Disability Representation in Contemporary Playwriting

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DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN CONTEMPORARY PLAYWRITING

by

CAROLINE HULL
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ABSTRACT

Is it possible for a playwright to authentically capture the disabled experience without it becoming privy to stereotypes or utilized as a catalyst for the plot? The thesis aims to challenge the prevalent notion that making the disability intrinsic to a theatrical plot is essential for authentic representation, and instead asserts that authentic portrayal of the disabled experience can exist independently of making the disability a central plot device. To support this claim, in Chapter One, I engage with relevant work in the field of playwriting and narrative media studies, such as the workshop “Inaccessible: Writing Plays with Characters who are Differently Abled” led by Jef Peterson. In Chapter Two, I analyze a range of contemporary American and English scripts from the 21st century featuring characters with disabilities, including Simon Stephen’s A Curious Incident of a Dog in the Night-Time. My research converges with creative practice in Chapter Three, with an autoethnographic analysis of my own experience writing an original, full-length script entitled When it Rains, which centers on a character living with a disability. In exploring multiple scripts, engaging with academic texts, and reflecting on my own creative process, my research thereby advocates for a more diverse and inclusive portrayal of disability in theatrical narratives.
To those who have felt pressured to overcome the adversities of their disabilities or live as sources of inspiration to others, when in reality, all they wanted to do was live.
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Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa

William Sippel

Dr. Chloë Rae Edmonson

Dr. Julia Listengarten

Belinda Boyd
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INTRODUCTION

The representation of characters with disabilities in theatre has long been a topic of social and academic significance. Theatre has the remarkable capacity to shape audience perception and challenge societal norms, and how characters with disabilities are depicted on stage can profoundly influence audience awareness and empathy, offering an avenue to dismantle preconceived notions and stigmas. Alternatively, theatre can also perpetuate negative stereotypes if handled irresponsibly or not given the appropriate amount of research. The motivation behind my research into theatre and disability stems from a profoundly personal connection, as it is inspired by my own experiences with disability, specifically Narcolepsy with Cataplexy. Narcolepsy is a sleep disorder that causes chronic daytime sleepiness, and individuals who have narcolepsy with cataplexy additionally experience sudden loss of muscle tone, which is triggered by strong emotions such as laughter or stress. I have found myself leaving the theatre space as a patron on numerous occasions wishing to have seen myself dynamically represented onstage in the same way that my peers have been able to. My own encounters with the challenges and intricacies of living with a disability, combined with my work as a playwright, have ignited my passion for reshaping the portrayal of disabilities in theatre – and this thesis documents how I am actively doing so by introducing an original piece of writing into the existing library of plays featuring characters living with disabilities.

The central aim of both my creative practice and my academic research is to critically analyze the representation of characters with disabilities in contemporary American and English scripts and to identify areas where these depictions often fall short or lack a sense of well-rounded development. Three fundamental questions will guide this narrative exploration: How
are characters with disabilities depicted in plays? Do these characters feel as well-rounded and colorful as the characters around them? Are the characters’ arcs and plotlines in these scripts limited to conflicts created by their disabilities? This thesis, as well as the original play it has inspired, aims to challenge the prevalent notion that making the disability intrinsic to the plot is essential for authentic representation within linear narrative theatrical forms. Asserting that the authentic portrayal of the disabled experience can exist independently of making the disability a central plot device, thereby advocating for a more diverse and inclusive portrayal of disability in theatrical narratives.

This thesis approaches the issue of authentic disability representation from multiple angles. Chapter One, “Disability and the Narrative,” will explore the historical portrayal of disabilities in literature and media, unveiling the evolution of perspectives. Chapter Two, “Disability and Theatrical Script Analysis,” takes us into the realm of contemporary scripts, reviewing their representation of characters with disabilities and seeking to understand the nuances and challenges inherent in these depictions. Moving forward, Chapter Three, “Playwright’s Exploration,” pivots towards creativity and narrative construction, introducing the original script that endeavors to fill the existing gap in literature. Here, I outline the themes and motivations shaping the narrative, transcending the conventional narrative of disability as a plot device. It also concludes my journey, analyzing my original script to mirror the preceding chapter’s analysis structure and then offering a comprehensive reflection on the attempted authenticity achieved in portraying the disabled experience. Importantly, it emphasizes the deviation from making disability intrinsic to the plot, marking a significant contribution to the discourse on inclusive and diverse theatrical narratives.
My research methodology in Chapter Two involves an in-depth analysis of contemporary plays featuring characters with disabilities. Each script was reviewed, and the analysis highlights both positive and negative elements of representation. Simultaneously, this study engaged with various forms of literature surrounding disability and theatre to enrich the analytical framework. A distinctive contribution to the field was devised through the development of my original full-length script, *When it Rains*, featuring a lead character with a disability; more specifically, the invisible disability that I have been longing to see represented in any form of media, my diagnosis of Narcolepsy with Cataplexy. My script intentionally avoids the centrality of disability in the central conflict. As a playwright, I am a dialogue-driven storyteller; my infatuation with the written word began with a fascination for human communication's colloquial, quirky, and improvisational natures. Inspiration surrounds us in the most unexpected places – overheard within talks of strangers on public transportation or hidden inside the late-night ramblings of life-long friends. I think that by developing more conversation-focused stories and focusing on crafting fully developed characters, we can truly bring forth the all-too-important message that we are all more alike than we assume. A careful analysis accompanies this creative process, culminating in a final reflection on the authenticity achieved in portraying the disabled experience.

I wanted this thesis to dive deeper into how disabled characters are written for the stage, and throughout my process, I discovered what I consider to be a gap in the literature regarding the characterization of disabled characters throughout contemporary American and English plays. There are plentiful sources about how characters with disabilities are written for the screen. In *The Disabled, the Media, and the Information Age*, prominent disability scholar Jack Nelson addresses the prevalent and problematic stereotypes perpetuated by film and television
concerning characters with disabilities. I draw parallels between these cinematic stereotypes and those in theatrical narratives, elucidating the shared challenges and potential solutions within both mediums. The article titled “Dispelling Stereotypes: Promoting Disability Equality through Film,” details surveys that indicate the usage of film as an effective pedagogical methodology to generate discussions and alter attitudes towards individuals with disabilities. I connect this to a workshop I attended at the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival (Region IV) taught by playwright and director Jef Peterson entitled “Inaccessible: Writing Plays with Characters who are Differently Abled,” which covered some of the same issues seen in several forms of media. “Empowering Images or Preserved Stereotypes: Representations of Disability in Contemporary Film Comedies” points a finger at how, historically, jokes have been made at the expense of disabled characters, all for the sake of a laugh, and it does so by analyzing three cinematic comedies - *Ego*, *The Art of Negative Thinking*, and *The Untouchables*.

Additionally, there are many resources specifically on bringing disabled characters to life onstage as performers rather than playwrights. Jennifer Thomas and Robert J. Vrtis’ *Inclusive Character Analysis: Putting Theory into Practice for the 21st Century Theatre Classroom* suggests that actors make time to take inventory of their own bodies and minds, considering that the way we each process life is not a monolithic experience. *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* provides direct and practical advice for developing inclusive theatrical performances with disabled actors. *Bodies in Commotion*, by Carrie Sandahl and Phillip Auslander, explores innovative ways of approaching identity, spectatorship, and the body as it touches on topics ranging from wheelchair sports to American Sign Language theatre with the goal of challenging the intersection of disability and performance. While a plentitude of studies on disability and theatrical performance exist, there is a lack of scholarly review on how
contemporary plays and playwrights handle the inclusion of these characters from a literary perspective. Chapter Two aims to examine how different American and English scripts from the 21st century choose to portray the complex lives and experiences of people with disabilities by analyzing a selection of scripts and responding to the characterization, linear plot structure, and critical reception of each individual piece as it relates to disability studies. Within these scripts, I aim to contribute a nuanced understanding of the representation of characters with disabilities, aligning these insights with the overarching questions guiding my research.

