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In/Visible: Disability on the Stage

# Tobin Siebers

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*With the help of examples from modern art, "Un/Sichtbar" traces the mutability of disability on the visual spectrum in the theater, focusing on those moments when disability blinks into view and then disappears. In both the theater and modern art, the visible effects of disability are akin to its "passing," both passing as able-bodied and disabled. This passing is especially crucial to the theatrical representation of disability. On the one hand, when disabled actors appear on stage, they often seem to be hypervisible, failing to pass as characters, and to such an extent that their presence disrupts the visual field of the audience, placing under attack the fictional construct that is the theater. On the other hand, able-bodied actors pass easily as disabled on stage but only if the audience sees "double," simultaneously accepting and rejecting the disability as real. In both cases, disability is not permitted to exist in conjunction with theatrical effects. What would happen if disability were not conceived as an obstacle on stage but as a resource for different aesthetics effects? What would these effects be, and how would they transform the experience of the theater?*

**Tobin Siebers** is V.L Parrington Collegiate Professor at the University of Michigan. He is the author most recently of three books in the field of disability studies, *Disability Theory* (Michigan 2008), *Zerbrochene Schönheit* (Transcript 2009), and *Disability Aesthetics* (Michigan 2010).

## In/Visible: Disability on the Stage

1. The word “theater” descends from the Ancient Greek theatron, meaning a “place for seeing.”<sup>1</sup> What does the audience see at the theater? Most obviously, the audience sees bodies, but what of bodies does it see? Which kinds of bodies are visible on the stage?<sup>2</sup> Which kinds are invisible? These questions reveal a fundamental paradox about in/visibility when posed in the context of disability on the stage. Because the theater is a theater of nondisabled bodies, they are supposedly most visible on the stage, but because they are the norm, they are in effect invisible. It means almost nothing when a nondisabled body appears on the stage. The audience does not see nondisabled bodies as nondisabled. It never asks why nondisabled bodies are being used on the stage. But the disabled body is another matter. When it appears on the stage, it is visible, perhaps hypervisible.<sup>3</sup> The audience usually notices disabled bodies, and it wants to understand why they are on the stage. The disabled body has meaning—and necessarily so—because, when something as visible as a disabled body appears on the stage, without attendant meaning or explanation, the audience finds fault with the drama. The drama that fails to explain the appearance of a disabled body on the stage is a failed drama. The disabled body threatens to disable the theater as a place for seeing.

2. The meaning of in/visibility in disability studies revolves traditionally around the significance held by physical traits in disability oppression. Visible disabilities make people susceptible to discrimination, while people with invisible disabilities supposedly possess the capacity to pass more easily as nondisabled. The attention to invisible disabilities in disability studies is designed to wake up people to the prejudices directed against all disabled people by increasing awareness about the problems faced by those who do not fit the usual stereotypes.

Of course, the situation is more complicated than it looks (pun intended). On the first hand, visible disabilities are not necessarily as visible as one might first think because the general lack of experience with disability in society renders disabled people invisible, regardless of their appearance (Siebers 2008, 117-18). There is no disability so obvious that it cannot go unnoticed. Georgina Kleege writes about how easy it is for a blind person to pass as sighted, and Anne Finger recounts an episode in which the people around her did not notice that she was in a wheelchair because its design was unexpected. On the second hand, people with invisible disabilities may be able to pass, but their passing often requires overcompensation harmful to their everyday existence. Having an invisible disability can also put one at odds with the police. Joseph Grigely admits wishing that he had a red hearing aid to render his deafness more visible, because his inability sometimes to follow orders in public gets him into trouble. On the third hand, experience with disability leads to the conclusion that there are really no such things as visible or invisible disabilities in and of themselves. There are only traits that are rendered visible or invisible by certain circumstances. This is the case because disability is a social construction, of course—since a disability may be a disability in one context but not in another—but also because visibility is a social construction.

Visibility and invisibility are matters of “appearance,” then, by which I mean both the taking of physical form and the specific features of any given physical form. Disabilities are visible when they appear. When they do not appear, they are invisible. This formulation may seem naive, but it is the only accurate way to describe the relationship between disability and in/visibility, since everything in the visible world is a matter of appearance.

3. Bodies are always appearances. They include human beings, animals, artifacts, artworks, and natural objects, etc., and when they appear, they stir emotions. For example, nondisabled bodies encountering disabled bodies experience emotions of pleasure, pain, revulsion, or terror, to name the most obvious responses. Disabled bodies experience similar emotions when facing nondisabled bodies. These bodily feelings are the substrata on which so-called higher aesthetic effects are based. Aesthetics, to provide a bare-bones definition, is the human science that calculates how some bodies make other bodies feel (Siebers 2010, 1). Its range extends from the emotions felt in everyday encounters between bodies to the emotions experienced when one body responds to another body called a work of art.

