance, activism and research, we decided to create a book: *Giving and Taking Voice in Learning Disabled Theatre*, first proposed to Routledge in February 2020.[20] The book attempts to let the learning-disabled artists give and take voice in a range of different ways. The focus on *giving-and-taking* is an attempt to account for the contradictions inherent in this work to date, including the inequity implicit in the exchange of one privileged group *giving* theatre to another less privileged group. It is an attempt to show how ideas or epistemologies, such as liberating the 'authentic' voice of a marginalised group of people, is a kind of (neo)liberal chimera that posits 'voice' or representation as a marker of fixed, static identity when such concepts as self and identity are context-dependent and fluid. Finally, it attempts to show how the disciplinary formations of theatre and performance are inflected with ableism: of voice, body, character/persona, object, light, sound, dramaturgy, scenography and space. The methodology of the book is to intercut transcriptions of interviews with the performers with my "thick description"[21] of the company's processes of devising, rehearsal and performance in an attempt to incorporate different modes of discourse, a polylogue of voices.

Attempting a history and creating the book sent us back to the archive of the company. In drafting and redrafting the book, I found in this archive many hours of interviews – of the performers by me and other non-disabled creatives, documentary makers and New Zealand TV and radio journalists. I also found video interviews done by the performers themselves of each other: Matthew Phelan interviewing the performers in rehearsal for *Ship of Fools* prior to the Awakenings Festival in Australia in 2007.[22] There are interviews and conversations recorded in the Buddhist Centre in Christchurch three weeks after the fatal quake of 2011. Peter Rees interviewed other members of the company in 2012 while devising *The Lonely and The Lovely*. From 2020 to 2022 the company's processes were recorded in Zoom meetings that were the only way of being together during the lockdowns prompted by the pandemic. Revisiting the archive raised fundamental questions about the company's multimodal activities and ways of being together and our kaupapa or foundational principles of being together. Was it still the making of theatre? Was it just being together? Was it finding ways of being together in our untogetherness?

THE MULTIMODAL PRACTICES OF DIFFERENT LIGHT: FIELD NOTES, A VIDEO POSTCARD, EXTRACTS FROM A CONFERENCE PAPER

An account of the multimodal practices of Different Light likewise needs to try to accommodate different voices, different modes of discourse. The following is a brief attempt to do so.

Field notes

In a recent three-hour session of Different Light being-together, some on Zoom and some in person, I attempted to record the wandering lines of discussions and activities:

> Travelling together, talking about travelling together overseas and locally, travel as research into moving through an ableist world, caring for each other when ill or not up to attending or fully participating in rehearsal, Zooming or video messaging, sharing refreshment breaks and meals, shopping for things with which to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, doing trivia quizzes, inventing personal and group trivia quizzes, reminiscing on the history of the group, planning impossible performances, dipping into different narrative genres, planning impossible journeys, in-jokes, variations on a theme of in-jokes, disciplining each other and ourselves to act our age, learning about other learning disabled artists, performers and activists, word association, singing freely (unashamedly), writing new lyrics (badly), checking in with what and how people are doing, being bored, trying out different kinds of rhetoric, planning for future presentations and performances, reading and discussing easy-read material for other theatrical productions, playing with words, thinking we are serious and working seriously, talking about the hobbyhorses of Transition,[23] the carousel of hobby courses that process people with intellectual disabilities in New Zealand after they leave high school in their twenties, unplanned humorous intervention by performer Peter Rees: Peter repeating, Peter the repeater, Peter petering out …

A video postcard

In July 2022 the Different Light ensemble sent an 8-minute video postcard to the Performance and Disability Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research conference in Reykjavik, addressing the theme of Shifting Centres:

DAMIAN BUMMAN: Right now, it's 9.45 am in Reykjavik
which means that it's 9.45pm in Christchurch
and 7.45pm in Sydney and 7.15pm in Adelaide.
But now it is 9.46am in Reykjavik
which means it's 9.46pm in Christchurch,
7.46pm in Sydney, and 7.16pm in Adelaide…
(He looks at his watch)
Unless my watch is wrong…
…
MATTHEW PHELAN: The centre of Different Light is Ōtautahi, Aotearoa.
JOSIE NOBLE: The centre of Different Light is everyone here – in a cold theatre.
ISAAC TAIT: It's thinking.
ANGIE DOUGLAS: It's Glen and Angie.
JOSIE NOBLE: The centre of Different Light is acting.
GLEN BURROWS: We are.
MATTHEW PHELAN: Performance.
BIDDY STEFFENS: We do scriptwriting.
GLEN BURROWS: Yeah.
ANGIE DOUGLAS: We do fun things.
ISAAC TAIT: Dancing also. Yeah.
JOSIE NOBLE: And also the centre is everyone here and devising scripts.

