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Creating Inter-Abled Movement Spaces

Arts practices and institutions have undergone massive changes in the last decade with respect to diversity, equity and inclusion. More diverse voices are being uplifted in arts spaces, and entire seasons are curated with these principles in mind. Even with the rising awareness around racial and cultural equity, there continues to be an unnecessary and pervasive issue of ableism and accessibility with respect to movement pedagogies. For all the talk about access and equity, core elements across many pedagogies center only able-bodied individuals, creating curriculums incompatible with physical disability. With physical concepts like “neutral” and “balanced” ubiquitous across multiple physical theatre pedagogies, it is no wonder when we look at the physical landscape of our ranks we encounter a makeup of unintentional, but nonetheless effective, ableist gatekeepers, with those unable to perform the constructed physical model excluded through lack of access. This article explores how this problem self-perpetuates, and offers some insights to begin to intentionally break down barriers to access in physical pedagogies.

When discussing disability, it's helpful to understand the different models under which the term disability is defined, two of which are the medical and social models. The social model came about from a document published in 1976 titled “The Fundamental Principles of Disability by the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation” (UPIAS). The document states: In our view it is society which disables physically impaired people. Disability is something imposed

on top our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society. (NDACA).

This framework challenges the medical model of disability, in which “disability is perceived as an impairment in a body system or function that is inherently pathological” (Olkin). The medical model places the burden on the person to “be cured” of their impairment or remain marginalized in a society not designed for their needs, while the social model places a distinction between *impairment* and *disability*, the latter of which is imposed through societal and institutional barriers designed to center wholly on the able bodied experience. While passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 helped ease this burden on disabled folks, there are still many spaces which are not accessible to enter, let alone work in for many disabled people. From historic buildings with flights of stairs and no elevators, inadequate passage through restaurants that don’t accommodate mobility devices, and stores that spray perfume or other scents that can trigger severe allergies, the list of a casual and public denial of access is wider than most people recognize. When we zoom in to our own physical training grounds, we see these same issues pervade our pedagogies, simply through assumption of ability that reinforces itself by excluding artists that can’t uphold the physical model. In her essay “The Tyranny of Neutral”, Carrie Sandahl writes, “Bodies are considered damaged physically and emotionally from the process of living, and those bodies capable of cure are suitable actors. Disabled bodies, though, cannot be cured” (Sandahl and Auslander 262). The “cure” Sandahl refers to is the concept of the neutral body, versions of which can be found in a wide range of acting methods. The assumption that a “neutral body” (i.e. symmetrical, controlled, efficient) is not just possible for all actors but

necessary continues to exclude performers that are not symmetrical, not always efficient, as is the case with many disabled bodies.

Examining the root of physical biases across movement pedagogies is outside the scope of this short essay. I will focus on the teachings of Jacques Lecoq, whose methods I trained in when I earned my MFA from the Pig Iron School in Philadelphia. While I reference this training specifically, it should be noted that the same ideas and assumptions are found in multiple pedagogies, which you may see reflected in your own training and curriculum. In his seminal text *The Moving Body*, Lecoq several times comes very close to the transformational and radical act of recognizing there is not a physical mold for a peak performer but continues to return to the bias of physical ability either implicitly or explicitly. When speaking about Neutral Mask he talks about the need for physical “error” in character work, saying, “Error is not just acceptable, it is necessary for the continuation of life, provided it is not too great. A large error is a catastrophe, a small error is essential for enhancing existence” (Lecoq 21). From this statement, Lecoq asserts that idiosyncratic movements are necessary for rich characters but will distract if they deviate too much from the (presumably) able norm. Where does this leave an actor with a permanent limp, or one that uses a mobility device? Are they not then capable of creating a rich character in their own body? And who is the arbiter of error?

Before throwing the whole practice away, it is worth investigating our objectives when teaching a practice such as Neutral Mask. Lecoq talks about the Neutral Mask being free from “inner conflict”, putting the actor in a state of “discovery, openness, freedom to receive” (Lecoq 36-38). If this is the state to which we are trying to unlock for our students, it should not matter if that student uses a wheelchair or has physical asymmetry, which has little bearing on one’s

ability to discover and receive. With this objective at the fore, prescriptive physicality becomes less important and can further be aided by intentional verbal cues leaning toward imagery that can more easily be interpreted individually. With some conscious reframing, the principles of Neutral Mask can be recast to benefit all bodies, widening the lens through which this work was conceived. This extends to Neutral Mask principles like *The Arrival*, in which performers are working toward physical grounding and openness; “balance” and “symmetry” are almost always a part of this conversation. Stripping physical cues that lean toward symmetry allows a more individualized approach that doesn’t assume every body can position itself the same way..

Verbal cues that lean into more universal bodily understandings (expansion, grounding, and directional breathing, for example) can loosen the narrow definition of ‘neutral’ as it is found in Lecoq’s work. Similarly, framing “*The Journey*” as an exploration of an individual body’s relationship to and reflection of space is far more useful than critiquing how a student’s body is or is not conforming to a mold. That mold was developed in the early 20th century, during an age of huge global industrialization and a near obsessive focus on worker efficiency and optimization, a connection also discussed in Sandahl’s “Tyranny of Neutral” essay (Sandahl and Auslander).