Guided by a personal connection to disability studies and the art of playwriting, the focal point of a significant gap in literature emerges - a critical analysis of contemporary scripts, emphasizing the authentic portrayal of characters with disabilities, free from narrative constraints. Throughout this thesis, prevalent notions are challenged, advocating for a more diverse and inclusive depiction of disability in theatrical narratives. The methodological approach, incorporating script analysis, literature engagement, and the development of an original script, lays the foundation for a comprehensive exploration. With ties to existing scholarly works and practical workshops, this thesis endeavor paves the way for subsequent sections, promising a nuanced contribution to the ongoing discussion on disability representation in theatre.
CHAPTER ONE: DISABILITY AND THE NARRATIVE

Characters with disabilities have grappled with their challenges in the world of theater, often facing stereotypes and unfavorable portrayals in the narrative. Disability has been used as a device to evoke pity, fear, or inspiration without ever considering the complexity and diversity of disability experiences; I, for one, know that I am defined by more than my overwhelming urge to fall asleep and the fact that I occasionally lose muscle control involuntarily. Nevertheless, these challenges extend beyond the stage, weaving into the fabric of storytelling where these familiar tropes find their home. In this chapter, I will begin by defining the term “disability,” referencing the models provided by disability scholar Joseph N. Straus. The chapter then transitions into a classification and analysis of five significant disability stereotypes present within narratives brought to light in Jef Peterson’s workshop, “Inaccessible.” Before we delve into the intricate layers of these stereotypes, let's take a moment to ponder a fundamental question: What truly defines the term disability?

Defining Disability

Disability is not a fixed or objective category but a dynamic and subjective one influenced by the interaction between the individual and the environment. Joseph N. Straus, a key figure in disability scholarship, provides us with two thought-provoking conceptual models – the medical and social. These two models offer different ways of understanding and representing disability in culture and society. The medical model sees disability as a "pathology, either a deficit or excess with respect to some normative standard" (462). According to this model, disability is a problem that resides in the individual and needs to be fixed or cured by some medical intervention. It places blame on the individual, suggesting that any deviation from the
norm needs fixing. This model reinforces the idea of normalcy as a desirable and natural state and disability as an unnatural and undesirable deviation.

Conversely, the social model views disability as a socially constructed phenomenon shaped by time, place, and context. This model challenges the notion of normalcy as a fixed and universal standard and recognizes that disability results from the interaction between the individual and the environment. It shifts the focus from the individual to society and from the medical to the political. The precise definition of the social model describes disability “as socially constructed rather than biologically given: the nature of disability, the kinds of conditions that are considered disabling, and the meanings attached to disability all vary with time, place and context” (462). The social model acknowledges the diversity and complexity of disability experiences and the role of culture and history in shaping them. Another notable disability scholar, Lennard J. Davis, contributes to this dialogue by steering our focus toward the heart of the matter – the construction of normalcy. Davis argues that the real issue is not just the construction of disability but how normalcy itself is construed, leading to the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities. He goes on to say, “Focus not so much on the construction of disability as on the construction of normalcy. I do this because the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the problem of the disabled person” (162).

**Stereotypes of Disabled Characters in Media**

A nuanced examination of the representation of disability in media, particularly within the realms of film and theater, brings to light the influential role that stereotypes play in shaping societal perceptions. Film and disability scholar Jack Nelson meticulously identified six
prevailing stereotypes that persist not only in film and television but also extend their influence into various forms of media: the disabled person as a victim, as a hero, as a threat, as unable to adjust, as one to be cared for, and as one who should not have survived. In the pursuit of a deeper understanding, I attended a workshop titled "Inaccessible" at the Region IV Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival in February 2023, spearheaded by Dramatist Guild member Jef Peterson. Peterson's exploration not only reaffirmed the overwhelming existence of disability stereotyping in film, television, and pop culture but also shed much-needed light on the specific stereotypes most often depicted. Peterson chose to focus on the following five harmful tropes shown throughout different forms of the narrative – the villainous disability, the bitter disability, the cosmetic disability, the helpless disability, and the inspirational disability.

The first trope that Peterson chose to analyze in his workshop was portraying disabled characters as villainous or evil individuals. This narrative draws an unsettling correlation between disability and malevolence. A disproportionate number of villains throughout literature, film, television, and theatrical performances have physical or mental disabilities, and this provokes audiences to draw the harmful correlation that disabled bodies are broken/prone to being twisted individuals. One of the most iconic examples of this in pop culture is seen in the Star Wars franchise through the character of Darth Vader, who has a prosthetic arm and leg and requires a respirator to breathe. His disability is often utilized throughout the narrative to suggest that he lacks empathy and is less than human, which is supported by this line of dialogue spoken by Obi-Wan Kenobi in Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi (1983), “He’s more machine now than man, twisted and evil.”
One of the most well-known instances of this stereotype surfacing in theatrical literature as opposed to cinema is in William Shakespeare’s *Richard III* in the characterization of Richard himself, who is depicted as a hunchback with a severe limp. This specific quotation from *Richard III* references how he feels that since his disability prevents him from being a lover, he chooses to become a villain as that is the fate left for him. “And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover / to entertain these fair well-spoken days, I am determined to prove a villain / and hate the idle pleasure of these days” (Act 1, Scene 1, lines 28–31). This further emphasizes the cultural correlation between malicious intent and disability and thus contributes to the societal stigmatization of those in the disabled community. Including characters that fit the villainous disability stereotype can have a negative impact on the self-esteem and identity of children with disabilities, who can internalize the ableist messages that they are inferior, unworthy, or evil. Children tend to, as disability scholar Heather Feldner writes, “internalize ableism, where negative social associations and perceptions that have been projected onto the children about their difference become intrinsically acknowledged” (132). Children with disabilities are prone to developing low self-esteem and negative images of themselves, so having to grow up watching iconic characters such as Darth Vader or Captain Hook may cause them to internalize ableism, whether they are aware of it happening or not. This is one of many reasons why it is vital to have a diverse array of disabled characters in film, television, and theatre so that disabled children do not have to grow up without knowing which way to look to see themselves represented in a positive light.

Within the spectrum of disability portrayal, Peterson brings another stereotype to light—the embittered character resentful of their disability, suggesting that life with a disability is intrinsically devoid of meaning and not worth the trouble. This narrative often leans into a very
problematic notion – “Why bother living life at all if the life I’m stuck living is a disabled one?” Writing a character who has a disability and considers it a fate worse than death is exceedingly destructive. It exploits the emotions of non-disabled readers while ignoring the perspectives and experiences of disabled people. This trope is exemplified by the character of Will in *Me Before You*, a 2012 novel by Jojo Moyes that was adapted into a film in 2016. Peterson and I share a strong dislike for this particular portrayal of the bitter disability trope, as we both brought it up instantaneously upon the introduction of this subject with no shame in showing our disdain. *Me Before You* tells the story of Louisa, a cheerful and quirky caregiver, and Will, a wealthy and depressed quadriplegic. Louisa tries to convince Will that life is worth living, but he decides to end his life via medically assisted suicide at a Swiss clinic. Disability activists have criticized the film for portraying disability as a tragedy and a burden and for suggesting that disabled people are better off dead. The film ignores the diversity and complexity of disabled people’s lives and the social and structural barriers they face. This dialogue from Will to Louisa reveals his negative view of his disability: “I don’t want you to miss all the things that someone else could give you. And, most of all, I don’t want to be the one who stops you finding them.” He believes he is unworthy of love and happiness because of his disability and that Lou would be happier without him. He also suggests that his disability makes him unable to give Lou everything that she needs and that he wants to die to liberate her from his unworthy existence. This dialogue conveys the harmful message of the film, which is that disability is a tragedy and disabled people are, quite literally, better off dead. Another example of this message is when he says, “I don’t want to be half a man.” However, in an attempt to play devil’s advocate, there are instances within the complexities of storytelling where such portrayals of the bitter disability stereotype cause the narrative to delve into the significant societal pressures and personal conflicts that
contribute to this perspective, which is valuable for provoking critical reflection throughout audiences. Thus, while condemning the reinforcement of harmful stereotypes such as this one, it is necessary to recognize the ever-present complexities and nuances that can often exist when crafting characters that will potentially foster empathy and understanding. To further this point, I argue that disability should not be considered a tragedy but a part of human diversity. This aligns with one of the core ideas of the social model of disability, which recognizes that disability is a social construct and that the barriers faced by individuals with disabilities are not inherent in their impairments but imposed by society. By challenging the medical model of disability, the social model empowers disabled people to claim their rights and dignity and to demand social change and inclusion.

