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# Kirsty Johnston “Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism”

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of Ryan Cunningham’s “2-Spirit or Not to Spirit” and appears in Dénommé-Welch’s essay. Meanwhile, Metzger’s article looks at both the insularity of Québécois theatre and the spatial connectivity of webseries, probing the potential for community in the genre.

Community and connection, after all, is the unifying thread of these essays, however contentious. Multiple authors note how the Q2Q conference occurred in the wake of the Pulse shooting in Orlando in June of 2016. What struck me and many others about Pulse is that even as it laid bare the racism and queerphobia that has only flourished in the U.S. (and Canada) since its aftermath is, as Eury Colin Chang notes, an example of tragic communitas (186). The grief this event triggered in locations far from Florida points out that we are brought together by our collective oppression through colonial capitalism and its reverence for straight, cis, white maleness. As Cameron Crookston reminds us in “Passing the Torch Song,” “In addition to the common personal trauma of being disowned by one’s family, both queer youth and adults must live in a community that defines their identity in opposition to the very philosophical and political idea of ‘the family’ [...]. Yet the idea of a chosen family, as well as kinship-based rhetoric [...] has continuously been used within queer subcultures” (57). To (very loosely) paraphrase Sara Garton Stanley’s “A Queer Redo,” we may certainly not be one big happy family, but we’re still family.

If this were a vlog instead of a print review, I would cut to me lip synching for my life to the Sister Sledge drag standard “We Are Family,” because I should bring it back to performance somehow. The breadth of performance traditions included in this volume is commendable; everything from theatre to webseries to drag to performance art to protest to reality TV to identity and beyond makes an appearance. Itself a performance of queer theory, this is also an important document in its multiplicity of editors and range of scholarship styles employed, allowing for an expansive and contradictory look at a topic rarely centered and collected in such a prominent way in Canadian theatre and performance (1).

**JOHNSTON, KIRSTY**  
***Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism.***

London: Bloomsbury, 2018, 240 pp.

JESSICA WATKIN

What do you think of when you hear the words “Disability performance” together? I will not guess, because I know my answer may be different as a Disabled theatre artist in Toronto, but bringing attention to what we think of and how we consider Disability in performance, and specifically modern drama, is the crux of Johnston’s new contribution to the growing field of critical disability theatre studies. Johnston asks us to consider early on in the text: “how art is changed when we conceive of disability as an aesthetic value in itself. In particular, it

is worth asking how the presence of disability requires us to revise traditional conceptions of aesthetic production and appreciation” (5-6). This book decentres the familiar to subvert cultural assumptions of Disability and open up aesthetic, representational, and cultural possibilities of considering Disability content in modern drama plays, and Disability representation (Disabled performers in iconic roles).

Johnston has separated her book into straight two parts. The first, “Critical Survey of Disability Theatre Aesthetics, Politics, and Practices,” is a crash course in Disability Justice Movements and how Disability is understood as performance in the section “What is Disability Theatre?” and then is followed by an exploration of Disability tropes, aesthetics, and representations. She uses each chapter as a seed for which she plants and invites readers to water and grow the ideas on their own. This book offers a comprehensive and accessible introduction to how Disability is understood for a theatre studies context. Following the nuanced discussion of more than three models of Disability, in the second part Johnston invites essays from other strong Disability Theatre scholars and a Disabled remixing of a modern play (*The Glass Menagerie*, one of the main four pieces of modern canon taken up in this text). This book works to carve out useful and productive explorations of Disability, Disabled characters, and how Disabled artists can infuse Modern Drama, a period of time otherwise vacant of Disability-created arts.

I will admit I was originally hesitant to delve into a book discussing Disability plays that are written by nondisabled people, because Disability Arts advocates for Disability-written pieces, but this text offers readings that illuminate historically ableist pieces as places for learning where Disabled characters and performers can add value. For example, Johnston cites Ann M. Fox’s reading of *The Glass Menagerie*. Tennessee Williams, to my knowledge, isn’t a disabled person like his character Laura, and therefore does not know what her experience would be. But Johnston has chosen Fox to craft the argument that despite the ableist depiction not proving much for current 2019 Disability justice standards, it does say a lot about the strength and insights of Disabled people’s roles in society at the time of the piece. What Fox suggests, and ultimately what Johnston is getting at within the book, is that Disabled characters in modern drama offer insights into the worlds of Disability. Disabled characters deviate from the norm or the expected, they depict uncomfortable and irregular (nonnormal) experiences, which can reflect the Disabled people and their treatment in those moments of time.