However rigid Lecoq’s work can be, a flip side is his exploration into *mimodynamic*. He says, when speaking of physicalizing colors:

We can see neither the form nor the movement of a color, nevertheless the emotion in which they arouse may set us in *motion*—even in *emotion*. We try to express this particular emotion through *mimages*, through gestures which have no reference point in the real world. (Lecoq 46)

From this perspective, Lecoq recognizes that this part of the work is inherently interpretive, impossible to set rigid rules around, and therefore more accessible. A few years ago, I worked with a student that had a severe back injury requiring surgery. When he entered my movement class, he was at the beginning of several months of wearing a highly restrictive back brace that gave him no access to his core. We met before the class started and he expressed worry that he wouldn't be able to participate. I assured him that he could participate as much as he was comfortable, and we were both happily surprised at how his body began to translate mimodynamic work. His distal ranges lit up, creating expressive, interesting shapes in his limbs and head. He was sometimes silly, often transfixing as he translated materials, elements, colors through his body, finding nuance and character through abstraction. Sometimes just his head and neck engaged, sometimes his hands. His "restriction" soon became a playground, an exploration into "what if," totally devoid of prescription. By showing up exactly the way he was, this student was able to not only participate, but became a leader in his ensemble, diving in and creating magic with the access his body had. Mimodynamic did not have to be adapted for his body, allowing him to access the work in a way unique to him and rich with possibility.

What I am proposing is not an abandonment of what makes our work useful, but rather an expansion of it. Focusing on ways in which we as educators can reach more students through movement can only benefit our field. What this transformation entails will vary for each of us, but considering some fundamental shifts can help lay the groundwork for a more accessible room. Lecoq work focuses heavily on the theme of play, which is an excellent starting point for any physical space. I have begun using the term *landscape of play* to refer to the unique ways in which an ensemble's bodies interact with their environment and each other, not the ideal to

which I hope they are able to conform. To dig into the theme of play as a vehicle for an accessible room, I am a big fan of exercises like Open Canvas—in which a facilitator leads the ensemble in a 3-5 minute physical improvisation based on an abstract theme—that build ensemble and improv skills and encourage students to authentically respond to their own ensemble’s landscape of play without prescription. Finding ways in which students can physically explore in safe containers builds the capacity of the ensemble to creatively work with their peers, exemplifying what Paolo Freire calls “problem-posing education” in which “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves” (Freire 64) (emphasis Freire). Allowing the group to explore their unique landscape of play in facilitated physical improvisation encourages empowerment of one’s positioning in the ensemble, by investigating where their unique embodiment contributes to the whole in a way no other group of humans could possibly achieve. To facilitate through this lens, providing access in physical explorations opens up possibilities for all. For example, I have previously used chairs scattered about the playing space when I know I have students in need of physical resting spots. Meeting students where they are not only promotes inclusivity but creativity as well, in this instance allowing for simple levels as a catalyst to unlock ideas. Moreover, far from being a burden, disabled bodies have the capacity for infinite possibility specifically *because* of their impairments. Adapting to living in a disabled body gives all sorts of creative options for movement and expression that otherwise able-bodied performers wouldn’t think to investigate.

To illustrate this point and to offer a tangible model of what it means to be a disabled mover, I turn to disabled choreographer and dancer Alice Sheppard, founder of Kinetic Light

Dance Company, who uses her wheelchair and crutches to choreograph completely singular performances, creatively investigating the possibilities inherent in her particular impairment and those of her collaborators. Of this she says, “My chair is my body” and goes on later, “My crutches and wheelchair are not tools that compensate for my impairment...I understand these starting points as embodiments, each of which has different movement possibilities” (Wong 165-66). To watch some of her work is to witness a masterclass on integrating one’s mobility devices into deeply virtuosic choreography. In one dance, Sheppard is joined by collaborator Laurel Lawson performing a duet in specially crafted wheelchairs that ends with Sheppard on her back in her chair, using her feet to balance Lawson in the air in their own wheelchair in an incredible lift (“Alice Sheppard: Disability Is an Art.”). Sheppard’s work directly challenges the assumptions of what disabled bodies can do and reminds us what is gained when the word “possibility” replaces “prescription” as the central theme of physical embodiment. Sheppard saying “*my chair is my body*” implies it is not merely a tool or cumbersome extension to be worked around, but a necessary part of her through which her creative lens is channeled. When taken this way, it becomes easy to see how moving *differently* is a small bridge to moving *creatively*, a viewpoint largely unconsidered in our society.

Director and intimacy choreographer Carly D.W. Bones shared with me, “everyone is already in the room,” meaning she approaches rehearsal spaces imagining she is going to encounter all kinds of different needs, backgrounds and opinions, and so she designs her rehearsals with that in mind. She uses Universal Design concepts, which are defined as “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability” (Center

for Excellence in Universal Design), where the physical needs of the space are also considered along with content delivery. Things like planning water breaks, arranging comfortable seating where possible, and creating guidelines around wearing scents in the studio are all easy preparations that can have a positive impact on the learning environment. The Arts and Cultural Accessibility Hub offers a more exhaustive list that can help you tailor your own room (“Topic Category: Spaces”). Rather than imagining the students that walk into our spaces are able-bodied simply because they are there, imagine you will be working with both disabled and able-bodied students, students with differing sensory needs, and more, and see how the way you operate in the room, your lesson plan, your approach might all differ with this perspective. Pre-class surveys and daily check-ins and check-outs can serve as a starting point and continual gauge of your students’ needs, further crafting a responsive room and can allow you to fine-tune the landscape of play as it is, and as it fluctuates from day to day (“Designing Accessible Movement Spaces”).

More often than not, simple re-framing and an openness to creating a space that commits to access can be radical acts in building inter-abled movement spaces. To reference Lecoq, “The teacher must be prepared, at every moment, to question his own approach, to get back to seeing the world with freshness and innocence, to avoid imposing clichés” (Lecoq 48). With this sentiment at the fore, it becomes then impossible not to move this work forward, not to continue to break down and break open our practices, but instead to interrogate the *why* behind the work and empower ourselves to expand our vision for what this work does and who it is for.

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