

Candidate 4 evidence

Disability in theatre: Are Actors no longer able to act?



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Over the past couple of years there has been a great movement towards more diversity in theatre, with vast improvements being made against discrimination for someone's gender or ethnicity. Yet far too often representation in disability is brushed aside. In 2022, 22% of the British population had a disability. (14.6 million)¹ Despite this, 95% of disabled characters are played by able-bodied actors.² This highlights a clear problem with representation of disability and proves UK theatre still has a long way to go before it is truly diverse. Gregory Doran, the RSC's artistic director states that he believes that if Richard III is cast as an able-bodied person, it "would no longer be acceptable."³ However, he contrasts this by saying "I do not want to get to the point where we only cast Scottish murderers as Macbeth, Danish princes as Hamlet and morbidly obese alcoholics as Falstaff."⁴ This clearly highlights an interesting debate about diversity and disability. If only disabled actors can play disabled characters, where can the line be drawn? At what point does the freedom of diversity trap actors in roles where they are unable to 'act' and instead just play a version of themselves?

For the first time ever, the Royal Shakespeare Company cast a disabled actor, Arthur Hughes, in the role of Richard III in a production which opened June 2022. This is a huge step for disability in theatre as it provides not only representation, but a deeper level of understanding of disability to the performance. Director of Richard III, Gregory Doran, states 'What I do know, rehearsing Richard III, is that by drawing upon his lived experience of disability, Arthur Hughes adds a completely different perspective to the role. It can only enhance the performance and impact of the production.'⁵ This highlights the importance of including

¹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602/>

² <https://harvardpolitics.com/disabilities-in-performing-arts/#:~:text=One%20in%20four%20Americans%20adults,played%20by%20able%2Dbodied%20actors.>

³ <https://news.sky.com/story/only-disabled-actors-should-play-richard-iii-says-outgoing-royal-shakespeare-company-boss-gregory-doran-12606579>

⁴ <https://news.sky.com/story/only-disabled-actors-should-play-richard-iii-says-outgoing-royal-shakespeare-company-boss-gregory-doran-12606579>

⁵ <https://news.sky.com/story/only-disabled-actors-should-play-richard-iii-says-outgoing-royal-shakespeare-company-boss-gregory-doran-12606579>

disabled actors in theatre. It gives them the opportunity to shed a new light on characters with a disability that wouldn't receive the same understanding if they were played by an able-bodied actor.

The trailer for the RSC production of Richard III is subtle yet confrontational. It begins with Arthur Hughes standing dimly lit with his back facing the audience, so they can only see the faint outline of his body. Hughes slowly turns to face the audience, revealing his foreshortened arm. There is complete silence and Hughes stands in the spotlight, allowing the audience to stare at his unique body. He stands with piercing eye contact into the audience, drawing them in and making them feel uneasy, yet enticed. This is hugely effective as before any dialogue has happened, the audience has already made several judgements about the character. Having Richard stand in such a strong, confrontational way even though he is in a vulnerable position is incredibly powerful as it demonstrates to the audience that Richard will not let his disability hold him back. Casting Hughes in this role allows this sense of confidence and strength to be brought to Richard as he has greater understanding of how it feels to have a disability, instead of a non-disabled actor with no experience of disability playing him as fragile or weak.

In many performances of Richard III, Richard is covered in clothes, almost as if he is being shielded from the audience. This is especially notable in Anthony Sher's 1984 performance of Richard III where he is dressed in a black bodysuit with gloves and boots, showing very little skin to the audience. He wore a large cape which weighed him down and made him move in a laboured, uncomfortable way. This portrays Richard as weak, almost as if he is hiding from the audience due to his disability.

Hughes' version takes a different approach to Richard's character. He dresses in revealing clothing to show off his disability, instead of hiding it. He wears a leather gilet, leather trousers, big brown boots and sometimes he even goes bare chested. His movements aren't timid and small, but instead he swaggers around the stage with bold gestures, showing his confidence and authority despite his disability. At moments he even takes his bold persona to the next level by flirting with Queen Anne. This confidence that Hughes brings to Richard is clearly displayed when Richard is trying to persuade the court to betray his brothers. He boldly runs around the stage, leaping onto the table and throwing one of his arms into the air in a powerful manner. He yells out to the audience, confronting them as if they are part of the courtroom too. Hughes' voice is strong and powerful, yet there is a playful tone too which allows the audience to feel intimidated, but also respect him.