Johnston embodies a concept known in Disability Studies as Interdependence: the practice of leaning on others and them leaning on you to work towards a collective goal. In the book, this is done by the second part, “Critical Perspectives” with two essays by two of Disability Arts Culture’s most prominent voices: feminist disability and theatre scholar Ann M. Fox, and Michael Davidson. This section also includes an interview with Graeae Theatre’s Artistic Director Jenny Sealey, who has been leading the world in their UK-based Disability Theatre. And finally, a short script by Disabled artists called *Shattering the Glass Menagerie*. This second part of the book is steeped in remixing and new critical readings of modern plays (Beckett, Brecht, Williams) that offer specific explorations on the Disability themes and characters. The interview with Sealey introduces the practical applications of including Disabled performers in modern drama, and then actually realized in the final section of the play script. Although it seems radical, including actual scripts and practicalities of theatre production in a scholarly book on theatre, it is natural and fluid in Johnston’s text.

Johnston is an established and influential Canadian scholar in Disability Theatre. Her first book, *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*, speaks to Disability Theatre (both led and representations of Disability in theatre). Her involvement in the Republic of Inclusion and other prominent Canadian explorations of Disability Theatre has kept her aware of what is happening locally. Her analyses in this book and beyond offer a nuanced and aesthetic-heavy understanding of what Disabled actors have to offer in a canon that lacks lived experience of Disability. Johnston's book fits in with a handful of other Disability Theatre books recently released, such as Petra Koppers's *Theatre & Disability* (part of Palgrave series meant to turn various theatrical themes into digestible and productive texts). Also significant is Tony McCaffrey's new book, *Incapacity and Theatricality: Politics and Aesthetics in Theatre Involving Actors with Intellectual Disabilities* which coinhabits Johnston's Disability aesthetic space with an international (New Zealand) fix of a small gap in Johnston's book: Intellectual Disabilities.<sup>1</sup> Johnston's text takes up physical and visible Disabilities thoroughly, for example the physical optics of Wheelchair users in Brecht's *Threepenny Opera*, but only touches briefly on neurodiversity explored in modern drama. Johnston speaks beside and with Disabled artist-scholars like Victoria Ann-Lewis and Carrie Sandahl when referring to actor training, dramaturgy, and the politics of representation, and within these sections discussions a question rises for me: How do we consider "quality" within the concept of Disability in Theatre?

This text largely takes up aesthetics and the critical value of Disability, particularly when it comes to Nondisabled performers playing Disabled characters. Johnston and the other contributors identify the undisputable *need* both ethically and aesthetically for Disabled performers to embody Disabled characters throughout the canon. This reminds me of Mia Mingus's concept of "Access Intimacy" meaning that Disabled people have a familiarity with other Disabled people because of their lived experiences of Disability. In terms of aesthetics and performance techniques, this suggests that a Disabled performer would know intimately how to perform a Disabled character. Despite this simple concept, the contributors to this book identify that "cripping up" (nondisabled actors playing Disabled characters) is commonplace. This is an important distinction for both scholars and practitioners within the theatre field as an argument for increased access for Disabled performers.

This is an important text for both Canadian theatre scholarship and practice, but also for theatre historiography. It begins to develop a critical disability lens for otherwise lacking canonical pieces (similar to other examinations by marginalized groups: Indigenous, Feminist, Black communities etc.), and will influence the future of teaching, producing, and adapting modern drama for and by Disabled artists.

## Notes

1 In Canada we use the term Neurodiversity instead of Intellectual disability.

## Work Cited

Mingus, Mia. *Leaving Evidence*. [www.leavingevidence.wordpress.com](http://www.leavingevidence.wordpress.com). Web. 17 Oct. 2018.