Moving forward to another common stereotype spoken of by Peterson, narratives frequently adopt a more cosmetic approach to disability, introducing unique magic or mechanical elements that reframe disability as a superficial choice rather than a daily life challenge, as well as to physically enhance the individual’s experience overall. Another way to describe this approach would be to call it a more aesthetic-focused presentation of the disabled experience. This transformation often wholly transforms the experience of the character living with a disability in such a way that it is so fictional that it almost erases the representation of said character entirely. A clear example is in the animated series *Adventure Time* (2010), where Finn loses his arm several times and replaces it with various prosthetic devices with extraordinary powers. His prosthetic arm changes from a flower to a sword, to a mechanical arm, to a grass arm, and finally, to a metal arm complete with a built-in computer. These many devices restore Finn’s standard arm and hand functions, enhance his abilities with magic, and increase his success as a hero. However, this portrayal completely ignores the emotional and physical
challenges that amputees face, such as grief, adaptation, and pain. Finn appears not to struggle with adjusting to his new arm whatsoever and mentions that he prefers it to his original limb. He is not treated differently by any of his friends, enemies, or acquaintances since losing his arm and rarely expresses any emotions at all about the loss itself. All these traits come together to make this a perfect example of a cosmetic disability. Everything about it is surface level, and there is no complexity to the condition beyond the number of extra powers it grants Finn during his adventures. Finn’s seamless adaptation to a prosthetic arm with magical heroic capabilities overlooks the emotional and physical struggles associated with such a significant loss by presenting disability as a simple cosmetic issue that can be easily fixed and, at times, even enhanced. However, it is worth acknowledging that in children’s comedic cartoons, not everything is expected to be handled with complete sincerity one hundred percent of the time, as *Adventure Time* also features talking animals and a kingdom made out of candy.

This next stereotype on Peterson’s radar is on the complete opposite end of the spectrum, as its portrayal of disability lacks any magical capabilities. Have you ever sat in the audience for any adaptation of Charles Dicken’s 1843 play *A Christmas Carol*? If so, you have borne witness to the next trope on the agenda – the helpless disability. This very prevalent stereotype involves characters with disabilities being portrayed as vulnerable or weak, existing primarily to evoke pity or empathy. These characters often do not live to the end of their stories or are not expected to, such as the prominent Tiny Tim from *A Christmas Carol*. Tiny Tim truly epitomizes this portrayal, emphasizing innocence and dependence on others, perpetuating societal perceptions of disabled individuals as objects of charity. His character serves only as a narrative device to underscore the themes of class, charity, and redemption in a story where his disability acts as a catalyst for the main character’s change of heart. Bob Cratchit, Tiny Tim’s
father, refers to how Tiny Tim is aware of his condition and how it changes how others perceive him. Bob says, “He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas day who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see” (Dickens 28). Through Tiny Tim’s conscious desire to be seen in the church, Dickens weaves a narrative thread that not only reveals societal perceptions of disability but also leverages Tim’s presence as a commentary on the expectations and empathy projected onto characters with disabilities, reinforcing the enduring stereotype of the helpless disabled figure.

The final harmful characterization trope is dubbed the inspirational disability. The concept of “inspiration porn” throughout storytelling perpetuates the notion that disabled or chronically ill individuals exist solely to inspire non-disabled and healthy people, which encourages them to do better things with their own lives. It sends the message that people should be grateful for their circumstances because at least they are not disabled. This reinforces the notion that disability is a misfortune that needs to be compensated by extraordinary achievements or accolades. Moreover, it creates unrealistic expectations for those in the disabled community, who, as a result, can feel additional pressure to conform to a particular ideal of being inspirational, appreciative, and optimistic. I, for one, have felt this weight on my shoulders numerous times, and it has left me wondering which piece of theatrical storytelling first caused this initial pressure shift within me. Equality and Diversity practitioner Laura Chapman once shared in an online interview how “as ableist prejudice, inspire porn puts the onus on the disabled individual to overcome discrimination and inequality. Being nice is not being kind, people think that by applauding, they’re being nice, but they are actually silencing those who would like to talk about the extra effort, pain and suffering caused by institutional and societal
injustice” (Oates). One film that certain critics disparaged for appearing to romanticize disability was *The Theory of Everything* (2014), which was a biographical film focusing on Stephen Hawking’s relationship with his wife as well as his scientific achievements while navigating his motor neuron disease. Some disability activists and advocates spoke out against the writing specifically for how it portrayed Hawking’s disability as a tragic obstacle that could be overcome by powerful love and absolute genius rather than a complex and diverse experience that requires social and structural changes. Nevertheless, it is also imperative to acknowledge that Hawking achieved incredible things while navigating an intense condition, and any biographical film attempting to document that could have been inspirational to audiences.

Most of the examples I have chosen to utilize throughout this chapter are from film, and that is because the world of cinema showcases disability a lot more frequently than the world of theatre. Well-known representations of disability in popular films can significantly influence theatrical representation by shaping audience perceptions and expectations. When films portray disability with authenticity and depth, they challenge stereotypes and broaden the narrative scope, encouraging playwrights and directors to craft more nuanced and diverse characters for the stage. This ripple effect fosters a culture of inclusion, where the complexity of the disabled experience is acknowledged and represented in all forms of storytelling.

By dissecting the stereotypes discussed in this chapter, we can create a nuanced understanding of narrative representation’s profound impact on shaping societal attitudes toward disability and apply it to analyzing theatrical scripts that feature characters with disabilities. In the following chapter, I will review contemporary scripts written for the stage that include disabled characters and analyze how they choose to portray disability in relationship to
characterization and plot structure and how they may or may not resonate with certain harmful stereotypes.
CHAPTER TWO: DISABILITY AND THEATRICAL SCRIPT ANALYSIS

Disability representation in theatre has proven to be a critical and evolving issue, hopefully promising a better future for all theatre community members. As films like CODA and The Peanut Butter Falcon garner critical acclaim and reach broad audiences, they set a precedent for disability representation that transcends the screen and finds resonance in the theatre, pushing the boundaries of traditional scripts and promoting a more inclusive and realistic portrayal of the human condition. While some theatrical scripts have attempted to portray disabled characters with authenticity and agency, others have relied on stereotypes (as discussed at length in the preceding chapter) that reinforce the marginalization and oppression of disabled people.

In this chapter, I will analyze a selection of contemporary theatrical scripts that follow that feature disabled characters and examine how they utilize disability as a plot device or a source of characterization. I have selected four scripts written in the 21st century for in-depth analyses, with an additional examination of the overall effectiveness at capturing the authenticity of the disabled experience through characterization from the perspective of someone living with a disability. These scripts are All in a Row (2019) by English playwright Alex Oates, Cost of Living (2016) by American playwright Martyna Majok, All of Us (2022) by English playwright Francesca Martinez, and The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2014) by British-Irish playwright Simon Stephens. These scripts were explicitly chosen to represent contemporary English language playwriting because they showcase a wide range of different disabilities and plot structures within the world of each play, as well as diversity in the critical reception of each piece. Additionally, I want to be explicit in my acknowledgment that I am electing to focus on narratives with linear plotlines for the purpose of this analysis and creative exploration.
However, there are many ways to represent disability onstage without the presence of a linear plot (i.e., devised work, experimental work, abstract work). The analysis of each play will begin with a brief synopsis of the events within the script, and then I will move into a section on disability’s relationship to the character(s). Following the analysis of characterization, we will evaluate the relationship between disability and the plot structure, revealing if each of these plays selected chooses to utilize disability as a plot device and whether they are justified in doing so or not. To conclude, I will reflect on the overall critical reception of each play, including my personal thoughts on each piece from my perspective as a member of the disabled community.

Disability representation in playwriting should reflect the diversity, complexity, and wholeness of disabled people’s lives and identities. By highlighting the absence of a script that fails to completely stray from aligning with problematic stereotypes or utilizing disability as a plot device, this analysis will demonstrate the importance of disability representation in theatre for challenging ableism, building access, and imagining new worlds onstage and off.