The Stage, Wars of the Roses state, "Arthur Hughes makes a gripping Richard, a charismatic and physically forceful presence."⁶ This captures the essence of Hughes' Richard as someone who is a powerful and ambitious, not a bitter, weak villain as he is often portrayed in other performances. Hughes' powerful, performance disrupted tradition and challenged people's ideas and perception of disability. It is refreshing to see a new, realistic interpretation of a character that many people with disabilities will be able to relate to and understand. This is why it is so important to cast people with disabilities in disabled roles as they are able to strip away myths and stereotypes about disability and provide the raw truth.

Director Gregory Doran's late husband Sir Antony Sher took the role of Richard at the RSC back in 1984. He was an able-bodied actor, whose performance was commended by many. The New York Times stated, 'Sometimes Mr. Sher deploys the crutches as if he were a manic

⁶ <https://www.rsc.org.uk/press/releases/first-look-video-of-arthur-hughes-as-richard-iii-released-further-casting-announced>

pole-vaulter, leaping about the stage like a maimed, mutant grasshopper. The result is an uncommonly fearsome villain whose grotesque deeds and distorted physique are accompanied by an aura of sado-masochistic sexuality.⁷ This shows how powerful the performance of an able-bodied actor can be when portraying disability. Therefore, as long as research is done to gather their own understanding of the role, able bodied actors can successfully portray disability.

It is incredibly difficult to compare the performances of Sher and Hughes' interpretations of Richard, as they both have found different ways to connect to Richard and bring his character to life. Yet, Doran told the Times 'Tony's performance would probably not be acceptable' in today's society. Doran talks about his decision to cast Hughes as Richard and says, "Shakespeare's Richard is famously described as a 'bottled spider' or a 'bunch-backed toad.' These insults are hurled, not at an actor wearing a prosthetic, but at someone who has a lived experience of that prejudice"⁸ This explains the importance of casting disabled people in disabled roles, as they have a genuine connection with the characters and what they must experience, which leads to a more authentic and educational performance.

However, Actor Simon Callow, in a letter to the Times, disagreed over disabled casting. He states that, "The theatre is a gymnasium of the imagination. Both actors and audiences stretch their imaginations there. Remove that element and you have a mere moving photograph".⁹ This highlights a crucial argument with only casting disabled actors in disabled roles, as there is no clear place to draw the line. It can be argued that the magic of theatre is that it is far from reality where there are no boundaries on who people are or what they can be. So, enforcing tight restrictions on who is allowed to perform limits this.

⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/06/26/theater/stage-london-quartet-of-shakespeare-royalty.html>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0tkmZDhjWts>

⁹ <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/times-letters-the-gap-year-resilience-and-university-access-rm3sb0st5>

Overall, Arthur Hughes' charismatic performance of Richard III shows how powerful casting disabled actors in disabled roles can be. Whilst Hughes' acting alone is impressive, it is enhanced by his deep connection to Richard through his shared experiences of disability. The world's view on disability is shifting, this shift could be what is encouraging theatre practitioners to make changes to their casting to ensure their plays stay relevant. This is beneficial, as it provides a level playing field for those who have experienced prejudice in the past. However, just because this particular performance was positively impacted by having a disabled actor, this does not mean every actor should be disabled playing Richard. Each actor can bring something new and will be able to relate to Richard in a different way even without a disability.

Another play which explores interesting ideas about disability is director Sam Gold's interpretation of Tennessee Williams' 'The Glass Menagerie,' which started in March 2017. The play follows the tale of a man reminiscing about the family he abandoned in the post-Depression era in St. Louis. His sister Laura is described as having a subtle limp, however, Gold's spin on the classic play sees Maddison Ferris play Laura. Due to muscular dystrophy disorder, Ferris uses a wheelchair. Instead of the "hardly noticeable" defect written in the original play, Gold decided to cast Laura in a wheelchair, therefore drawing the audience's attention to her disability. When asked about his decision to do this, he said "*The Glass Menagerie* is one of the few plays in the canon where there's a character with a mobility disability, and I'd never seen it done with an actor with a mobility disability. I thought that it would be a shame to do the play again and not give that opportunity to an actor that has a mobility disability."¹⁰ This highlights his belief that giving disabled people opportunities in theatre is crucial to fair representation.

