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Res(Crip)ting Feminist Theater Through Disability Theater: Selections from The DisAbility Project

ANN M. FOX and JOAN LIPKIN

The presence of disabled bodies on stage has recently begun to be theorized in the context of an emerging disability culture. Does the application of feminist principles of theater-making to disability performance serve as a catalyst by which an aesthetic of disability theater can be advanced? What are the implications that emerge to the feminist theater practitioner working to create a disability theater? These questions are explored here and include the scripts for three performance pieces created by The DisAbility Project and directed by feminist playwright Joan Lipkin. The DisAbility Project uses feminist strategies in the creation of script and movement; this essay explores how these facilitate discourses about the disability experience. But it also extends to ask how an emergent disability aesthetic can complicate and expand the interrogations of feminist theater, both in text and in performance. The work of The DisAbility Project suggests that a disability aesthetic can mitigate some of the limitations feminist theater faces in constructing its own subtle re-inscriptions of normalcy, leading to a reconsideration of the use of metaphor for feminist ends. Disability theater, like disability studies, asks the viewer not just to trouble gender or ability, but the entire matrix of identities constructing—and constricting—our understanding of the “normate.”

Keywords: Brecht, Berthold / community-based theater / disability theater / drama / feminism / feminist theater / gender / Lipkin, Joan / The DisAbility Project

MAN: Was I too healthy? Was that it? Did some secret-society deity decide I should be given a handicap to even up the race?

WOMAN: Well, that is an interesting conjecture.

—Myrna Lamb (1971, 164–5)

One of the pieces in Myrna Lamb’s classic, early feminist and episodic play, *Scyklon Z*, “But What Have You Done for Me Lately?” (first performed in 1969) features a man who is impregnated so that he might experience the dilemma of an unwanted pregnancy in an anti-choice culture. Here, disability metaphorically represents the female body within a patriarchal society as “handicapped” (as the above quote suggests) and looms as the potential punishment for women denied reproductive choice:

WOMAN: There is a woman who unwittingly took a fetus-deforming drug administered by her physician for routine nausea, and a woman who caught German measles at a crucial point in her pregnancy, both of whom were denied the right to abortion, but granted the privilege of rearing hopelessly defective children. (1971, 164–5)

As Lamb's play suggests, feminist theater is in something of a curiously ambiguous position with regard to disability. For the conscientious reader, it quickly becomes apparent that disability images are as ubiquitous in the literary and theater landscapes as their live counterparts are in a society more inclined to either politely overlook their presence or mark it in highly controlled ways. Indeed, as disability and theater scholar Victoria Ann Lewis has noted, "It is not that the nondisabled theater world knows nothing about disability and is waiting to be enlightened. To the contrary, the depiction of disability is over-represented in dramatic literature" (2000, 93). This is no less true for the American feminist playwrights who have been writing women into theater for the contemporary stage. Consider many of the plays following Lamb's that are otherwise lauded for their feminist sensibilities and you will discover that they emulate, rather than challenge, that early and essentialist icon of disability in classic theater, *The Glass Menagerie's* Laura Wingfield (Williams 1972). Prominent figures of this kind, for example, include paraplegic Julia in Maria Irene Fornes's *Fefu and Her Friends* (1990); the severely depressed MaGrath sisters in Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* (1988); and paraplegic Skoolie in Kia Corthron's *Come Down Burning* (1996).¹ "Feminists today," notes disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thomson, "even often invoke negative images of disability to describe the oppression of women," and that theoretical use finds its artistic corollary with great regularity in feminist playwriting (1997, 279). Lamb's example, while an early one, continues the use of disability as metaphor for female oppression that we can see in characters as early as the neurasthenic Young Woman battered by gender expectations in Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1993), or as recent as brain-damaged Sara, literally beaten in a gay-bashing in Diana Son's *Stop Kiss* (1999).

It is certain that the use of physical difference as a metaphor, one that does not represent disability experience for its own sake, is deeply at play in theater. Disability and literature scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have labeled this process as it occurs in literary fiction "narrative prosthesis" (2000). That it is as pervasively present within feminist playwriting, which ostensibly rejects the socially-constructed value systems embraced by more canonical theater (more on this in a moment), seems at first something of a paradox. Disability and theater scholar Carrie Sandahl points to several examples of this seemingly ironic state of affairs:

Consider the use of epilepsy as unbearable stigma in Marsha Norman's *Night Mother*, or paralysis as a perverse, grotesque burden in Maria Irene Fornes's *Mud*. Even "positive" metaphors (as in Jane Wagner and Lily Tomlin's use of mental illness as inspiration in *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*) ignore the actual material conditions of the disabled people portrayed. (1999, 15)

Sandahl's list can easily be extended; the plays mentioned above are themselves also works in which "the use of disability as a dramaturgical device tends to erase the particularities of lived disability experiences" (15). Paraplegia, for example, operates as a metaphor for the punitive nature of patriarchal structures in *Fefu*. Each of the MaGrath sisters' depressive episodes contributes to the larger image of Southern eccentricity and repression Henley creates. And in Corthron's play, the poverty that circumscribes its women throughout is embodied in Skoolie, as she is compelled to wheel herself about in a crudely fashioned cart.

