Navigating the Profession as a Disabled Theatre Artist

by Debbie Patterson

The transition from theatre student to theatre artist is a tricky one but it's especially tricky for those of us with disabilities. While I was privileged to be nondisabled for the first few decades of my career, my transition into disability has given me a little bit of insight that I would like to share.

My focus is mainly on the experience of being a performer, but I hope some of what I have to share is useful to other artists: directors, playwrights, designers, stage management and technicians.

If you are a person with an invisible disability you will need to decide if you want to disclose. This is a really personal choice and you should do what feels right for you. For some, it's a political issue: there is a sense of solidarity in aligning yourself with those who are obviously disabled and perhaps a sense of betrayal to not disclose. But like any aspect of identity, it is deeply personal and we should each feel free to define ourselves as we wish to be perceived.

There are pros and cons for disclosing and not disclosing a disability.

Choosing not to disclose will mean you will have to hide that aspect of your lived experience when you are working. If there are things you've learned through that lived experience that inform the story you're telling or the character you're portraying, you won't be able to discuss these in the rehearsal hall. If your interpretation of a character is challenged by the director, you won't be able to cite your lived experience in supporting your interpretation. In short, it means you will have to withhold a part of yourself from the work you're doing. You will not bring your full self to the work.

But on the plus side, not disclosing means that you won't be subject to able-ism within the casting process. There are directors who are afraid of working with disabled actors or who think disabled actors will be unreliable. You can avoid that particular red flag on your resume by not disclosing.

Disclosing your disability gives you the freedom to bring the truth of your lived experience into the rehearsal hall. You can access those experiences that inform the story you're telling. You can make space for the quirks or nonnormative aspects of your characters when you make space for the quirks or nonnormative aspects of yourself. You can request access supports if you need them and by requesting access supports, you can create a safe space for your colleagues to request the supports they need as well. This will allow them to bring their full selves to the work.

And on the other hand, of course disclosing means that you will be subject to ableism within the casting process. You might not get the gig because of your disability.

If you are “out” as a disabled person, you’ll want to develop an access rider that outlines all the things you need to do your job. Often you will need to tailor an access rider to the particular job. For example, if you have mobility issues you will want to negotiate for an accessible accommodation when working out of town. If a company lacks the resources to support all your access needs, you can decide how many of your access needs are non-negotiable and what you can manage without. But it’s wise to list any access supports you are taking care of yourself on an access rider so that there is a clear understanding of what your access needs actually are. It’s important to ensure the access rider is agreed to before you sign the contract.

In these negotiations, remember that what you bring is incredibly valuable: your lived experience of disability. The stories we tell in our culture about disability have been primarily created by people without disabilities for people without disabilities. These stories are flawed and inaccurate and limit our understanding of what it means to be human. You will have the opportunity to challenge the harmful stereotypes and tiresome tropes that misrepresent the experience of disability. This is important not only because public perceptions of disability need to be challenged but also because people who are not disabled now may well become disabled later. Almost all of us will have the experience of diminishment of our abilities through age, illness or injury. Our experience of disability allows people in our audiences to understand their own bodies in a more compassionate and integrated way.

You will often find yourself as the only disabled person in the room. This is a tricky position to be and you should avoid it if you can. As a performer, it’s incredibly difficult to represent disability, advocate for the accurate depiction of disability and to do your job as a performer all at the same time. If you can advocate for the inclusion of another disabled person in the room, as a director, stage manager, assistant director or dramaturge your job will be much easier.

It’s important to remember that many people have invisible disabilities that they are unwilling to declare. You may face barriers in your day-to-day work as an artist, but you must remember that the people around you are also fighting a hard battle. So even though you may feel like you’re the only disabled person in the room, you never know if someone else is struggling silently beside you. It’s important to remain compassionate and patient with your collaborators. Assuming you’re the only one struggling against barriers will get in the way of rich, productive, playful collaboration.

Finally, something you really need as a disabled theatre artist is the support and alliance of other disabled theatre artists. The best way to get that is to give it. You must advocate for other disabled artists, you must lift each other up. Educate yourself on the access needs of people with disabilities that are different from your own. Seek collaborations with other disabled artists, support their projects, promote their shows, celebrate their successes, recognize their achievements, be generous with your praise. I promise you it will make you a better artist.