¹⁰ <https://www.buzzfeed.com/louispeitzman/how-an-actor-with-a-disability-is-helping-to-transform-a>

One particularly memorable scene in the performance which highlighted Laura's disability was when Laura approached the staircase in her wheelchair. She collapsed the top half of her body over her legs and placed her hands on either side of her on the ground, putting her weight on them. She raised herself into the air and used her hands to shuffle over to the steps, where her mother then helps her to tackle them. The exercise lasted for an excruciating two minutes where the audience had to sit helplessly watching her struggle. This was powerful, as it showed her in such a vulnerable position, which let the audience acknowledge how daily tasks can be such a struggle for those with disability. Ferris' performance also allowed her to show determination and strength, even when faced with obstacles she did not let her disability hinder her. This shows how important casting disabled actors in disabled roles is, as it allows them to highlight the struggles they face, but also show their strength on how they deal with it.

One critic argued 'I found her struggle alarmingly distracting enough to throw the whole play off balance.'¹¹ Another argued that the performance was 'exploitative.' This supports the absurd claim that by publicly displaying a disabled body it is somehow different to displaying an able-bodied actor. Critics complaining about the display of a disabled body are, in short, suggesting that a disabled person allowing their body to be looked at is wrong, when in reality it is crucial for representation of all body types on stage.

However, Casting Ferris did cause some awkward moments in the play, for example, in the script Jim asks Laura to sit on the floor with him. Albeit this is a strange request in the first place, it is only made stranger asking this of someone who is in a wheelchair, as Laura must uncomfortably shuffle herself out of her chair and onto the floor. Later in this scene Laura

¹¹ <https://observer.com/2017/03/the-glass-menagerie-review-sam-gold-sally-field/>

and Jim famously dance around the room together, however, due to Ferris' disability, Gold directed them to stay on the floor and only dance with their upper bodies. This was awkward and potentially distracting to watch, and it arguably detracted from the beauty of the storyline. It felt like a potentially powerful scene was almost a satire. This being said, the awkwardness was not a result of Ferris' disability, just a reflection of the fact that theatre companies still have a long way to go with representation of disability as they need to learn how to make disabled actors feel comfortable when performing. The only way they will be able to learn about how to properly represent disabled characters, whilst ensuring actors are comfortable, is to continue to cast disabled characters in disabled roles.

By Casting Ferris, it allows her to show a different, stronger, side to Laura that doesn't often get to be shown, as able-bodied actors try focussing on portraying her limp as a weakness. Gold argues "She doesn't have to act like she's vulnerable, because the vulnerability is in the prop — there's a wheelchair that gets to do that vulnerability for her. She gets to have agency, and she gets to be the kind of woman I'd rather see onstage."¹² By casting a disabled actor in this production, it allows the audience to see more depth to Laura, which makes her character feel much more human and enjoyable to watch. It helps defeat the damaging stereotype that disability makes a person weak, and Ferris instead uses it to show a position of strength.

Laura is agoraphobic, which means she has an extreme fear of leaving her house and being in open spaces. Her constant feeling of isolation from the rest of the world is something that many with disabilities relate to. Gold's clever decision to cast Laura as disabled almost brings her agoraphobia to light in a physical way as it shows what is going on in Laura's mind in a

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/01/magazine/sam-gold-the-glass-menagerie-the-experimentalist-on-broadway.html>

way that can be viewed and understood by the audience. This intensifies the connection between the audience and Laura as instead of just viewing her as weak, they get an understanding of why it is difficult for her.

There are, however, some notable criticisms of Gold's casting decisions of Laura. Rex Reed wrote 'Sam Gold must have considered it larky and bold to cast an actress who has actual muscular dystrophy victim in the role, but it's a gimmick that backfires. Since Laura can't even walk, it no longer makes sense for Amanda to send her out on errands.'¹³ This argument implies that casting a disabled actor can impact the storyline of plays as it may change what characters are able to physically do. Arguably, this could frustrate the audience, especially in well-known classics such as the 'Glass Menagerie.'

However, the claim that someone's physical appearance can have that much of an impact on the story is rather far-fetched. The beauty of theatre is how it enables audiences to use their imagination. Gold's production had almost no set, with no sofa and minimal props, meaning the audience had to imagine what the rooms would look like. The fact that the audience can easily imagine this, but struggle to see how someone's disability would fit into the storyline suggests that the flaw lies not with disabled casting, but close-minded viewers.

