When One Size Doesn't Fit All: Theatre First Practices for Disability Initiatives

Hello! I'm Melissa Bondar and I've been a stage and production manager in the United States for the last eighteen years where I've done a lot of work assessing risk in performance, before moving here to begin work on my doctorate in improving risk practices in participatory theatre at the University of Greenwich. After reading this paper, if you only remember three things, I hope it's these points:

- Disability is more common than you realize.
- There is a noted disconnect between aesthetic goals and access realities that doesn't need to exist.
- Microevent breakdowns may be a useful framework to help pinpoint and overcome that disconnect in participatory events.

As we look to create better risk practices, physical assessments often come to mind first and include typical Health & Safety concerns such as clear paths, proper emergency exits, functional first aid and fire fighting measures. However, beyond that realm there are also questions of what the audience-participant is 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 to not only continue the narrative cleanly but to help avoid an uncomfortable situation for the audience-participant?

A significant number of participatory practices that I've personally encountered love to involve the use of hands. I assume to many devisers it seems like a fairly safe way to initiate intimacy. A very quick way for a performer to destroy that intimacy is to falter when they don't have a plan for the moment when they extend their hands hoping I'll reach out only to find that I have a limb difference and now we're both wildly uncomfortable. In most situations, they plow on anyway and hold my hand, with no acknowledgement of what's happening, and the only thing I'm focused on until they let go of my hand is whether or not I'm making them uncomfortable. I'm theorizing here, but this was probably not what they were going for artistically. It has plowed into a too intimate depth without proper connection. Conversely, the few performers who have acknowledged my hand with a simple added request for consent, puts me considerably more at ease and allows for what then becomes a very intimate experience as I'm allowing the performer contact with a part of my body that I generally don't have many people touch.

Within disability culture, there is a move towards person-first language (e.g. a person who is blind vs. blind person). This exists to put an emphasis on the person before the disability (Dunn and Andrews: 2015). When engaging in scholarly research regarding the intersection of theatre and disability, I find it interesting how it is often referred to as disability theatre, putting the disability before the theatre. For me, this is an apt reflection of how often logistical needs take primacy over the aesthetic when these two worlds collide.

During her talk In My Shoes: Accessibility in Practice at the 2022 Event Safety Alliance Summit, Betty Siegel, Director of Accessibility at the Kennedy Center in the US pointed out that one in seven adults will be disabled during their work life. Among those disabled, 84.7% are only mildly disabled and most disabilities are invisible disabilities. Invisible disabilities are those not evident when looking at a person, like autism or dyslexia. While audience scholarship has increased manifold during the twenty-first

century, this research has included little focus on experiences of audiences with disabilities (Hadley: 2015). This is unfortunate because a lot of accommodation considerations share similar objectives with many immersive and participatory experiences. In sorting accessibility considerations, the focus moves further onto the spectator with an interest in how the spectator is perceiving and interacting with both the experience and the other spectators in the experience. This presentation aims to introduce the idea of using micro-event breakdowns as a tool for both risk and aesthetic assessments. This tool then becomes a useful way to develop better accessibility practices. This presentation will also touch on the idea that rather than heaping accommodating options onto an existing micro-event, some micro-events may need parallel options to achieve their full accessible potential.

Micro-events are an analysis of participatory events subdivided into smaller sections of a performance. Defined by Jorge Ramos 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 notes the important players, the performer and audience-participant, as well as the space and narrative context of the moment and how they interrelate. Breaking down every aspect of a performance into micro-events, from the moment the audience-participants enter the performance space until their exit, allows for more specific needs assessments, both in terms of risk and inclusivity.

When we speak of risk, I do want us to be aware of the quantitative formula of likelihood of an event times the severity equals the risk, but I don’t want us to only focus on the physical risks, which include most accessibility mandates to remain compliant, and Bree Hadley (2015) cites those issues as the third of three main factors limiting spectators with disabilities from engaging in theatre (the other two factors are frustration over stereotypical characters with disability that don’t reflect reality and lack of accurate representation via authors and performers with disabilities). Adam Alston (2013) adds another layer to the discussion regarding risk in participatory performance when he shares the psychometric paradigm, which correspondingly emphasizes the technical/physical considerations, though also stresses 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.