*All in a Row*

*All in a Row*, penned by English playwright Alex Oates, depicts the struggles of a family as they work together to raise their 11-year-old son with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), who is prone to violent tendencies. The play takes place on the night before the boy, whose name is Laurence, is sent away to a residential school, and it explores the emotions, dilemmas, and conflicts of his caregiver, Gary, and his parents, Tamora and Martin. An unconventional aspect of the play is using a puppet to represent Laurence, the sole disabled character within the narrative.
This brings us directly to our review of how *All in a Row* elects to establish Laurence’s position as an individual through his characterization. The way that Oates crafted this particular theatrical narrative solidified Laurence’s position as an example of helpless disability. Laurence’s parents view him as an obstacle to their happiness, perpetuating the notion that disability disrupts normalcy. His lack of agency—literally (as he is puppeteered) and metaphorically—solidifies this stereotype. Laurence’s decisions are not his own; those around him dictate them; his parents and caregiver dictate when he can watch his favorite movie, *Finding Nemo*, when he can indulge in his favorite snacks, and most significantly, they decide that he should be sent away to a residential school. This portrayal reinforces harmful assumptions about disabled people, reducing them to mere plot devices rather than fully realized characters. However, it is essential to acknowledge that Laurence is an 11-year-old boy with a non-verbal form of autism that causes him to rely heavily on others (such as his parents), so it would be challenging, if not impossible, to craft a version of this character without keeping that reality in mind. Some levels of disability require the assistance of outside caregivers, and the need for that is increased when the individual needing support is a minor still adjusting to life and its challenges. There are numerous moments within *All in a Row* in which Laurence is compared to an animal or said to have similar thought processes to dogs or puppies, which further alludes to the notion that disabled individuals are less than human. Gary, Laurence’s caregiver, says, “Sometimes I wonder...If people with special needs are animals wrongly reincarnated into human form,” and elaborates by stating, “Well, Laurence in a lot of ways is a bit like a puppy” (37). A line of dialogue from Martin in conversation with Gary reads, “You understand that bruises are normal with a kid who turns into a pitbull when he doesn’t get an extra pizza” (11). This statement not only highlights Laurence’s perceived aggression but also
reinforces the stereotype that disabled individuals are unpredictable and uncontrollable – traits often associated with animals rather than humans. This connection to malice and aggression could also make a convincing argument for Laurence as a contender for the villainous disability stereotype, as he is the primary source of antagonism and stress in his parents’ lives. While it is indeed true that raising an autistic child can be a significant source of tension for parents learning to navigate new territories, it is equally crucial to consider the impact of disability representation within a play. Crafting stories from diverse perspectives enriches our understanding and profoundly influences how audiences perceive and empathize with such experiences.

Looking at disability in relationship to the plot structure, the narrative employs Laurence's ASD as a source of tragedy, violence, and humor. One example of Laurence’s ASD being used for comedic effect is when Martin openly discusses heavily inappropriate subject matter directly in front of his own son, something that would not take place if his son was not disabled. In the third scene, while Laurence is watching Finding Nemo, Martin laments to Gary, “If only he’d watch more films with fuckable cartoons, ay?” and continues by saying, “There’s a market for Disney Porn, you know. Twisted stuff” (8). The sexual and vulgar nature of this conversation is played for humor simply because of the nature of Laurence’s condition. The puppet representation reinforces the idea that autism becomes an entertaining spectacle for the audience. Instances within the play utilize Laurence's condition as a plot device, mainly focusing on violent outbursts. The central conflict arises when Laurence bites his mother, revealing the family's struggle and guilt regarding his care. Unfortunately, for the purposes of my analysis, the play tends to use Laurence's character more as a means for the abled characters to explore their emotions than giving him a platform for his thoughts and feelings. Additionally, having a puppet portray the singular autistic character perpetuates the notion that autism is an entertaining
spectacle to behold, as theatrical puppetry is incredibly eye-catching and intriguing to witness from an audience's perspective. For example, Scene One is a very brief sequence that consists of a few lines from Gary, Laurence’s caretaker, as Laurence repeatedly attempts to get more pizza from the refrigerator, bounces on the sofa, and runs around the room before eventually settling down to watch Finding Nemo on an iPad. Without the additional perceived entertainment that comes from witnessing the puppeteer interact with each of the set pieces, this inaugural scene would not captivate the audience's attention in the same manner – it is just simply not as interesting to watch a human open a fridge as it is to watch a puppet open a fridge, considering we see ourselves open up a fridge pretty much every day. We are not used to seeing puppets open fridges; therefore, it is new and exciting.

Pivoting to critical reception, Oates’ All in a Row received a lot of attention, most of which revolved around the decision to utilize a puppet for Laurence’s character instead of a living performer. These criticisms actually began before the play even debuted, sparking when a trailer for the production debuted online and spawning the Twitter hashtag “puppetgate.” On opening night, February 18, 2019, a protest was organized outside of the theatre by Paul Wady, the founder of Stealth Aspies Theatre Company, to condemn the choice of a puppet to represent a child with autism. A few news reporters from outlets, such as The Guardian, spoke out in support of the performance, and their review reads, “I, for one, am grateful that playwright Alex Oates and the creative team had the guts and integrity to see this one through” (Gillinson). However, the criticisms heavily outweigh the words of praise. The National Autistic Society was among the many groups to speak out, saying it could not support the show, according to The Standard. This quote from What’s On Stage does an excellent job of summarizing the overall feelings shared by many audience members and critics alike: “There is no doubt that this play
has the very best of intentions, but its strengths have been clouded, largely by a puppet that could quite easily be left in the dressing room” (Kemp).

Now, for my thoughts. At the risk of being too full of candor right out of the gate with this first piece, All in a Row may be a contender for my least favorite script currently sitting in my digital library. Honestly, what I found almost as off-putting as the content within the script was the preface that the playwright included to justify the decision to cast a puppet in place of a living, breathing performer. Certain lines from the preface itself made me want to incite an argument with the playwright, which shows just how ineffective the inclusion of this letter truly was. Oates’ “Preface” asks readers to let go of any remaining uncomfortable feelings and believe that his creative choices were correct, regardless of how many people (perhaps the 24,000 or so who signed the petition asking the theatre producing All in a Row to develop more ethical representation guidelines) tell you they feel dehumanized. Oates defended this by saying, “Laurence is a character with a level of disability that would make it impossible for him to appear in a play, especially in a play like this one” (2). As traits associated with ASD can manifest much differently than how the character of Laurence is depicted throughout the play, there are performers with ASD who are capable of handling the demands of a rehearsal schedule and high-intensity roles. In the present-day Broadway production of How to Dance in Ohio, most of the cast comprises performers with ASD. Oates addresses his artistic vision's backlash head-on, stating, “This has proved to be a controversial decision, and I am saddened that some people have taken offense” (2). Overall, my feelings on the production can be summarized by the words of Connor Ward, an autistic blogger who shared an online video review of the play, “if it was just a puppet, it would be an easy fix…but it wasn’t.” It is disheartening how little accountability the playwright takes throughout this open letter and how he fails to acknowledge that many of
the people who are offended by the way the character was written are people with autism themselves.

**Cost of Living**

*Cost of Living* (2016) is a drama written by Polish-born American playwright Martyna Majok, and it intricately knits together the lives of two couples of mismatched individuals who are each contending with their own distinct challenges. John, a Princeton Ph.D. candidate, is exceptionally wealthy but faces another set of trials as he was born with cerebral palsy, which leads him to hire an inexperienced caregiver, Jess. Jess, a graduate of Princeton, works multiple jobs in order to make ends meet. Meanwhile, a woman named Ani becomes quadriplegic after a near-fatal car accident. Her ex-husband, Eddie, begins to pursue a new phase in their relationship following the accident, and their connection expands in a tender yet tenacious way. Majok’s play alternates between intimate two-person scenes and explores caregiver and care-recipient dynamics.

To begin analyzing the relationship between disability and characterization within Majok’s *Cost of Living*, it makes the most sense to start with John, as he is the first disabled individual to make a physical appearance in the story. Majok establishes quickly within her text that John lives both a wealthy and fortunate lifestyle, which provides him access to resources such as health insurance, networking opportunities, and the ability to attend a prestigious institution such as Princeton. Though John’s cerebral palsy may require the use of a wheelchair, he is anything but less privileged than his non-disabled caregiver, Jess, who lives paycheck to paycheck and is stuck living out of her car. This quality contradicts the helpless disability stereotype that individuals and characters with disabilities are nothing more than vessels for
others’ sympathy and are point-blank less privileged in all capacities than their able-bodied counterparts. To quote John himself, “I have money. I can basically do anything I want except the things I can’t” (Majok 28). Another way in which John’s depiction within the script aims to puncture holes in preconceived notions of what it means to live life with a disability is through his unapologetically abrasive demeanor. During their initial meeting, when Jess refers to John’s condition as “Differently Abled,” he responds by abruptly telling her not to do that and exclaiming, “It’s fucking retarded” (Majok 21). However, there is an added complexity to John’s harsh attitude, as it masks the reasoning behind his sincere vulnerability and total isolation stemming from his prior experiences of the outside world being made uncomfortable by his condition. However, it is also worth hypothesizing that John has likely pushed more people away with his inclination to judge, which stems from his overwhelming financial privilege. This possibility is shown in a conversation with Jess, where she exhibits disgust at the harassment she experiences from wealthy, judgmental customers in food service. John responds very matter of fact-“How else will they know if they’re winning or not?” and claims that “People have to judge you by something” (Majok 83).