A conference paper

I accompanied this communication with a version of an academic paper, interweaving my words with those of the performers, from which this is an extract:

> I am speaking these words at Matariki, the first national holiday in Aotearoa/New Zealand to be based in indigenous practices and knowledge. Damian Bumman starts with time. Time zones. Time differences. Glen Burrows takes his own time to get on and across the stage. Peter Rees takes his own time for the onset of certain sounds and words and the onset of speech as he sometimes stutters or stammers. Matthew Phelan says the centre of Different Light is Ōtautahi, Aotearoa. This is our turangawaewae, the land on which we stand and whence we speak. Every week ten of us, two in motorised wheelchairs, follow the footpath to take a break from devising and rehearsal. The footpath still buckles awkwardly in places, the traces of the 2010-11 earthquakes: evidence beneath our feet and wheels of tectonic shifts, of a geological time that stretches back two to four billion years.
>
> As a learning-disabled theatre company, we need to pay attention to modes of knowing that go beyond the rational, the normate, and the neurotypical, we need to weave into our mix of togetherness and untogetherness the knowledge of tangata whenua, and we need to heed the cries of the planet. We continue to walk and wheel down the pavements of Ōtautahi: we grow old together. Below us Papatuanuku, the earth mother, for the moment, is still, supportive. If we look up, we will see, we will feel, the stars of Matariki. The stars of Matariki are weaving in our ageing, vulnerable, precarious, precious bodies, they are dancing within us …

Contemporary learning-disabled theatre, such as that developed by Different Light Theatre, seeks to temper the need for the inclusion and emancipation of learning-disabled people with the cries of the planet and interrelational ecologies of care. Different Light explores the political possibilities of learning-disabled artists' occupation and sharing of the subjunctive spaces and times of theatrical performance. This involves a multimodal approach to the creation, curation and presentation of theatrical performance. This approach is determined by the diverse abilities, capacities and virtuosity of the learning-disabled artists. In that process, fundamental questions are generated about what is meant by ability, capacity and virtuosity that have far-reaching implications for theatre and arts practice and research.

Tony McCaffrey is artistic director of Different Light Theatre, a learning-disabled ensemble, and author of *Incapacity and Theatricality* (Routledge, 2019) and *Giving and Taking Voice in Learning Disabled Theatre* (Routledge, 2023). He is co-convenor of the Performance and Disability Working Group of the International Federation for Theatre Research.

1. National Academy of Singing and Dramatic, Ara Institute, Christchurch, New Zealand.
2. I take these terms from Yvonne Schmidt, a performance studies scholar embedded with Theater HORA, a leading European learning-disabled theatre company. See Yvonne Schmidt, "Towards a New Directional Turn? Directors with Cognitive Disabilities," *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 22:3 (2017), 446-59.
3. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007).
4. For a lengthier discussion of "rigour" in this context, see Sarah Whatley, Charlotte Waelde, Shawn Harmon, Abbe Brown, Karen Wood and Hetty Blades, *Dance, Disability and Law: InVisible Difference* (Bristol: Intellect, 2018), 175-6.
5. A learning-disabled dance company from Aberystwyth, the members of which Ames categorises as her co-researchers. See Margaret Ames, "Emptiness as Material for Devised Theatre Performance," *Research in Drama Education:The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 23:1 (2018), 4-19.
6. Operating out of Geelong, Australia, considered by many to be the world's leading learning-disabled theatre company. See Bruce Gladwin, "Searchlight Pitch Session for *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*," presentation at Australian Performing Arts Market, Adelaide Festival Centre, 24 February 2010.
7. I am drawing here on ideas of "kairos" in the work of Yergeau and Lipari. See M Remi Yergeau, *Authoring Autism: On Rhetoric and Neurological Queerness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Lisbeth Lipari, *Listening, Thinking, Being: Towards an Ethics of Attunement* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2014).
8. Mia Mingus, "Access Intimacy: The Missing Link," *Leaving Evidence*, blog post, 5 May 2011, https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/access-intimacy-the-missing-link/.
9. Freda Chapple and Chiel Kattenbelt, eds, *Intermediality in Theatre and Performance* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2006).
10. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).
11. Petra Kuppers, "Disability Performance in the Streets: Art Actions in Post-quake Christchurch," *TDR/The Drama Review*, 59:1 (T225) (2015), 166-74.
12. Petra Kuppers, *Theatre and Disability* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 73-8.
13. *The Lonely and The Lovely*. Devised by the ensemble, directed by Tony McCaffrey. Different Light Theatre, Disability Studies in Education conference, Jack Mann Auditorium, University of Canterbury, 7-9 June 2013.
14. Māori term for extended family, including ancestors.
15. *Still Lives*. Devised by the ensemble, directed by Tony McCaffrey. Different Light Theatre, Ludus Festival, Leeds and PSi 18 Riley Smith Hall, University of Leeds, 28-30 July 2012.
16. Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York and Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.
17. Jack Halberstam, "Introduction," ibid., 11.
18. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 5.
19. *The History of Different Light*. Devised by the ensemble, directed by Tony McCaffrey. Different Light Theatre, Christchurch Arts Festival, NASDA Theatre, Christchurch, 1-3 August 2019.
20. Tony McCaffrey, *Giving and Taking Voice in Learning Disabled Theatre* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2023).
21. Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in his *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3-30.
22. *Ship of Fools*. Devised by the ensemble, directed by Tony McCaffrey. Different Light Theatre, Awakenings Festival, Horsham, Victoria, Australia, 13-15 October 2007.
23. Transition as in the New Zealand Ministry of Education guidelines on "transitioning students with additional learning needs from school to adult life." Ministry of Education, *National Transition Guidelines*, https://www.education.govt.nz/school/student-support/special-education/national-transition-guidelines-for-students-with-additional-learning-needs/national-transition-guidelines/.