

## Ableism in Theatre - My experience in navigating an inaccessible world

I started actively participating in theatre when I was 9 years old, after several years of dancing and singing at my local community center. I loved being able to interact with children in a way that didn't make my tongue swell in my mouth, or my fingernails dig into my palms. When I was with these other kids, we were all following the same choreography and reading from the same script, so I couldn't mess up. Right? As I went through middle school, my compulsions became more time consuming, and I wasn't able to follow along with my lines or my steps like the other kids could. I was distracted, yet wanted so badly to do everything perfectly. By the time I was in high school, I had to leave rehearsals often because I was overwhelmed and overstimulated, or in extreme pain. I no longer felt normal around these other kids because dancing can't hide a limp and a song can't hide a stutter. My mental and physical health and abilities continued to deteriorate through my adolescence, and now that I'm an adult who's pursuing a degree in theatre arts, I'm facing the question of whether or not I should continue in a field where I'm required to be able bodied and able minded to succeed.

Theatre is body and text centric; it requires its participants to engage in intensive work involving both in rehearsal and performance spaces. You have to be able to memorize large amounts of text, analyze subtext, connect physical movements to emotions, recognize perceivably normal social interactions, maintain physical strength and ability, consciously control your body and voice, in addition to many other physical and mental demands that are restrictive to people with a myriad of disabilities. I use a walking aid to relieve joint pain, and when I'm in rehearsal, it has to be abandoned because directors don't integrate it into my character, and it restricts my range of movement (even though it does improve my physical

abilities). The span of time that is given to memorize text isn't long enough for me, and I often face embarrassment or reprimand for not being off-book, despite emphasizing that I have processing and memory issues. Theatre has helped me understand relationships and social interaction more, but I still have a lot of difficulty understanding how I personally would react in situations, and how to apply that to a performance.

Beyond rehearsal and performance, which is mainly directed at actors, those involved in the technical aspects of theatre also face restrictions. The spaces in which tech is done aren't easy for an individual with disabilities to navigate. Catwalks and flies are narrow spaces that are almost always only accessible by ladder or stairs. You have to have a moderate amount of physical strength to work in a scene shop, and be able to stand, bend, and kneel for extended periods of time. Even aspects of tech like lighting and sewing require memory and tactile abilities. I've worked in tech as long as I've acted, and the physical demands have caused a great deal of frustration and disappointment, because tech is what I want to go into professionally. But if I have to use a cane, and can't put pressure on my knees, it's unlikely I'm going to find a space that I can work in. Even in UO's Hope Theatre, our catwalk is completely inaccessible to me; it is made of net, so I can't use my cane, and my ankles don't have enough strength to support me on an unstable surface on their own. The shop is more accessible than ones I've worked in in the past, physically, but I still have to ask for accommodations to make sure I don't cause myself intense pain, and frequently need help understanding the tasks I'm assigned.

My experiences in theatrical spaces are a microcosm of what I experience everyday as a person with disabilities. My environment is inaccessible, and while accommodations help, they aren't a solution. To improve the lives of people with disabilities, we have to start to reshape our

conversations about ability. We are not any less capable, our surroundings are just full of obstacles that make it so. Separate spaces don't need to be created, we can integrate accessibility into all of our spaces. As a theatre student, I hope to reform and reclaim theatre as a space for myself and other people with disabilities, as art is a form of healing and expression that everyone should have access to. The distribution of information and representation will allow us to bring our liberated selves onto the stage and into the wings; if I'm asked to leave my cane at the door in rehearsal, I am asked to leave myself there too.