Ani is another character in the script who is living with a disability, although unlike John, she has not been living with the condition for the entirety of her life. She becomes a quadriplegic and double above-the-knee amputee following a car accident, meaning she spent a large percentage of her life as a non-disabled individual. There is minor textual evidence to support the claim that Ani is an example of the bitter disability stereotype in the sense that she is angry, resentful, and aggrieved about her condition; however, It is necessary to acknowledge that she is still actively processing the trauma of surviving a near-fatal car accident and to consider how her relationship with disability juxtaposes John’s. When Eddie is trying desperately to search for
something to bring light to Ani’s situation, her emotions boil over, and she explodes, exclaiming, “I’m gonna be sad, pissed ‘n’ sad, fer however long I’m pissed ‘n’ sad, ‘n’ that’s fine. I feel like feeling whatever I feel right now. In my paper bag. ‘N’ that’s fine. There’s no recovery from this. My spinal cord’s shattered. This: Is it” (Majok 48). Ani’s bitterness is framed as a coping mechanism for trauma and the loss of her sense of self.

Transferring the focus of analysis from the portrayal of the character to the construction of the plot, it is relevant that both relationships within Cost of Living are that of the caregiver and the individual they are caring for, even in the case of Ani and Eddie, who had a connection prior to the events of within the play. The plot entirely relies on the presence of disability for the inciting incident of character interactions, including John hiring Jess as his caretaker and Eddie and Ani reconnecting after Ani’s accident causes her to need additional care. It is doubtful that Jess and John would have ever come into contact with one another without her looking for work as an inexperienced caregiver and needing someone to assist him. Additionally, It is impossible to be sure if Eddie and Ani would have pursued a reconnection in their relationship if not for the unfortunate outcome of her accident. Ani even makes a point to call this out directly within the dialogue of the play, resisting Eddie’s presence in her life and stating, “It's not like that anymore. If you wanna help me, you can help me. You helped me. But if you ever came back,…like, Came Back…I’d need to know it was fer me. Not fer…anything else” (Majok 80). Incidentally, in the final scene of the play, it is discovered that Ani has passed away due to an unforeseen blood clot, which leaves Eddie in mourning. The definitive scene concludes with a resolution between only the remaining able-bodied characters, as Jess has also left John’s narrative as a caregiver (albeit for a very different reason surrounding her allegedly stealing soap and her misinterpreting his romantic intentions). Ann M. Fox points out in her article “Staging the
Complexities of Care: Martyna Majok’s *Cost of Living*” how “the end of the play seems problematic, with two nondisabled characters connecting and the disabled characters disappearing” (158). She goes on to ask, “Is this simply the disappearance of disability yet again, now that it has served its narrative purpose? It seems to be, Ani has died, and John has on willfully to his shielded life” (Fox 158). This raises unsettling questions about the narrative utility of disabled characters while also confronting the audience with the stark realities of disability and dependency.

*Cost of Living* premiered in Williamstown, Massachusetts, in 2016 at the Williamstown Theatre Festival before moving to Off-Broadway in 2017, eventually being awarded the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. It received critical acclaim, notably for casting performers with disabilities in the roles of John and Ani (Gregg Mozgala and Katy Sullivan), which Majok insists upon in the casting requirements. *The New York Post* commentary reads, “If most of *Cost of Living* is invigorating for not leaning on easy answers or stereotypical Hallmark Channel characters, the ending aims to nourish audiences in a more traditional manner we’ve become accustomed to. And it does” (Oleksinski). Criticism given to the script typically calls out that while it is often marketed as a play focusing primarily on disability, it feels more centered on the caregivers’ stories and providing them with a resolution. *Theasy’s* review declares, “Perhaps what feels most exploitative about the play is that Majok doesn't offer any redemption or conclusion for John and Ani. She uses them to elicit an emotional response, but they conveniently disappear once they deliver their ultimate blow” (Kassier). Furthermore, a review from *Deadline* comments that while the humor and tragedy may be successful at times, it “feels as though it’s been predetermined from the start, with all the tragedy, cross-messages, hurt feelings and dashed dreams set in motion for no reason other than the late-night meeting of two
strangers who’ve survived the plot” (Evans). While certain audience members and critics have qualms with the script, Cost of Living’s positive reception and accolades stand as a testament to the power of a script containing stories not often shared on stage.

There are so many things that I love about Majok’s Cost of Living. Her firm decision to cast actors with disabilities is a testament to the inclusivity of the production and sends a powerful message about the importance of diversity in the arts - but the decision to frame the entirety of the play with scenes devoid of John and Ani, the disabled characters, solidifies the perception that the work primarily revolves around the act of caring for individuals with disabilities rather than delving into the experiences of the disabled protagonists themselves. Furthermore, the abrupt and seemingly contrived confusion between John and Jess, leading to their eventual estrangement, appears inconsistent with established character traits and challenges comprehension. John, portrayed as adept in interpreting social cues throughout the script, inexplicably struggles to discern flirtatious gestures and signals from Jess, manifested by her deviation from scheduled care hours to be present for him on a Friday night. This narrative development has been astutely critiqued in Deadline’s review, which aptly states, "A potential romantic development in the story of John and Jess arrives so quickly and is fumbled so badly – with a misunderstanding that wouldn’t be out of place in a sitcom or soap opera – that the play never recovers." So, while I can appreciate what this piece has done for the world of theatre and disability today, I still think some elements can be analyzed and questioned on their intent and interpretation in the realm of disability. However, as a piece of theatre about the importance of human connection and people needing people, it is something so incredibly stunning that I want more than anything to be able to see on a stage someday.
All of Us

*All of Us* (2022) is a comedy-drama written by British comedian and actor Francesca Martinez, and it vividly portrays the struggles and joys of everyday life for people with disabilities as they go through life in a society that often neglects them. Jess, a therapist with cerebral palsy, which she often refers to as “wobbly,” meets Ken, a patient living with depression and suicidal thoughts who challenges her to confront her issues. Jess’s best friend, Poppy, is a free-spirited and adventurous wheelchair user who refuses to let her own disability define her or limit her choices. Jess and her community begin to face more severe challenges as their lives and careers fragment, and the government’s austerity measures affect their support systems. Martinez’s reflective and political play shifts between comical and moving dialogues and exposes the human cost of welfare reform and the desire for radical empathy.

With this context in mind, we can address the representation of disability through the crafting of each character within the script of *All of Us*, which features a wide array of disabilities and unique characteristics throughout its pages. The central character, Jess, is diagnosed with cerebral palsy. However, her disability does not define her, and she often uses it as a way to connect with others and foster a sense of community and connection. Her profession as a therapist is an aid in this practice, as she can assist other members of the community who are struggling and challenges the common assumption that disabled individuals are only allowed to seek help and are never the ones to provide it to others. The beginning of the third scene calls attention to this assumption when a patient enters the therapy office for the first time and immediately calls out, “My mistake!” upon seeing the physical appearance of Jess, assuming based solely on the physical and nothing more. Another featured character worth noting is
Poppy, who is a wheelchair user due to having chronic pain as a result of restricted growth. Poppy’s characterization is worth noting as she is never afraid to express her anger, frustration, and outrage at the media’s portrayal of disability and the public’s ignorance and pity towards individuals in her situation. At the same time, Jess remains more subdued for some time. In addition, for years, people with disabilities have been “infantilized and held to be asexual (or in some cases, hypersexual), incapable of reproduction and unfit sexual/marriage partners or parents” (Addlakha 4), as detailed in the journal article “Disability and Sexuality: Claiming Sexual and Reproductive Rights.” Poppy continuously goes on Tinder dates and consensually hooks up with sexual partners for the fun of it. There is never a question of whether or not they find her attractive. Scene Seven begins with Poppy entering her studio flat as her Tinder date of the evening, Dom carries her, and her exclaiming as they sit down, “Either this stuff is really good, or I’m sitting next to Idris fucking Elba” (Martinez 44) before they proceed into more flirtatious exchanges typically throughout narrative storytelling for only able-bodied couples. However, there is a case to be made that Poppy does shift into the bitter disability stereotype towards the end of the piece, which is disappointing as it feels like it somewhat contradicts the rest of her vivacious and robust nature. Towards the end of the piece, it is revealed to the audience that Poppy has committed suicide because of the welfare reform cuts that have caused her to make drastic changes to her lifestyle, such as requiring her to be put to bed at nine o’clock every night due to cutting night-time care completely. It feels odd that the same character who emphatically states, “Why do you always fight for others but not yourself,” and “We can’t just let them get away with this” (Martinez 66) would resort to taking their own life a few scenes later. However, it is essential to acknowledge that what contributes to Poppy’s decision to end her life is the limits put on her liberation, and her independent and rebellious nature is what helps
to define her character; this could have contributed to a significant loss of identity or sense of self.

