

Disability Performance and Being in Good Relation to Disability in Your Practice By Dr. Jess Watkin

Hi, my name is Dr. Jess Watkin, and I am a Blind Disabled white settler Queer cis woman living in Ontario, Canada. I have been working as a Blind/Disability consultant, educator, and Dramaturg since 2016, and I particularly love to bring anyone into good relationship with Disability and Disability performance. When I use the term Disability I capitalize it to associate this identity with the political and interdependent Disability community. Disability is not a bad word, if we do not use it we erase the vibrant community of people who do use that word. When I write “good relationship with” I use that language intentionally to gesture towards the ongoing work unlearning ableism in the context of your life but also to Canadian performance. Being in good relationship with Disabled people means continuing to learn and engage with practices of oppression, intersectionality, racism, colonialism, and Disability. When I say “Disability theatre and performance” I am referring to performances with Disabled artists involved in the creative and production processes as artists or members of the core team. Disability performance is different than “accessible theatre,” which for me refers to theatre that is made accessible for an audience.

Respect and Dignity

Disabled people do not deserve to be pitied, looked down upon, or put on a pedestal. When you encounter a Disabled person outside of the theatre, I hope you offer them dignity and respect and do not project your internal biases and ableism onto them. Within the theatre, Disabled people deserve respect and dignity as well. This includes audience members, sure, that might be what you're the most familiar with. But I also think performers, producers, technicians, box office staff, volunteers, writers, etc. all can be and are Disabled people. Disabled people are present in every facet of theatre and performance, and by not acknowledging or understanding that their contributions to the culture are valuable then you are not truly seeking an equitable, inclusive, and diverse theatre culture and community.

Open Mind, Flexibility, Open Heart

As artists and creatives in the theatre and performance industry, we have ideas and visions of how we would like our work to be executed and received. Sometimes while working with Disabled artists and consultants they may invite different ways to think through theatrical problems. An example of this would be if you are a lighting designer, what can you do to support people who do not see a performance? The answer here is not *nothing*, but may take some shifting ideas around what you might consider the impact of lighting is for someone who interprets performance non-visually. I would suggest connecting with Blind consultants, Blind artists, and being flexible in the ways that your designs might be brought into an accessible practice. It is easier to unpack this idea with examples, however the rule of thumb is to ask questions, and ultimately truly listen to the answers and bring them into your understanding of your own practice. Be willing to shift your design, vision, practice to support a perspective and experience of performance that may be unlike your own.

Ask Questions...and then Listen

It is okay to not know something. This is the crux of Disability work, we (Disabled people/artists/scholars) do not expect everyone to understand everything all at once. The key here is the willingness to ask questions, be specific, and then listen and process the answers in relation to yourself. In my work as Disability consultant and educator I try to invite questions that might seem trivial, that you may think "I should already know the answer to this, I'm embarrassed to reveal I do not know," because the first step to finding out new information is acknowledging you do not know it and asking anyway. This is another important aspect of being in good relationship to Disability within performance: ask questions! And trust that the people you are asking them to will support your learning. It is not our responsibility as Disabled people to teach every nondisabled person about Disability, access, and everything between, but especially while working and being paid in the capacity to support performance work, asking the question and listening for the answer is the best way to move forward. If you want to know more about Disability, try reading, and my number one suggestion for folks who are brand new to Disability performance in Canada is to **attend a Disability event or performance**. Go and see on Zoom or in person how Disability culture and community *feels* and looks differently than traditional theatre--or not. Experiencing, listening, without making assumptions is a key to getting closer to good relationship with Disabled people and ultimately Disability performance in Canada.

Gratitude, Acknowledgement, and Compensation

Every part of my work is impacted by gratitude. It would take too long to write out everything that got me just to writing this piece, let alone the other things I've achieved. Everything I have done has been made possible by interdependence, which is a concept used widely in Disability studies that means that instead of doing things independently or individually, Disabled folks do things in relation to one another, community, and the world around us. The energy I get from one project infuses my next and vice versa, I am Blind and cannot read the words I am typing without accessibility from software I have no idea how to make. We all rely on hundreds of things to get us through each day, and so when coming into good relationship with Disabled people we express gratitude at every turn for where we are.

When it comes to the learning and value you may glean from Disabled artists, people, and consultants, it is important for me to emphasize that acknowledging them publicly in your work, programs, advertising materials, etc. is paramount to valuing the teachings you have been offered, and most importantly to compensate Disabled people for the work they do for you. Sometimes in my experience, I have found that theatre creators will prioritize the access for audiences over inviting disabled people in and paying them so that the entire team can understand how a show might impact and be received by Disabled people. It is important to compensate all Disabled folks involved in your work for their work, and to listen and learn from them moving forward.

For further information and resources please see: [Interdependent Magic: Disability Performance in Canada](#) edited by Jessica Watkin (Playwrights Canada Press [Interdependent Magic | Playwrights Canada Press](#))