All this is not meant to negate the power and worth of these plays and the importance of their roles in challenging assumptions about class, race, gender, and sexuality. It is also not meant to imply that only feminist playwrights have invoked images of disability in this way; for example, plays ranging from Hanay Geiogamah's *Body Indian* (1999) to August Wilson's *Fences* (1986) also use disability to embody the experience of racial and economic oppression. Furthermore, the move from the page to the stage, informed by a feminist sensibility, does not always of necessity follow old patterns; indeed, "when feminism and disability politics are taken into consideration together, they can productively inform and complicate one another" (Sandahl 1999, 12). Metaphor, which is at the heart of theatrical language, need not be rejected completely, but might likewise be enhanced in just this fashion. Cherríe Moraga's *Heroes and Saints* (1996), for example, is a feminist work that powerfully interweaves metaphor and the lived experience of disability. The play's main character, Cerezita, born only as a head because of her mother's drinking from the pesticide-ridden community water supply, embodies the outcome of the environmental racism leveled against her Latino/a community. But Moraga also creates Cerezita as a desiring, desirable human being whose disability is very much part of her identity, and not merely a personal tragedy. Cerezita resists her mother's attempts to hide her from the stares of strangers, insisting on her own visibility; indeed, her disability later makes it possible for her to actively lead her community, not just passively inspire them. Still, there is no avoiding the fact that in much of feminist theater, we see reflected the tensions and questions that have already emerged from the movement to place disability studies and feminist thought in conversation with one another. Given feminist theater's relative inattention to the presence of disability beyond its more trouble-

some metaphorical uses, to what end might the feminist practitioner of theater concern herself with disability culture? What in feminist practice lends itself to creating theater centered on disability, and to reclaiming the power of metaphor in representation? And what, in turn, does a “disability aesthetic” have to offer by way of expanding and interrogating feminist theater?²

But before engaging these questions, it is important to define what is meant by feminist theater and disability theater, respectively. For the purposes of this essay, feminist theater will be defined as that which also seeks to effect social change through questioning the traditional apparatus of theatrical representation, and by extension, calling attention to the social construction of identities upon which privilege is based. In other words, as feminist theater and performance scholar Jill Dolan points out, it is a theater whose theoretical perspective

is concerned with more than just the artifact of representation—the play, film, painting, or dance. It considers the entire apparatus that frames and creates these images and their connection not just to social roles but also to the structure of culture and its divisions of power. (1993, 47)

This is a category of feminist theater typically defined as materialist. Engaging psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and Marxist theories, it seeks not only to challenge traditional forms of spectatorship, but all elements of theatrical creation and presentation. The playwright is not assumed to be literally or figuratively the solitary producer of meaning (and presumably male), the theatrical space is not presumed to be a proscenium arch, and the representational style is not presumed to be mimetic or that of theatrical realism. Dolan also allies materialist feminism with “a post-modernist performance style that breaks with realist narrative strategies, heralds the death of unified characters, decenters the subject, and foregrounds the conventions of perception” (1996, 97). This challenges conventional uses of representation, history, and language that, conversely, place women either at the periphery or in the center as objectified and gazed-upon entities.

Because a definition of disability theater has not been as extensively theorized as that of feminist theater, to speak of disability theater is instantly to raise questions that point to the elusiveness of defining the thing itself and that have yet to be fully explored by critics. Does any work by a disabled playwright automatically count, regardless of subject matter? Should such a category include images of disability in canonical theater? Should it include long-established theatrical traditions within communities where the label of “disabled” is met with much more contention, such as Deaf theater? Should it include art made with disabled populations that primarily emphasizes the therapeutic or cathartic effects on those involved as performers?

It is no more accurate to assume that all work by a disabled playwright or performer is of necessity disability theater than to surmise that all work by women playwrights is feminist. The most innovative and productive disability theater, for the purposes of this essay, does not include disability's more traditional theatrical manifestation, i.e., the tokenized presence of the disabled character in isolation, as metaphor for insidiousness or innocence, or as overcomer. This does not mean that we should not look at the historical representation of disability in theater and ask questions about the kinds of cultural dialogues it alternately reflects and invokes around deviations from bodily normalcy. Because this kind of representation of disability experience is more widespread in popular literature and the mass media, to analyze these characterizations is no less monumental or important a task awaiting disability studies scholars.

To speak of disability theater as an entity is to speak of a self-conscious artistic movement of roughly the last three decades, during which time writers and performers within disability culture have moved to create art as multifaceted as the community from which it emerges. Victoria Ann Lewis's article, "The Dramaturgy of Disability," has been crucial in the process of not only identifying who some of the important writers of disability theater have been for an academic audience, but also in initially delineating the dramaturgical strategies that underpin disability writing for the stage (2000). Lewis points to artists whose approaches to theater run the gamut from writing plays (Mike Ervin, John Belluso, Susan Nussbaum) to conducting performance workshops (Lewis's own OTHER VOICES Project, a disability performance workshop based at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles) to creating solo performance work (Cheryl Marie Wade). To her lists, we can add significant other forays into the performance of disability, including playwrights such as Katinka Neuhof; community-based theater workshops like The DisAbility Project (based in St. Louis, Missouri) and Actual Lives (based in Austin, Texas); and solo performers like Lynn Manning, Terry Galloway, Julia Trahan, and David Roche.