Shifting from a focus on characterization to the relationship between disability and plot structure, *All of Us* is a script that heavily relies on the existence of disability to propel the action forward and to create a compelling and relevant story that calls for a more compassionate and inclusive society. While the overarching message within the piece is undoubtedly essential and advocates for the rights of disabled individuals, the plot does utilize the presence of disability as a source of conflict and tension for the narrative as a whole. The conflict is first incited when a Department of Work and Pensions assessor visits Jess in her home and walks her through several questions regarding her lifestyle and capacity to take care of herself, resulting in her no longer being eligible for the higher rate of Personal Independence Payment (PIP); this leads to her car being taken away, which spirals into many unbelievably unfair and unjust consequences, not only for Jess, but for the disabled community she is proudly a part of. The climax of the play as well, as discussed in the character analysis portion, is also heavily reliant on the presence of disability; this is when Poppy makes the tragic decision to take her own life due to the neglect of the Department of Work and Pensions. There is even a line that directly refers to this from Jess herself, where she cries out, “Poppy killed herself because of your cuts” (Martinez 112). It does not get much more explicit than that. In addition to the inciting incident and climax existing because disability is integral to the plot, many characters would not have been introduced to one another without disability being identified as the connecting factor. Jess’ occupation as a therapist has led her to connect with many other disabled individuals whom she would not have met if they had not reached out to her for guidance as a healthcare professional. One example of this is the relationship between Jess and Rita, a patient that Jess is seeing concerning her
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), which is established in the first scene of the script. In the following scene, Jess makes a very self-aware joke about disabled people being introduced to one another primarily because of their conditions in response to Jess’ carer, Nadia, suggesting she meet Poppy for the first time, loudly saying, “Why? …Cos we’re ‘DISABLED’?!” (Martinez 14). As humorous as this line may be, it still rings true for the situation presented in the text.

Shifting into the piece’s critical reception, *All of Us* received notable praise. It is worth mentioning that playwright Francesca Martinez played the lead role of Jess in the debut production in the Dorfman Auditorium in the National Theatre of London, which opened in August of 2022 after beginning previews in July. *The New York Times* shares, “All of Us…opens our eyes to the hardships of disabled people in Britain” (Wolf). On the contrary, the script also received criticism for a particular lack of subtlety and attempt to cram too many issues of disability into one three-hour tour. *The Standard* review explains how “Martinez’s message that all of us are hurt but all of us can be redeemed by love, empathy, and compassion sounds banal, even before riot cops start tipping protestors out of wheelchairs” (Curtis). Another source, *Time Out*, says the piece “struggles under the weight of the ideas it’s exploring, growing increasingly disjointed in its second act. There’s a trite bluntness to its efforts…and it over-explains its characters’ emotional struggles” (Saville). It is evident that while most critics and audience members are behind the overall message of Martinez’s work and understand its intentions, they believe it could be done in a manner that is less “on the nose.”

My perspective on the play *All of Us* is dichotomous, marked by admiration for Martinez’s prowess as a comedian and reservations about the overall tone of the piece. While her wit shines through in moments of humor and levity, a sentiment I hold in high regard, the script
leaves me with a sense of preachiness that runs the risk of compromising its success at delivering the message that “disabled people are people too.” Rather than offering a genuine slice of life into the disabled experience, at times, the script appears tailored to elicit sympathy from non-disabled audiences. The non-disabled characters feel like villainous caricatures, particularly in the constituency office and community center sequences. At one point, officers even resorted to tipping people out of wheelchairs and wrestling disabled individuals who were peacefully protesting, which seemed ridiculous and ultimately brought me out of the moment. The extensive political undertones, though clearly rooted in justified intentions, dominate the show, which has been described as three hours long. I found myself searching for moments to relate to rather than finding them alone, without aid. The overall trajectory of the play feels burdened by an agenda, leaving me with an unfulfilled desire for a nuanced portrayal of disability that goes beyond advocacy.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (2014) is a mystery play based on the 2003 novel of the same title by Mark Haddon but adapted for the stage by Simon Stephens. It follows the journey of a 15-year-old boy named Christopher Boone as he investigates the homicide of his neighbor's dog, Wellington, and, in the process, discovers an unending web of deception. This leads him to the discovery that his father, Ed, lied to him about the death of his mother, Judy, after she left their family following an affair. Christopher has a form of ASD that makes it difficult for him to process social situations and intense emotions, which results in his repeated reliance on logic and factual information as a coping mechanism. A unique element of Stephens' adaptation is that it presents the narrative as a play-within-a-play, a change of pace.
from the novel's original presentation. The script explores themes of honesty and deception, family and identity, and difference and acceptance.

In the play adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, the protagonist, Christopher Boone, provides the audience with a glimpse into the mind of an individual with Autism Spectrum Disorder. His family members and academic influences celebrate his exceptional mathematical abilities and keen attention to detail, showcasing the creative and academic strengths that can sometimes accompany neurodiversity. Christopher shares this achievement with one of his neighbors, Mrs. Alexander, adding, “I’m the first person to do an A-Level from my school because it’s a special school” (Stephens 36). Christopher's possessing this character trait does contribute to the prevalent stereotype that there is a direct link between mathematical ability and being diagnosed with ASD. However, there is actually “little direct evidence for a link between either systemizing and mathematics ability in either individuals with ASD or neurotypical individuals” (Escovar et al. 2). His astonishing mathematical abilities, albeit a genuine part of his characterization, may unintentionally reinforce the inspirational disability stereotype that individuals must possess exceptional skills to be considered valuable or motivational rather than simply a burden to work around.

Interestingly, for the purposes of this study, the narrative of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* distinguishes itself by not relying solely on disability as a plot device. It is an authentic coming-of-age murder mystery piece, just one that happens to follow the journey of an autistic fifteen-year-old boy. While Christopher’s autism is central to the story as it makes him the person he is, the play transcends a narrow focus on only disability by exploring broader elements such as honesty, family relationships, and overcoming personal obstacles. What incites
conflict in Christopher’s life and within the world of the play is not his disability but the judgments of the adults in his life and their lack of ability to manage what works for him. The disabling environment in which he lives is more disruptive of normalcy than anything Christopher has brought upon himself. To this point, Christopher’s father chose to hide his mother Judy’s affair and claim she died in the hospital rather than tell him she was living in London with another man until he eventually discovered forty hidden letters she had written him over the years. This discovery distresses and exhausts Christopher to the point where he becomes physically ill, to which Ed defends himself by sputtering, “I don’t know what to say…I was in such a mess…Because I didn’t know how to explain, it was so complicated” (Stephens 61).

Another instance of this is when, after being told numerous times by Christopher that he needed to take his A-level mathematics test on a specific day, his mother disregards his concerns and calls the school and reschedules it. Constant demands and questioning accompany their lack of understanding and willingness to listen to him, “You’re not listening to me, are you, Christopher?” (Stephens 121). It displays a lack of awareness of how Christopher feels and how he experiences life through a different lens; at times, it is celebrated, and at times, it is scoffed at.