Jamie Lloyd's modern take on Chekhov's 'The Seagull' explores disability in a very interesting way. It was performed at the Harold Pinter Theatre starting on the 29th of June 2022. It saw Daniel Monks, an actor who is hemiplegic, take on the role of Konstantin, an able-bodied character. Konstantin is a weak, submissive character with little self-confidence. He has a childlike tendency to obsess over his mother and Nina's approval, and when he is rejected he simply cannot cope and kills himself. When asked about Monks' performance,

¹³ . <https://observer.com/2017/03/the-glass-menagerie-review-sam-gold-sally-field/>

Lloyd stated that Monks brings a different, genuine side to Konstantin that hasn't been seen before.

In the performance, Lloyd uses costume to draw the audience's attention to Monk's disability. Monk is dressed in a black t-shirt and black shorts, displaying his underdeveloped arm and leg. The rest of the cast are in long sleeved shirts with full length trousers or skirts, meaning Monks stands out from the other actors. His revealing outfit almost confronts the audience, inviting them to look at his disability and make judgements about his body.

One scene that stood out to me in the performance was when Nina returns after many years and is met by a depressed, broken Konstantin. The staging is stark, with only chairs lined up in a row for set, and Daniel Monks is sat downstage centre alone. He is hunched over and trembles as he cradles his underdeveloped arm, almost holding it out for the audience to examine, inviting them to feel his pain. This reinforces the idea that he is suffering, not just mentally but also physically which intensifies the audience's perception of his vulnerability. When Nina invites Konstantin to sit beside her, Monks slowly limps towards her, struggling after every step. This was incredibly difficult to watch; each step was a hurdle which he had to painfully overcome and the viewers could do nothing but sit and watch. The emotional impact this scene had shows how casting disabled actors can unlock powerful, genuine emotions in the audience.

Lloyd has remained silent over his decision to cast a disabled actor as Konstantin. It can be inferred from his silence that he doesn't want to single Monks out and draw attention to his disability. This decision is powerful as it helps to normalise disability on stage, it implies that having a disability shouldn't impact the roles you play. However, casting Monks, a disabled actor, to play Konstantin does highlight some controversial questions. Konstantin is weak and

submissive, therefore, by casting him as disabled, is it drawing questionable ties between these traits and disability? It feels wrong to associate such a weak character with disability as it implies that someone's disability makes them weak. Whilst Lloyd's aim of casting a disabled actor for his skill, not physical appearance is commended, his decision to choose Konstantin in particular is questionable. Could he not have chosen Trigorin; a talented, attractive, confident character instead? If he really wanted to maximise representation on stage, he should be fighting against stereotypes that those with disabilities are weak, not adding to them.

This being said, it is important to consider the benefits of casting a disabled actor in a non-disabled role for representation. It allows those with a disability to not feel defined by it and be seen for who they are, not what they look like. When asked his thoughts on this, Monks said, 'I don't just want to play disabled stories, and it feels really exciting to play a character not written as disabled. I just know that if my 13-year-old disabled self saw me now, it would have encouraged me to dream bigger.'¹⁴ This demonstrates that casting someone for their appearance is a dated perspective that needs to change. Monks is a prime example of how casting someone based on their talent alone should be the main thing considered in a role.

Overall, it is clear that casting disabled actors in theatre is crucial for representation. Whether it is casting disabled actors in roles that are written as disabled such as Richard III or Laura or casting them in non-disabled roles such as Konstantin, it is important. However, this does not mean that every disabled character must be played by a disabled actor, in the same way that not every able-bodied character has to be played by an able-bodied person. Daniel Monks summarises this by saying, 'disability narratives need to include disabled people in the telling

¹⁴ <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/this-shit-will-fuck-you-up-emilia-clerke-and-daniel-monks-on-the-sea-gull>

of those stories and move forward and become much more authentic. But, having said that, ultimately, we are actors who want to be a part of telling *all* stories and not just be relegated to telling stories about disabilities.¹⁵ Clearly, the real breakthrough for disability in theatre will be when disabled actors are able to play any character, disabled or able bodied, without it drawing any attention of the audience and becoming a central part of the story.

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