In her study, Lewis locates two prominent directions in disability theater: one focuses on exposing disability as a social construction and one "celebrates the difference of the disability experience, what is called 'disability culture' or 'disability cool' in the disability community" (2000, 102). The former emphasis might produce theater that advocates for disability rights, works to contravene familiar stereotypes, questions definitions of bodily normalcy, resists essentializing disability into one kind of physical experience, and foregrounds the ways in which disability intersects with other identity categories. The latter direction emphasizes representing the experience of disability and disability culture. Kathleen Tolan locates the work of disabled theater artists along slightly different lines: "There are artists and groups whose main interest is social/

political, who perceive their main work as critiquing society, changing perceptions, forging communities . . . there are others whose greatest interest is in artistic and aesthetic exploration and expression" (2001, 17).

Useful as Lewis's and Tolan's works are, they suggest polarized categories of creation, a construction that we might begin to think beyond. How might we begin to imagine a definition of disability theater that negotiates these divisions between art and activism in a more synthesized fashion, producing something we might label a *disability aesthetic*? In the process of doing so, disability theater can not only expand its own artistry in dialogue with feminist theater, but can in turn problematize feminist theater's potential reification of the metaphorical use of disability as a sort of *dramaturgical prosthesis*. Through the interrelationship of these approaches, we might in turn contribute to the call Thomson has made for feminism and disability studies to productively inform one another. The DisAbility Project is a useful company through which to investigate the question of a disability aesthetic. As artistic director Joan Lipkin points out, "I always say to my ensemble . . . that we are equal parts art and advocacy. And the minute we fail to delight, surprise, move or mystify in *how* we say things as well as *what* we say, we've lost our focus" (Tolan 2001, 19). The Project is thus consciously at the intersection of the artistic and activist strains of disability theater.

The scripts that follow, "Facts and Figures," "Employment," and "Go Figure," exemplify how we might begin to answer the questions raised above and further the exploration of the ways in which feminist and disability theaters can inform and enhance one another. They are three of an expansive and growing repertoire of theater pieces created by feminist playwright and director Joan Lipkin and the members of The DisAbility Project, a grassroots St. Louis theater ensemble that creates and performs work centered around disability culture. Founded in 1997, the Project is made up of actors with and without disabilities, embodying a diverse (although by no means complete) representation of performing experience, age, race, class, sexuality, *and* disability. The disabilities that have been represented at varying times within the group include paraplegia, quadriplegia, AIDS, multiple sclerosis, cerebral palsy, stroke, blindness, bipolar disorder, cancer, spina bifida, muscular dystrophy, spinal cord injury, asthma, polio, epilepsy, amputation, depression, cognitive disability, and alcoholism. Under Lipkin's direction, the members of this community-based theater meet weekly in workshop sessions to share experiences, create, and rehearse work. Originally, the Project as conceived was to build toward a single theater event in the fall of 2000. The Project has evolved, however, into an ongoing ensemble which both continues to create theatrical work and to take their award-winning performances out into the greater St. Louis area, in venues from ballrooms to boardrooms to classrooms.³ At any given performance, the company draws from a repertoire of approximately twenty pieces to assemble a performance

tailored to the individual audience. The pieces cover a range of disability experiences, including disability history, transportation, parking, pain, employment, attendant care, sexuality, health care, architectural accessibility, and social interaction. In addition to depicting some realistic situations, there are also several pieces that are primarily visual in nature, in which the innovative movement and stage images that can be created by disabled bodies are the primary focus.

The creative process from which these scripts emerged begins to suggest how feminist theater practice and disability theater might engage one another. While the weekly workshops take place under Lipkin's direction, the resulting work resists privileging a single view; instead, it is collaborative, multiperspectival, and constructed in concert with Lipkin, the performers, guest artists, and the audience (whose feedback has given rise to new pieces). Because the ensemble cast contains a range of performers with and without disabilities, no one kind of bodily experience is reified as the disabled or nondisabled norm. Likewise, the presence of disabled actors emphasizes the importance of their performing their own stories. And while there are significant and material differences in the lived identities of nondisabled and disabled people, integrating this company underscores that there are concerns relevant to the disabled community that have real implications for nondisabled individuals as well. One can become disabled at any time, and we are all on our way to becoming disabled by virtue of the aging process; certainly our body-phobic culture includes a wide range of physical shapes, sizes, and capabilities for which we have little tolerance.

A playwright whose own principles of feminist playwriting and directing embody poststructuralist and materialist thought, Lipkin has long interrogated socially-constructed categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality typically regarded as cohesive and natural. She has informed her work on the Project with similar innovations in theme and style, confounding traditional audience expectations and viewing habits. Each of the following three scripts links to concerns and methodologies advanced by feminist theater, but likewise infuses those ideas and dramaturgical strategies with a disability perspective.

For example, "Facts and Figures" extends a feminist critique of history and language; both are systems of meaning from which disability has been erased, except as a disembodied expression of derision ("You are so ADD").⁴ In a personal interview, Lipkin emphasized that the company, in performing this piece, wants to "awaken the audience to attend to language differently and have their experience of the performance to be grounded in a sense of history." "Facts and Figures" at once presents an audience with the realities of the disability experience, while simultaneously exposing how that experience is co-opted and portrayed negatively within everyday language. This piece foregrounds the lived experience of those with disabilities, past ("Freak shows exhibiting the bodies of

disabled men and women were common entertainment in the Victorian period") and present ("People with disabilities are the largest minority in the United States"). Through the revelation of these facts, disability is moved out of the world of the "private, generally hidden, and often neglected" (Wendell 1997, 266). The included facts link the experience of female and disabled bodies ("During witch trials, many of the women who were tried for witchcraft had disabilities"), foregrounding for an audience how female and disabled bodies have simultaneously occupied sites of marginalization.