Outside of the events within the play, it is alluded to within the letters from Christopher’s mother, Judy, that Christopher’s autism played a role in the separation between her and his father, in addition to her affair with a neighbor, Mr. Shears. She wrote, “I was not a very good mother, Christopher. Maybe if things had been different, maybe if you’d been different, I might have been better at it. But that’s just the way things turned out” (Stephens 56). While the script addresses the complexities of family dynamics, especially families with neurodivergent children, it is crucial to critically examine the implications of connecting Christopher’s autism with his parent’s separation. This narrative choice risks perpetuating harmful stereotypes that suggest a
child’s disability is a substantial determining factor in the success or failure of marital relationships. The script never addresses whether Christopher feels anything about these statements and their implications.

_The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time_ premiered at the National Theatre in London in 2012 before transferring to West End and Broadway. It has received high praise and numerous awards, including five Tony Awards and the 2015 Drama League Award for Outstanding Play. One of the main elements that critics commended was the innovative set design, as it utilized a black box set with projections, audio, intense choreography, and erratic stage lights with the intention of bringing audiences into Christopher’s neurodivergent perspective and providing insight into a sensory overload experience. _Time_ describes the play as “a real Broadway curiosity, a play that works on every level – crowd-pleasing, eye-opening, life-affirming and unmissable” (Zoglin). Some critics argue that Christopher's character may unintentionally reinforce certain stereotypes associated with autism, as his traits align with common portrayals in popular media. Critics also note that the play may oversimplify the challenges faced by individuals with autism, potentially limiting a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the autistic community. _The Guardian_’s criticized the play for being “a spectacle devoid of emotional verity” (Croggon) and for portraying Christopher’s autism in a stereotypical and sentimental way. She wrote: "There’s a strong current of sentimentality that makes this very much a story for those on the outside looking in, which perhaps has been exaggerated by the crudities of adaptation to the stage" (Croggon). There has also been commentary on how, for atypical audience members who wish to see themselves represented in a piece of theatre, the actual performance design does not lend itself to accessibility. A review from _DARTcritics_ explains, “I understand that the use of flashing lights
and ridiculously loud noise is so that the neurotypical audience members can get a small taste of what life is like for those of us on the spectrum on a daily basis…this is far too extreme for those of us on the spectrum that want to see ourselves represented in theatre, a rare enough occurrence without it being made inaccessible by sensory overload” (Bloomfield). While *The Curious Incident* did offer sensory-friendly performances, it is disheartening that autistic audience members would need to take extra steps to ensure their comfort and safety to witness a production that is attempting to bring their unique experiences to light.

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is one of my favorite pieces of theatre, but I have not gotten the opportunity to witness a live production. I’m curious how my opinion might change, for better or worse, if I’m ever granted the opportunity to see the script on a stage and not just on paper. It’s an excellent example of how it is not always necessary for disability to be utilized as a plot device, as an entire narrative arc exists separately from Christopher’s autism. It’s easy to equate the presence of disability in theatre or film to Chekhov’s gun; once you realize it’s there, you feel you need to sit and wait for it to be relevant to the story in some massive, gut-wrenching, eye-opening way. In *Curious Incident*, Christopher simply has autism. It is not Chekhov’s gun. It exists organically within the narrative, which I feel provides a refreshing departure from traditional storytelling approaches.
CHAPTER THREE: PLAYWRIGHT’S EXPLORATION

In order to transition into the personal decision to craft a narrative that aims to authentically capture a slice of life that involves a central character living with a disability, I feel as though I should dive deeper into my relationship with the disability at the center of this narrative. My first introduction to the condition of narcolepsy, prior to my diagnosis, was watching an episode of Modern Family with my mom at age fourteen. In this episode, titled “Sleeper,” the character of Phil Dunphy magically becomes narcoleptic and experiences cataplectic sleep attacks when in comedically stressful situations; coincidentally, at the same time, his teenage daughter is researching the sleep disorder and writes it off as being one of the less "exciting" conditions to pursue, sarcastically saying “I got the disease that’s rare and fun.” This is the only episode of the series in which Phil’s character appears to have this condition, which I find incredibly intriguing. I appear to display the symptoms every day of my existence instead of only thirty minutes (featuring convenient commercial breaks). As much as Modern Family still holds a soft nostalgic spot in my heart, I do have to resent the writer’s room a smidge for not providing a more proper introduction to the disability that would end up becoming such a massive part of my everyday life and routine. In addition to the research reviewed in the preceding chapters, that personal anecdote plays the most prominent role in why I have chosen to contribute to the field by drafting a script for the stage focusing on an individual living with narcolepsy with cataplexy. With this contribution to contemporary playwriting, I aimed to create a script for the stage that centers on a disabled character that defies disabled stereotypes throughout narrative storytelling and does not rely on disability to move the plot forward. That script is entitled When it Rains. This piece explores the tempest within personal and existential relationships as a hurricane bears down on three former roommates.
When it Rains

This play is a work in progress. As I intend to continue workshopping and editing the script beyond the defense of this thesis, I have included the description of When it Rains on my pre-existing New Play Exchange page rather than electing to publish the unfinished product. The following chapter will detail the writing process reflection of this contribution to the field, so I first want to include a concise synopsis of the plot of the completed piece.

When it Rains is a full-length play with a cast of three that is performed in one act and ideally lasts about ninety minutes in total, with no intermission. The main character, Agnes, is in her mid-20s, and she, like me, has a diagnosis of narcolepsy with cataplexy. The other two characters are Ian and Charlotte, who are also in their mid-20s. When the events of the play begin, Agnes and Charlotte are feverishly preparing for an impending hurricane in a modest Florida rental home, stacking sandbags and googling what appliances to unplug. The atmosphere is charged with tension when Ian, the recently “evicted” ex-boyfriend and almost fiancé of Agnes, unexpectedly arrives to allegedly retrieve some belongings left behind. His timing, however, is clearly suspect, as he secretly hopes to weather the storm with Agnes, hoping to mend their fractured relationship. The storm's ferocity mirrors the emotional turbulence within the trio. Agnes, haunted by the abrupt end of her four-year relationship with Ian, grapples with the unspoken reasons behind her refusal of his marriage proposal. Ian, trapped in the house due to the intensifying storm, navigates the delicate balance of addressing the unresolved issues with Agnes while contending with the unrevealed manipulations of Charlotte, who is keen on rekindling their romance. Amidst the chaos, Charlotte harbors her own secrets. As her friends confront their past, she grapples with the stark contrast between their seemingly stable lives and her own stagnation. The revelation of her acceptance into a prestigious visual art program
becomes a ticking time bomb, threatening to disrupt the carefully constructed facade she presents to her friends. *When it Rains* aims to be a poignant exploration of discomfort, vulnerability, and the complex layers of human relationships. As the hurricane rages outside, the characters are forced into uncomfortable confrontations, exposing the rawness of their emotions and the fractures in their connections. Each character must confront their anxieties, not only about the storm but also about the unsettling uncertainties that define their lives. It’s an impossible question to answer: what truly is more unpredictable? Nature…or human nature?

**Analysis**

Narcolepsy is a chronic neurological disorder that heavily influences the brain’s ability to control sleep-wake cycles. Cataplexy is an additional symptom of some variants of narcolepsy that causes an unexpected loss of muscle control triggered by intense emotions such as anger, excitement, and fear. Symptoms of cataplexy mimic those of seizure disorders, and the most severe attacks result in total body collapses in which individuals are unable to move whatsoever, as it is a paralysis of muscle activity that naturally occurs during deep sleep. I was genuinely motivated to create a narrative that centered on a character with Narcolepsy, as I have been searching for a story that brings attention to the condition without making it the butt of a joke about falling asleep. There is a stark difference between making jokes with friends who truly understand that disability is far more complex and flipping the channel to see random characters laughing at a one-dimensional depiction of what I have to live with every day.

In order to avoid unnecessary exposition, as all three characters already possess a cohesive understanding of what Narcolepsy with Cataplexy is, the disability is never defined within the text. The first time Agnes’ condition is alluded to is when her roommate, Charlotte,
asks if she has taken her medicine, Adderall, to which Agnes responds, “Would I be lifting all this shit if I didn’t take my medicine?” Then, the diagnosis is confirmed when Charlotte responds, “How was I supposed to know – you’re narcoleptic, not an invalid. Chill.” In this brief interaction, it’s established that Agnes has a disability, although we have yet to understand the full extent to which this affects her lifestyle. It would be inorganic and expositional to attempt to cram an entire understanding of the disabled experience into a one-page interaction, so it makes more sense to spread it cohesively throughout the narrative structure.