A key element of good participatory experiences is clear orientation to the performance, which I argue should be the first micro-event encountered upon arrival. It’s important that it be considered a micro-event because referring to Ramos’ definition above, the orientation should begin with the physical space considered and it should be intentional within the narrative of the story (2015). This is not to say that it must be interwoven in the narrative. A show pushing strong boundaries or even a show with a few basic orientation tasks but asking for an intense suspension of disbelief upon entering the performance space could benefit from consciously creating an orientation micro-event that in anchored in the audience’s reality – perhaps engaging them before entering the venue or creating a neutral entrance space for the orientation – and then inviting them into the main playing space. Rose Biggins recounts a reviewer who noted repeated,

though clearly necessary, warnings about the rules of consent delivered during a show left the audience feeling sad “because of the nature and context of its delivery, doing so revealed a situation at odds with the debauchery and hedonism of the fictional setting” (2020: 79). Conversely, many times embedding the orientation needs into a world-specific or adjacent setting can help ease audience-participants into their roles. A particularly good example of this can be found in the role of o Capitão in ZU-UK’s *Hotel Madea*, who engaged with the audience-participants as they arrive in a world-adjacent setting of the docks across from the training camp, and then a continued orientation sequence a step further into the world in the training camps (Ramos 2015: ix).

A benefit to the flexibility of a lot of immersive and participatory practices is that there is more room for improvisation and personalized responses, which can create a fertile aesthetic ground amid the concept of parallel tracks for ability. Due to competing accommodations, accessibility needs may conflict from one disability to another, and it may be impossible to accommodate everyone, but by risk assessing each microevent and asking, “who does this leave out?” it may be possible to create a parallel track that still conveys the artistic goals in a different way. The key emphasis here is on not neglecting the artistic and aesthetic goals of each micro-event as well. Hadley (2015) again notes that most accessibility work is considered only on the logistical level, “not at the level of aesthetic, symbolic or social access” (161).

A likely limitation to the concept of parallel micro-event creation is time and money. To develop alternatives with the same depth of immersion and fully rehearsed scenes takes additional rehearsal time, space, and possibly additional performers or crew. However, taking the time to assess these microevents will help to avoid the ad hoc solutions Bree Hadley mentions here:

> 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 (Hadley: 2015, 160).

Additionally, if there are costs associated with certain accessibility options, Siegel (2022) confirms that an effective measure can be to ask about accessibility needs on your ticketing website. This allows production companies the option to schedule those additional measures only when needed. It also allows spectators with disabilities more flexibility on when to attend, as well as pushing devisers into a thought pattern that allows for a more streamlined aesthetic integration if these accessibility tools might be booked at any given performance. When certain dates are set aside for particular modes of accessibility, the prevalent thought can be come how do we do ‘enough’ to get through the one performance, again often limiting the accessibility considerations to only the logistical level.

A particularly good example of parallel tracks comes from the company Talking Birds and their production of *Solid Blue* at a medieval monastery. Before sharing though, I would also like to take a moment here and note that after I found this story – a story about wheelchair users, arguably the most common example for accessibility, I spent

several weeks trying to find a second example, especially emphasizing a different style of accommodation. And I couldn't. While I'm not saying no one is out there doing these accommodations well, I am saying that if they exist, they are not being documented in a way to make examples easy to find. This is unfortunate because trying to reinvent the wheel each time is infinitely more difficult than just going to the tire store.

Back to Talking Birds and their production of *Solid Blue* - the lift was broken beyond repair and too expensive to fix for their run, making part of the production inaccessible to those with mobility impairments. The company devised an alternate option that included broadcasts from the other space into a room that was accessible but also additional integrated live performance via interactions with three performers that strove to maintain the aesthetics and narrative points of the production (Anonymous: 2014). This illustrates how the goal for a parallel track should be not less, just different.

Connecting to my own lived experience again, I recently saw a brilliant performance of *Bottom of the Ocean* but an entire segment of it that revolved around redemption and absolution, after an intense previous encounter, failed because when the performer went to absolve me by literally washing my hands, and when I stuck it out, she froze, only took my left hand and wiped it down. The whole thing again just felt very uncomfortable and removed from the moment. Am I only partially absolved of my actions from the previous room? For this performance that could've been easily avoided with a quick warning to the performer from the person who checked us in – if everyone in the performance was aware of the key moments in the microevents composing the show.

Is it a likely reality that we can accommodate all people for all performances? No. I don't think so. That may then leave you asking what's the point? Raising awareness of the issues is always a key first step to creating change. Personally, I don't expect a fully accessible world overnight, but I do think there are a lot of performance companies and makers who can benefit from developing better tools for more accessible performances. Not only does this tick a "doing the right thing" box, looking at the world through a variety of ways expands the lived experiences for everyone. Bruce Barton (2021), in an interview on the PII Network, in a discussion about the pros and cons of trying to create work in more accessible ways, says "even if something you add into it, you know that 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, the expression I often use it is increases the viscosity, it's thicker, it's denser, there's more going on in it."

In conclusion, further study is needed to test and develop this theory that the application of micro-events to participatory performances can help develop better risk assessments that take aesthetic quality and accessibility into better consideration. And now that we've come to the end, I'd just like to remind you of my three takeaways:

- Disability is more common than you realize.
- There is often a disconnect between aesthetic goals and access realities that doesn't need to exist.
- Further study of how we can apply microevent breakdowns may prove a useful framework to help pinpoint and overcome that disconnect in participatory events.

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