But these facts also remind us that there is a specific disability experience to be articulated. Disability studies scholar Susan Wendell, in calling for a feminist theory of disability, confirms this necessity and suggests the opportunity arising from it:

Emphasizing differences from the able-bodied demands that those differences be acknowledged and respected and fosters solidarity among the disabled. It challenges the able-bodied paradigm of humanity and creates the possibility of a deeper challenge to the idealization of the body and the demand for its control. (1997, 272)

The reconsideration of social history that feminist theater seeks to recreate is therefore deepened by acknowledging other categories through which communities are Othered, including disability. The figures of speech interwoven with the piece's facts are a confirmation of this. Using disability negatively ("He gave me such a lame excuse!" "That is so retarded"), these expressions at once appropriate and reconfigure physical difference solely as lack. By questioning the dismissive assumptions behind our use of language that addresses disability ("She is psycho"), the piece invites each audience member to become aware of and thus accountable for her or his own use of metaphor and language. Incorporating such a consciousness of language can only help practitioners of feminist theater examine their own use of disability with as much care as they would language marking race, class, sexuality, and gender, for example.

One of the facts with which "Facts and Figures" presents audience members concerns disabled workers: "People with disabilities are the most under-employed population in the country. Mostly because our transportation systems make it difficult for them to get jobs, or employers won't hire them [sic]." More specifically, as Heather Gain and Lisa Bennett point out, disabled have "the highest unemployment rate of any group—somewhere between 72 and 90 percent" (2002, 16). The piece entitled "Employment" comically and pointedly expands on this fact by performing the assumptions about ability that underlie employer willingness, or rather, unwillingness, to consider disabled job applicants. The characters in "Employment" move to challenge the seeming impasse

that results when a disabled person applies for a job but is quickly turned down on the grounds that she might “turn off the customers,” not be up to the rigors of “a pretty demanding job,” and is only suited for “the sheltered workshop.” “Can this situation be saved?” asks the job seeker, turning to the audience for resolution. In some settings, the audience is given the opportunity to create potential solutions to the dilemma, imagining how the workplace and workers’ roles could be reimagined to include the disabled person. Members of the Project have also constructed alternate endings that can be presented if an audience is less inclined to participate, endings in which they, along with the manager, are invited to open their minds. Lipkin and ensemble tweak the social assumptions about what disabled workers can and cannot do, and offer a further pointed comment: in an age when disabled people are unemployed in such large numbers, and employers are in need of employable workers, ableist attitudes serve no one. Linking gender to economic inequity is not new in feminist theater, but the attention paid to the particular link between disability and unemployment enhances that critique of economic privation based on social identity.

“Go Figure,” the story of Katie Rodriguez Banister’s re-imagining of her sexual identity after becoming disabled, both allies constructions of gender and disability as well as speaks importantly to the unquestioned assumption in our society that the disabled person is asexual, undesirable, and undesiring. What is immediately striking about this piece is that even as Banister revels in remembering her sexuality before her accident (“You may not be able to tell, but I used to be quite the Barbie girl”), that memory is tinged with the recollection of worry about what people would think of her. We, as audience members, are reminded that Banister’s change in experience underscores that the female body, in both its nondisabled and its disabled identity, is policed as the site of potential transgressions away from normalcy, whether the standard be one of beauty, sexual propriety, or physical wholeness. Banister’s life transition from nondisabled to disabled is therefore not a shift from normalcy to abnormalcy so much as a movement from being the object of one kind of spectatorial look to another. For as Thomson reminds us, “If the male gaze informs the normative female self as a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject as a grotesque spectacle” (1997, 285). In our society, both female bodies and disabled bodies find themselves literally and figuratively marginalized because of their supposed deviation from an idealized norm, whether that model is a particular gender, a standard of femininity or heterosexuality, or some illusory construction of wholeness. Thomson specifically points out the parallels:

Both the female and the disabled body are cast within cultural discourse as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as

well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a valued norm which is assumed to possess natural corporeal superiority. (279)

This is comically, but pointedly, illustrated when Banister remembers, "I placed a personal ad in the singles paper: 'Petite, professional, independent woman on wheels seeks male,'" and "one man," unable to imagine a disabled woman placing a personal ad, "thought I drove around a lot." But Banister's experiences, while distinct, are perhaps not as removed from those of nondisabled women as might be imagined, since "female bodies, like bodies of color, homosexual bodies, *and* disabled bodies, are positioned culturally so as not to forget their embodiment" (Miner 1997, 292–3).

Banister powerfully reclaims her own particular sexuality, breaking down the illusion that the "temporarily able-bodied" watching her performance are somehow removed from these issues. Equally important is her assertion that she is having "the best sex of my life"; hers becomes not an overcoming narrative on how to learn to do without, but an invitation to the audience to learn to do *with* differently. "Go figure!" she exclaims, but that expression of surprise can simultaneously be read as an invocation to the audience, disabled and nondisabled spectators alike, to figure out how to move beyond the narrow confines of how society defines sexual roles. For this reason, it is particularly fitting that Banister trades off the telling of her story with Rich Scharf, an openly gay male member of the company. This both destabilizes the expectation that it is only *her* story, and one grounded only in a presumption of heterosexuality.