Narcolepsy can, at times, affect a person’s ability to drive, and for Agnes, that means that she cannot operate a vehicle due to the risks of cataplexy. This has led to her occupation as a Florida Virtual School mathematics and science teacher, which allows her to work from home with accommodation. Ian references her job directly: "My little cousin is in her biology class on FLVS. He says she’s the only online teacher he’s had who actually seems to care about him.” Agnes also uses humor to joke about her inability to drive and to bring moments of levity to difficult situations, as it’s essential for individuals with narcolepsy to be aware of their emotions and attempt to de-escalate situations of extreme stress or tension. Humor is a coping mechanism in this sense. For example, when Ian first appears in the house after not warning Agnes of his imminent presence, she exclaims, “I don’t care that there’s a fucking hurricane outside - If I had the ability to drive a car, I would get in it, run you over, and then drive the fuck away.”

There are three significant moments in which Agnes experiences attacks of cataplexy when she is overcome with solid bouts of emotion. The first occurs when Ian comes over to the house, and she is overwhelmed with anger at being blindsided by his company, which causes her to collapse onto the ground. This scene also establishes that both Ian and Charlotte have a solid understanding of her disability, as neither of them is made uncomfortable by her symptoms. They
help ensure she is uninjured from the fall and move her to a more comfortable location. Charlotte even comments to Ian, “I warned you this would happen if you didn’t tell her you were coming, couldn’t you have made sure she was sitting down?” Ian responds, “I know. I guess I didn’t believe we were on such bad terms that I’d make her go all…cataplectic.” The second instance we see her experience this symptom is due to fear, when there is a large crack of thunder from the hurricane, and the power proceeds to go out instantly. The final instance of cataplexy juxtaposes the others, as it is at the resolution of the piece when Agnes feels an overwhelming wave of happiness upon Ian deciding to re-propose to her after their reconciliation. The following dialogue is from Ian and Agnes’ reconciliation scene.

AGNES: You know, the odds aren’t good. Almost 50 percent of marriages end in divorce.

IAN: There’s no one I’d rather fail with than you.

AGNES: Hm.

IAN: Okay, do you want me to talk statistics? I believe you told me that only .02% of people have cataplexy. That’s, like, barely a possibility, but you’re still here, and you still have it. If anyone is going to beat the odds, it’s you.

AGNES: I’m not sure whether to be flattered or offended.

IAN: Just be you. I am learning to speak your language.

Showing these examples of how cataplexy can affect a person’s life and how they process emotions is a way of bringing the audience into what it might be like to walk in the shoes of someone with this disability. It does not affect the outcome of the plot for her to have these cataplectic attacks, and it is integral to the portrayal of this condition.
The plot of *When it Rains* centers on the nuances of human connection, the impact of unspoken truths, and the struggles of self-discovery. The central conflict, mirrored by the presence of the hurricane raging outside the house, is Agnes’ fear of commitment and marriage, which has been ingrained in her from a young age due to family trauma. Growing up amidst parental discord, she harbors a generational fear of failed marriages and divorce. Marriage, for Agnes, represents a potential threat to the delicate balance she and Ian have achieved rather than a celebration of their love. Unable to clearly communicate this to Ian, Agnes grapples with this fear, declining his proposal in hopes of preserving their existing relationship. While Ian seeks reassurance, Agnes struggles to articulate the emotional complexities tied to her past. This plot unfolds as Ian, unaware of Agnes’s internal turmoil, yearns for a commitment that transcends the present. In a monologue delivered to the audience, she articulates, “I don’t believe in horoscopes or superstitions, but statistics have to mean something. Every marriage in my family tree has fallen victim to deforestation. That cannot be a coincidence.” This is worth noting because Agnes’ insecurity and fear of failure stem from something other than her disability and internalized ableism, something that is perpetuated by other forms of media. Fear of failure is a theme in the script that is tied not only to Agnes but to the other characters as well. Charlotte, her roommate, suffers from a crippling fear of rejection in the visual art world that has caused her to remain stagnant in her hometown rather than open the envelope on her desk that will confirm or deny her acceptance into university. Ian is terrified of thunderstorms, which stems from a memory of hurricane winds being responsible for the death of his childhood dog. However, he pushes past this fear in order to attempt to work things out with Agnes, as he describes that he “is more scared of losing her. She is a force of nature that anyone would be lucky to see.” By making the fear of failure and internalized self-doubt a common thread among all three
characters and not just the character with the disability, it erases the possibility of misunderstanding her self-reservations as internalized ableism or hatred for her condition.

Part of what contributed to selecting these particular themes is that I was planning and preparing for my wedding at the time of writing, which was throughout my second to last semester as a graduate student. I may not share the same feelings on marriage as Agnes, but I spent much time thinking about what it means and how the promise of one's self to another can turn out so unpredictably, as people are constantly growing and changing. The unpredictability of human nature and relationships is what led me to elect a hurricane as the plot device that forces the three characters into an uncomfortable situation, needing to wait out the rain. In addition, all three of the characters are named after destructive storms – Ian, Agnes, and Charlotte (Charlie). As a native Floridian, I wanted the play to take place in Central Florida so that the characters would have prior knowledge and experience with the arrival of hurricanes, as I did not want the storm’s presence to overshadow the drama between the characters, but rather to act as an aid in adding to the stressful and uncertain environment. The following dialogue excerpt is from the beginning of the play, in which Charlotte and Agnes are preparing for the storm.

AGNES: There’s no more bags, this is it.

CHARLOTTE: That’s what I said.

AGNES: Did you finish the front door or just give up?

CHARLOTTE: No, I finished.

AGNES: Are we supposed to do the garage too? I can’t remember if that’s a thing.

CHARLOTTE: I don’t think that’s a thing.
AGNES: We definitely don’t have enough for that if that’s something we’re supposed to do. We’ll probably be fine either way, but I really don’t want to risk it, there’s so many leaks in this place I can’t even –

CHARLOTTE: Google says we don’t have to do the garage.

Including this conversation in the script establishes that Agnes and Charlotte behave more casually toward the concept of an oncoming hurricane than roommates who have never dealt with this type of natural disaster. Agnes saying that she cannot remember if the garage needs sandbags also implies that at some point, she did hurricane prep before and has since forgotten the details.

Reflection

My main goal in writing When it Rains was to create an engaging narrative featuring a character with a disability, more specifically, the disability I have longed to see adequately represented in a piece of media in a way that did not conform to stereotypes or outplayed formats. I aimed to create a fully fleshed-out character who happened to have the diagnosis of Narcolepsy with Cataplexy. I feel as though I succeeded in avoiding crafting a character that could be used as an example of any of the following stereotypes – the villainous disability, the bitter disability, the helpless disability, the inspirational disability, or the cosmetic disability. Additionally, I succeeded in avoiding integrating the presence of disability so heavily into the plot that it feels more like a vehicle for entertainment or action than an organic part of the character’s life experience. My source of inspiration for this entire process stemmed from my personal longing to see myself represented on stage, grappling with my own disability. It was a desire born from the realization that authentic representation is not merely about visibility but about accurately reflecting the multidimensional complexities of lived experiences. However, it
is impossible for me to point-blank answer the yes or no question of whether or not this play authentically captures the disabled experience. I can speak on the fact that it is thoroughly informed by my own experiences navigating a life led with this condition, but my experiences are going to be exceedingly different from other disabled individuals, even those living with the same exact diagnosis as mine. I’ve met individuals with Narcolepsy who are able to drive their own cars, something that I’ll likely never be able to do.

As I reflect on the first draft of *When it Rains*, I grapple with questions that extend beyond the confines of the stage. There is so much that requires contemplation as our community of artists strives for inclusion through theatre-making. What steps can be taken to ensure both physical and digital accessibility in theatre spaces? How can inclusive casting practices be embraced to actively seek out actors with disabilities? What advocacy efforts are needed to promote policies and practices that support disability inclusion in the arts, including funding for changes to accessibility standards? These questions, and more, prompt me to continually research and reassess my approaches to theatre-making, ensuring that it constantly remains inclusive and reflective of the myriad of perspectives within the disabled community.

Overall, I set out to write a narrative with a disabled character at the center rather than what one might call a disability narrative. In that element, I succeeded in accomplishing that intention. However, I feel that it’s essential that, as artists, we all remember how different we are and that we all have different stories and perspectives to share, even as we attempt to bridge that gap to bring us closer together.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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