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Stepping Out of the Stream: How Theatre Needs to Adapt for Disabled Audiences

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Stepping Out of the Stream

How Theatre Needs to Adapt for Disabled Audiences

By
Elissa Weir

Who am I and what have I researched?

- I am deaf and majoring in drama and communications, media & film.
- Conducted interviews with audience members for University Player's *Stream You Step In*, a series of short digital plays performed in 2020.
- These digital plays and the subsequent interviews brought to my attention how much more accessible they were for not just able-bodied audiences, but for disabled audiences, including myself.
- The lessons of accessibility we have learned from digital theatre can be applied to in-person theatre.





Universal Design in Theatre Spaces

What is Universal Design?

Designing with the intent to make something accessible to all, regardless of age, ability, gender, colour, etc.

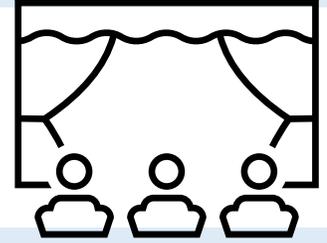
Problems with Universal Design

"Because design is a value-based activity ... not all human variations straightforwardly count as part of the universal. When the content of the universal is unspecified, UD can slip into vague notions of "all" or "everyone" that assume normative users and de-center disability. " (Hamraie)

Riki Entz, a disability consultant on *The Stream You Step In* notes that being accessible to everyone all of the time is not possible, and that some accommodations that help some make the experience inaccessible to others. A simple example would be that some see better with lights on, whereas others might see better with them off.

Given that theatres are already struggling to make general accessibility, it might be more to the point to have more individual performances be accessible to more specific needs. And with digital theatre, more of those specific needs can be catered to simultaneously.

Lesson 1: Relaxed Theatre



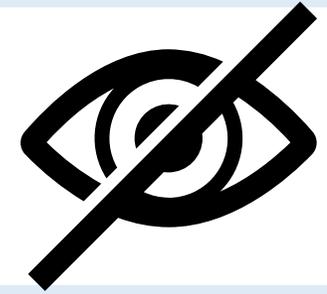
Digital

- Inherently relaxed.
- Theatre etiquette is non-existent
- One can talk, eat and drink, get up and walk around, or leave the room.
- Other examples: tics and stimming can be done without fear of scrutiny from others.

In-Person

- Continuing online streaming options even when theatres open to full capacity again.
- Normalisation of relaxed performances in-person (Even non-disabled interviewees liked the more relaxed format)
- Theatre Passe Muraille has been offering relaxed performances for select shows

Lesson 2: Audio Description and Vision Impaired Accessibility



Digital

- Separate stream with AD
- AD that considers the concept of "theatre in the head".
- Pre-show recording to describe set, costume, and actors beforehand.
- At home: stream is physically closer to audience and can be projected to larger TV screens to help those with low vision.

In-Person

- Continuing online streaming options so that AD could be implemented, and screen size and brightness can be tailored to specific needs
- More shows written and designed specifically for blind and vision impaired audiences.



Hou, David. "Dante Jemmott and Alex Bulmer deliver a unique take on Shakespeare's story of star-crossed lovers." *Now Toronto*, 18 September, 2021, <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/stage/stratford-review-r-j>

Pre-pandemic in-person example:

R+J adapted by Ravi Jain, Christine Horne and Alex Bulmer

The show had a pre-show podcast to establish set, costume and stage, as well as playbill information.

Thomas Ryder Payne, the composer and sound designer for the show, created sound design that helped suggest action on stage.

Lesson 3: Closed Captioning and Sign Language



Digital

- CC can be added on pre-recorded digital performances
- CC can be added live by copy and pasting sections of script or by a stenographer should the performance include elements that vary per performance

In-Person

- Using resources such as GalaPro (though not ideal for CC)
- Continue online streaming options so that CC could be implemented on-screen
- Projecting CC on stage during in-person performances
- Incorporating ASL performers into performances



Sharp, Bronwen. "Horatio in *Prince Hamlet*". *The Georgia Straight*, 24 January, 2019, <https://www.straight.com/arts/1192521/silence-speaks-volumes-prince-hamlets-bracingly-original-take-shakespeare>



Katz, Dahlia. "From left to right: Corinna Den Dekker, Dawn Jani Birley, Yan Liu and Daniel Durant in *The Black Drum*, which combines dance, movement, signed music and a rich visual design." *CBC*, 22 June, 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/entertainment/black-drum-deaf-musical-1.5181760>

Pre-pandemic in-person example:

Prince Hamlet adapted by Ravi Jain and *The Black Drum* written by deaf writer Adam Pottle. Both shows are examples of ASL being ingrained in the text and/or performance of the show, and the performers using ASL, rather than having separate interpreters.



Katz, Dahlia. "Iphigenia in *Iphigenia and the Furies (on Taurian Land)*". Passe Muraille, 2022, <https://www.passemuraille.ca/21-22-season/iphigenia/>

Planning for the Future

More theatres and companies should strive to include more accessible options for their shows. Digital theatre has shown us how many methods of accessibility can be achieved via digital platforms and modern technology. It has never been easier to accommodate disabled audiences in theatre.

Theatre Passe Muraille has already bridged this gap between digital and in-person accessibility, having a disability consultant on staff, and with *Iphigenia and the Furies (On Taurian Land)* there were plans for accommodations when it had been scheduled for in-person and for when it ended up becoming digital.

This research will be reformatted and made into a video essay for students taking Introduction to Theatre I so that future academics, performers, and creators in drama can have an overview of the underrepresented topic of disability in theatre and theatre spaces.

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