As Nancy Mairs explains in *Waist-High in the World*, "Most people, in fact, deal with the discomfort and even distaste that a misshapen body arouses by disassociating that body from sexuality in reverie and practice" (1996, 51). "It was like I was a virgin again," Banister exclaims about her sexual identity after becoming disabled, and in a sense, she *is* "like a virgin." She, and the audience, have to re-imagine her sexuality and desirability as manifested in ways beyond what society deems normal or acceptable. In this way, Banister is one of those paraplegics who, as Wendell asserts, "have revolutionary things to teach about the possibilities of sexuality" (1997, 274). The materiality of Banister's life as sexual being is acknowledged, celebrated, and also the means by which a re-imagining of sexuality can occur *through* disability.

Dramaturgically, the pieces discussed here all sustain aesthetic challenges to traditional theater practice familiar to those historically adapted by feminist playwrights. The episodic nature of the performance, juxtaposing, for example, monologic pieces with more non-representational ones, makes for a nonlinear viewing experience, echoing movement within feminist theater to resist conventionally realistic representation and progressive plots.⁵ A resistance to these more traditional forms can likewise inform a disability aesthetic that resists social constructions of

physical evolution, progress, and normalcy by resisting Western theatrical convention. In form and content, these pieces invite the nondisabled members of the audience to consider new ways to perceive space, time, and the body, while not denying the materiality of those same bodily experiences as lived by disabled people.

More specifically, both "Go Figure" and "Employment" rely on Brechtian interventions into the theatrical viewing experience, including direct address to the audience and disrupting conventionally realistic representation. In "Go Figure," for example, two actors become a split subject to pass the single story back and forth; while it is Banister's experience, Scharf's presence suggests its connection to others. Scharf's readable physical and gender difference from Banister at once prevents us from universalizing Banister's experience and simultaneously compels us to consider how Scharf might have felt his own body similarly circumscribed by ideals of male beauty and masculinity. "Employment"'s rolling back the scenes to invite audience members to "replay" them in a different, more activist manner, works to create a similar alienation of the audience from a passive viewing experience. This referencing of fast-forward and rewind is a product of the age of television and video, pointing to the manner in which the Project also uses references to popular culture. Deconstructing the assumption that theater is only high culture, these references, like the comedy of the pieces, invite audience members to link their own experience and vernacular with those used by the disabled characters, thus further establishing a connection.

One final note about the performance context for these scripts: these scripts are typically performed in concert with other pieces created by members of the Project; in a typical performance, anywhere from eight to twelve pieces get performed, depending on the audience, size of the ensemble, venue, and amount of time available. While other pieces might be performed in between them, when all three are part of a performance, the scripts included here are generally presented in the following order: "Facts and Figures," "Employment," and "Go Figure." The order is purposeful; as Lipkin observed in a personal interview, "the experience of any performance is an emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and visceral journey. The arc of that journey is crafted carefully." As a result, "Facts and Figures" and "Employment" both come early in the performance. "Facts and Figures" foregrounds a history with which audience members may be unfamiliar, while "Employment" simultaneously embodies the concrete reality of job discrimination while engaging an audience's support through humor. "Go Figure," as one of the most intimate and emotionally challenging pieces, comes later in the performance.

Rosemarie Garland Thomson has called for disability to become a "universalizing discourse," invested in

asserting the body as a cultural text which is interpreted, inscribed with meaning, indeed *made*, within social relations of power. Such a perspective advocates political equality by denaturalizing disability's assumed inferiority, casting its configurations and functions as difference rather than lack. (1997, 282)

Toward that end, and as these pieces demonstrate, an emergent disability theater can simultaneously build upon and complicate the thematic and aesthetic interrogations feminist theater initiates with regard to other kinds of social identities. This might further encourage feminist theater to avoid the subtle re-inscriptions of normalcy encoded in a too commonly well-intentioned, albeit superficial, use of disability in theater. Go figure: crip culture can rescript feminist theater in ways that contribute to establishing disability and feminism as powerful allies in imagining a more expansive view of reality, onstage and off.

Facts and Figures **Joan Lipkin and The DisAbility Project**

Two groups of the ensemble

Odd numbers on stage left, even numbers on stage right. This piece can be done with as many as sixteen people, each taking their own line, or a smaller group with a doubling up on lines. There should be varying heights and levels among the groups. Each person has his or her factoid written on a piece of paper, preferably memorized. After the reading of the line, the paper is discarded in whatever way possible (crumbled, thrown to the floor, etc).

ENSEMBLE MEMBER ONE: That is so retarded.

ENSEMBLE MEMBER TWO: In medieval times, disabilities were seen as a curse from God.

THREE: The industry has been crippled.

FOUR: During witch trials, many of the women who were tried for witchcraft had disabilities.

FIVE: He's a lame duck.

SIX: Court jesters with physical disabilities were common entertainment through much of European history.

SEVEN: Those kids are such freaks.

EIGHT: Freak shows exhibiting the bodies of disabled men and women were common entertainment in the Victorian period.

NINE: He gave me such a lame excuse.

TEN: People with disabilities are the largest minority in the United States.

ELEVEN: Hey, four eyes!

TWELVE: In China, many children with visible disabilities are killed or abandoned at birth.

THIRTEEN: He/she is psycho.

FOURTEEN: People with disabilities are the most under-employed population in the country. Mostly because our transportation systems make it difficult for them to get jobs, or employers won't hire them.

FIFTEEN: You are so ADD.

SIXTEEN: Most people with disabilities live below the poverty line.

[At the word "below," the ensemble begins to bend over in whatever way possible. Then they begin to slowly rise up, with a collective hum, getting increasingly louder as they rise. When they are fully upright again, those people in the ensemble who can, begin to wave their fists in the air and emit a sustained roar. This comes to a collective stop. The ensemble takes several moments to breathe and transition. They move slowly into a brief contact improvisation with each other, touching and connecting in various places on their bodies.]

[beat]

ALL: *[to audience, with outstretched hands and arms where possible]*
Welcome to our world!

Employment **Joan Lipkin and The DisAbility Project**

Salesperson

Manager

Job Seeker (a woman using a wheelchair)

Wild Shoppers (As few as three, as many as you like)

Wild Shopper #1

Wild Shopper #2

Wild Shopper #3 (A man using a wheelchair)

Salesperson is found amid the Wild Shoppers. The roar of the shoppers pushes the Salesperson from amongst their midst. She runs into the Manager's office excited and flustered.

SALESPERSON: It's a jungle out there! *[Wild shoppers writhe, pull at various items, improvise comments and roar.]* I'm putting in for combat pay.

MANAGER: You're just a little tired.

SALESPERSON: I won't go back in there. *[Wild Shoppers roar and improvise comments again. Items of clothing go flying.]* I won't.

[She starts to sob.]

MANAGER: There, there . . .

SALESPERSON: Have you ever worked the post Christmas sale? [*More frenzy from the Wild Shoppers. Perhaps more roar. Sales Person sobs.*]
Post Christmas. Pre-Christmas. Columbus Day?!!! I need more help.

MANAGER: We're doing all we can. But in this economy, it isn't easy. They're paying \$8.50 an hour plus benefits at Taco Bell on Manchester. And \$9.00 at Triple A Dry Cleaning.

[*Salesperson continues to sob. In rolls Job Seeker in a wheelchair.*]

JOB SEEKER: Excuse me. I'm here about the job.

MANAGER: Oh, you must be looking for the sheltered workshop. It's at the other end of the mall.

JOB SEEKER: No, I meant the job here. The one that was listed in the paper.

MANAGER: Oh. There must be some mistake. We sell clothes.

JOB SEEKER: Yes, I can see that. And I wear them. That's why I'm here. I live to accessorize.

SALESPERSON: Fantastic! I love what you're wearing.

[*Manager pulls Salesperson aside to talk with her privately.*]

MANAGER: Excuse me. We can't hire her. It'll turn off the customers.

SALESPERSON: Oh, I don't know. She's more enthusiastic than most of the people we have working on the floor. And perky. You did say that perky was part of the job description. And she obviously loves clothes.

JOB SEEKER: [*to audience*] I love clothes. I never wear white after Labor Day.

MANAGER: It's not just that. The aisles are too crowded. She couldn't get through.

[*Wild Shoppers roar.*]

JOB SEEKER: I'd really like to work here. Really, I would.

SALESPERSON: And I'd like to do something but my hands are tied.

JOB SEEKER: [*to audience*] Can this situation be saved?

[*Everyone hums theme song from Jeopardy. A Wild Shopper breaks away from the group to offer an alternative scenario.*]

WILD SHOPPER #1: Excuse me. I have an idea. Could we roll this scene back a little?

[*The Wild Shopper, Salesperson, and Manager mime rolling back of time with hand gestures and vocalization. The scene resumes.*]

JOB SEEKER: I'd really like to work here. Really, I would.

SALESPERSON: And I'd like to do something but my hands are tied.

WILD SHOPPER #1: I have been here for an hour and a half and no one has offered to help. Or even said hello. What you need around here is more friendliness. Why couldn't she work as a greeter?

JOB SEEKER: [*To audience*] Hi. Hi. How ya doing? Thank you for coming. Welcome.

WILD SHOPPER #1: See? She's great.

MANAGER: I don't know. I'm not sure that something like that is in our budget.

WILD SHOPPER #1: Sheesh. Even Wal-Mart has a greeter. I'm not shopping here any more!

[Wild Shopper #1 goes back to crowd. Everyone hums the Jeopardy song again, this time a little faster. Wild Shopper #2 interrupts it before it ends.]

WILD SHOPPER #2: I know! I know! You say the aisles are too crowded? I agree. It is way too crowded in here. How about if she was a cashier? *[To audience.]* How about that?!

JOB SEEKER: *[To Audience]* Cha ching! Cha ching!

[The wild shoppers roar.]

SALESPERSON: We need to open up another register.

MANAGER: I don't know. It's a pretty demanding job. How do I know that she is responsible?

JOB SEEKER: Oh, I'm very good with money. You have to be when you love clothes as much as I do.

MANAGER: I'm sure you are *[to salesperson]*. But we'd have to make special arrangements for her. You know with the equipment and all. It could be expensive.

WILD SHOPPER #2: How expensive could it be? She already has her own chair!

[Manager is clearly noncommittal so Wild Shopper #2 goes back to crowd. At this point, Salesperson could ask the audience if they have any ideas and then bring them up to discuss them. Improv is involved. Job Seeker remains enthusiastic and Manager is uncomfortable and unconvinced.]

Alternative Ending #1

[Depending upon the audience's mood, a final suggestion could be taken from Wild Shopper #3]

WILD SHOPPER #3: You know, anyone who loves clothes as much as she does (and I must say, you look mahvelous) . . .

JOB SEEKER: Thank you, dahling.

WILD SHOPPER #3: Anyone who loves clothes as much as she does should be a personal shopper.

JOB SEEKER: Oh, yes. I love it! And I would love to spend somebody else's money for them.

[The Wild Shoppers roar.]

MANAGER: How would she get around?

JOB SEEKER: I got here, didn't I?

MANAGER: I don't know.

WILD SHOPPER #3: Well I do. [*to job seeker*] Here's my card. [*to manager*]
I'm with that little department store down the street.

MANAGER: Not blah-blah-blah?!

WILD SHOPPER #3: The very one.

MANAGER: And are you blee-blee-blee?!

WILD SHOPPER #3: Indeed, I am.

MANAGER: Oh no!

WILD SHOPPER #3: And I know talent when I see it. [*To job seeker*] My
car is out front. Shall we discuss the details over lunch? [*He leaves,*
and she follows.]

JOB SEEKER: Cha-Ching, Cha-Ching, Cha-Ching!

[*Wild shoppers roar, salesperson and manager look at each
other in disbelief.*]

Alternative Ending #2

JOB SEEKER: I could be a greeter, a cashier, a personal shopper and more.
Maybe you've just never worked with someone like me before. Please
think about it. You know, open your mind?

MANAGER: You're right. And I really will.

SALESPERSON: Just do it soon, please?!

[*The Wild Shoppers roar.*]

SALESPERSON: I need help fast!

Alternative Ending #3

[*After the audience has come up to propose several endings, the ensemble
needs to bring the scene to a strong close.*]

SALESPERSON: [*to Manager*] So, what do you think?

MANAGER: I'm not sure.

JOB SEEKER: Look, I could be a greeter, a cashier. [*Mention all of the
other things that have been proposed.*] Maybe you've just never
worked with someone like me before. Please think about it. You
know, open your mind?

MANAGER: You're right. And I really will.

SALESPERSON: Just do it soon, please?!

[*The Wild Shoppers roar.*]

SALESPERSON: I need help fast!

Go Figure

Katie Rodriguez Banister, Joan Lipkin, And Rich Scharf

Richard: a gay man

Katie: a woman using a wheelchair

Rich is alone on stage

RICH: You may not be able to tell, but I used to be quite the Barbie girl. Oh yeah, I always was a traditional little girl at heart. I enjoyed dressing up and all that went with it. From my first pair of panty-hose to my bouffant hair, shellacked in place with half a can of Aqua-Net. Remember how popular big hair was in the 80s? The bigger the hair, the closer to God. And with the make-up to match. The trick was to go to that borderline Barbie look without being sickening; I'm not sure I always succeeded. God, I can remember my college girlfriends and I dressing up to go out for the night with the boom box blaring, "no parking, no parking on the dance floor, baby."

[Rich starts to turn stage left as he says the following line.]

RICH: My favorite outfit was this gray cashmere sweater . . .

[Katie comes out from stage left as the following line is said in unison, the two of them facing each other.]

KATIE AND RICH: With my black leather mini-skirt and four-inch gray snakeskin pumps.

KATIE: That outfit said . . .

RICH: Look at me.

[Rich and Katie face back towards audience.]

KATIE: Why, I even won a wet t-shirt contest once at a bar, and the girl next to me dropped her drawers.

RICH: . . . and I still won!

KATIE: My first kiss was in sixth grade at the Kirkwood ice rink. After the rink closed, John, this absolute doll, called me over, put his lips on mine and then ran off. It was so cool!

RICH: I was stunned! When my dad came to pick me up, I felt like throwing up because I was sure he knew what I had done, that he could read it on my face!

KATIE: *[wryly]* And it's a good thing that dad didn't always know what I did as an adult. If there was a man I was attracted to . . .

RICH: *[Rich starts to move behind Katie]* with whom I wanted to be sexual . . .

KATIE: I just went for it. I liked being sexual,

RICH: and I certainly didn't have any problems finding willing partners.

KATIE: I figured . . .

[Rich is behind Katie by this time and they look at each other while saying the following in unison.]

KATIE AND RICH: God gave us our sexuality to be enjoyed, right?

[Rich returns to Katie's right side and faces her.]

KATIE: Well, I did worry about what people thought about me . . .

[They face each other during the following lines.]

RICH: Tramp.

KATIE: Slut.

RICH: Hussy.

KATIE: Trollop!

[Beat.]

RICH: Intern!

[They face the audience.]

KATIE: . . . and sometimes I would feel worse afterward, after I'd had sex with someone,

RICH: even though I got what I wanted!

[Rich starts to kneel at Katie's side.]

KATIE: But I had fun, too, you know?

[Rich is kneeling at Katie's side so that their heads are level with each other as the following line is said in unison.]

KATIE AND RICH: It felt powerful to be attractive!

KATIE: Then an auto accident brought my life to a screeching halt. I became a quadriplegic, and my life changed—ha—to say the least. I remember the first time I saw myself in the mirror at the hospital.

[Rich has sunk onto his knees by this point.]

RICH: I was devastated. I didn't look like me. I didn't even look like a female anymore. I felt more like an it.

KATIE: And I fought for my womanhood. I told my occupational therapist that I'm not leaving rehab until I can put on my own lipstick!

[Rich steps in front of Katie to face audience, as Katie turns to face upstage.]

RICH: An old boyfriend from high school came to visit me in the hospital. We had been a very active couple. He walked up to the bed, leaned over, and gave me a rose. Then we engaged in a major lip-lock session. I was in heaven. Thank God my hormones weren't paralyzed! But when we met again after I got out of the hospital, it was a disaster. It just didn't work. I was devastated again. And it was at that point that I realized that the life I had was no longer.

[During the following lines said in unison, Rich and Katie will rotate, lazy-susan style, with Katie ending up facing the audience and Rich behind her facing upstage by the end of the lines said in unison.]

KATIE AND RICH: No more wet t-shirts. No more pumps. And I miss my pumps, dammit. And no more sex.

KATIE: It's funny. You think there are certain things in life that you'll never accept. And then those things happen to you. And somehow you accept them or bust, I guess. So I slowly accepted the fact that this chair had become my world. My life. And a part of who I am. And somehow, I refused to give up. That's when I placed an ad in the singles paper: "petite, professional, outgoing, independent woman on wheels seeks male." I got over 30 letters! Although one man thought I drove around a lot.

[Again, Katie and Rich rotate as above; by the end of the following line said in unison, Rich will face the audience and Katie will be behind him, facing upstage.]

KATIE AND RICH: I did date two men, but they were disasters. So I just gave up.

RICH: So imagine my surprise, a few years later, when I met someone. And he expressed interest in me. And I said, "Oh no. You don't understand. I don't do that anymore. I can't date you. It's just not possible." Well, let me tell you, this man is patient. And over the course of a year and a half, he became my best friend, and I began to trust him, and I could no longer fight my feelings of attraction for him. So one day we were in the kitchen, and I said, "Pull up a chair and come sit by me." And we kissed. And kissed. For an hour and a half we kissed. Hey, I had to make up for lost time!

[By the end of the line Katie has turned to face the audience, even with Rich and to his right.]

KATIE: But I still kept my guard up. I mean kissing was fine, but obviously it couldn't go any further than that. Well, about a month later, we're at a friend's wedding, our sixth of seven that summer! And the good ole preacher was preaching,

RICH: "If you love someone, and you know it, grab a hold of them, and let them know it, too!"

[During Katie's line below, Rich will step upstage away from Katie and look at her; this has now briefly become Katie's story alone.]

KATIE: So I did. We didn't make the reception. Instead, we went back to my place and I let him know in no uncertain terms that I wanted to be with him. But as he was removing my tray, my foot pedals, and my shoes, I started crying,

RICH: "Oh God, what if this doesn't work? What if you're not satisfied? What if I can't do it?"

[By this time Rich has come up behind Katie.]

KATIE AND RICH: It was like I was a virgin again!

[the following lines will overlap slightly.]

KATIE: Well, I told you this guy was patient . . .

RICH: And he lifted me to the bed . . .

KATIE: And would position my legs, you know . . .

RICH: Move my leg if he needed to.

KATIE: And even though I'm paralyzed from the chest down . . .

RICH: I could feel the pressure of his hands on my breasts.

KATIE: And I could feel him inside me . . .

RICH: Kind of like a distant pressure.

KATIE: I could feel it in my head . . .

RICH: Like the tingling of a limb that has fallen asleep.

KATIE: And it was the same . . .

KATIE AND RICH: "Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God!"

KATIE: Just in different places now.

[*Rich comes out from behind Katie and stands to her left.*]

RICH: It's funny. Don't get me wrong—I'm still pissed to be in this chair.

But instead of becoming a permanent wall, this chair has helped to teach me about true love.

KATIE: And I'm having the best sex of my life.

[*Katie and Rich look at each other, then look at the audience.*]

KATIE AND RICH: Go figure!

Ann Fox is Assistant Professor of English and the Gender Studies Concentration Coordinator at Davidson College. Fox's early scholarship traced the rise of feminist sensibilities in American commercial theatre, with articles on this topic appearing in *Text and Presentation*. More recently, her work centers on disability and theatre. Fox and Lipkin have co-authored conference papers and an article in *Contemporary Theatre Review*. Her current study is on re-reading twentieth-century American drama through the lens of disability studies.

Joan Lipkin is the founding Artistic Director of That Uppity Theater Company in St. Louis, Missouri, where she created the *Alternate Currents/Direct Currents and Women CenterStage! Series*, *The DisAbility Project*, *Democracy on Stage*, and the *Nadadada Festival*, in addition to developing much of her own work. A playwright, director, screen and fiction writer, teacher and social activist, her award-winning work has been presented worldwide. For more information on her work go to www.uppityco.com and www.disabilityproject.com.

Notes

1. The plays mentioned here cover a wide range of feminist playwriting. Understandably, not all scholars would agree on their being classified as such. However, what is suggested by their use is that across the spectrum of feminist theater, however that enterprise is defined, there exists a pervasive use of disability images.

2. Daniel J. Wilson articulated this definition of a “disability aesthetic” during the National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute on Disability Studies at San Francisco State University in the summer of 2000.
3. Lipkin and her company have received numerous awards, including: a Missouri Arts Award, the Arts for Life Special Lifetime Achievement in Progress Award, and a Community Enhancement Award from the Governor’s Council on Disability.
4. “Facts and Figures” was originally developed by students at Davidson College working with Lipkin during a week-long residency, in March 2001.
5. We might think here of plays ranging from *Fefu and Her Friends* (Fornes 1990) to Ntozake Shange’s *Spell #7* (1979).

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