It is extremely difficult to study bodily feelings in the heat of everyday encounters between people. These encounters show our emotional responses at their most mundane and raw—raw precisely because they occur in the most mundane circumstances, when feelings of attraction and repulsion, of acceptance and rejection, surge forth with embarrassing immediacy, fierceness, and clarity. These are the feelings that we negotiate everyday when we turn a corner and find ourselves face to face with another body, and yet it is almost impossible to discuss these feelings, precisely because they are at so familiar to the experience of being human.

But things are different in the world of art. Here not only may we discuss the feelings that other bodies inspire in us, but we are encouraged to do it as part of the experience of art. The human appreciation of art has given birth to a culture of feeling, a long tradition of aesthetic response, a complicated history of theories and vocabularies about art—all of which are determined to understand how and why art objects make people feel. And yet rarely, if ever, have the aesthetic theories developed about the art world been connected to the emotional interactions taking place in the social world. There seems to exist little interest in understanding either what our responses to art objects might tell us about our responses to other people, or the tendency in both life and art to judge some bodies as inferior based on how they make us feel.

4. The Black Power movement of the 1970s insisted on the beauty of African Americans and sought a place for them on the stage. Similarly, disability pride claims disability and seeks its representation on the stage. I support diversity as a political goal, but here I am more interested in the aesthetic resources of disability. The goal is not to base an aesthetics of disability either on a strong and normalizing identification with disabled bodies and minds or on the emotions of aversion supposedly felt before disabilities. The goal is to make disability a resource for expanding the emotions represented on the stage, using the specific feelings stirred by disabled bodies and minds to create a new and modern disability theater.<sup>4</sup>

5. Although bodies on the stage pass as other bodies—this is the essence of acting—all theater remains in the end a theater of visible bodies. The actor plays the part of the character, but the actor’s body remains visible to the audience, no matter how well the actor inhabits the character. Otherwise, it would be impossible for the actor to spark

an emotional response in the audience. Bodies on the stage excite emotions because they are visible bodies, including feelings that justify notions of human inferiority. Of these notions, the inferiority of disabled bodies provides the ideological foundation of theatrical representation, by which I mean that the disqualification of disability is so central to the stage that it requires us to think about this inferiority in ideological terms. What I call the ideology of ability is at its simplest the preference for able-bodiedness. At its most radical, it defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons (Siebers 2008, 7-11). There is in the theater a mistrust of the body, and a constant attempt to improve and to perfect it. The stage cannot tolerate disability, and when disability does appear there, it is marked as inferior almost without fail.

Disabled bodies on the stage are thought to be inferior for two reasons, both having to do with their supposed visibility. First, disabled bodies do not pass, that is, disabled bodies supposedly cannot pass as the character with the same facility as nondisabled bodies. For example, the actor is supposed to disappear into the character, to live the part, but the visibility of the disabled actor apparently disrupts this aesthetic effect, offering instead a spectacle that does not fit into the drama taking place before the audience's eyes. Moreover, the long history of interpreting the disabled body as a metaphor of evil, social chaos, or moral uplift sets into motion a secondary plot that risks to take over the narrative of any drama in which a disabled actor appears. The audience pays more attention to the metaphorical significance of the disabled body than to the story being told by the drama, and if the metaphor clashes with the drama, the metaphor wins. This explains why disability on the stage is generally made to serve simple and obvious metaphors. Metaphor is the main tool by which theatrical performance recoups the aesthetic effects of disability for its own purposes.

Second, the disabled body summons emotional responses that disrupt the aesthetics of the performance. This is another way of saying that the disabled body does not pass, but I want to focus directly on the aesthetic effects of disability rather than on its supposed impediments to successful acting. The disabled body, theorists of disability studies argue, represents for nondisabled society a spectacle in itself, with the consequence that the disabled person is, in effect, always on stage (Sandahl 1999, 12). When a disabled body enters the room, all eyes turn upon it, as if it has moved to center stage. A rush of emotions animates the room. The disabled person may recoil from the stares, ignore them, or take a deep bow. In any event the appearance of the disabled person in the room is pure theater.

The usual spectacle on the stage represents the performer's incorporation of the role, the disappearance of the performer into the character. The disabled body, when it appears on the stage, stands out as a spectacle in and of itself, one that threatens to draw attention to itself and away from the other performances on the stage. At this moment the visibility of the disabled body disrupts the space of theatrical representation, exceeding the formal requirements of that space with an experience of extraordinary, powerful, and undeniable emotions. How is the audience to deal with the rush of feelings? How are these feelings to be converted into meaning? What happens if these feelings cannot be explained? There appears to be two possible responses. In the first response, as we have already seen, the explosion of emotions and the need to contain them produce a mental adjustment on the part of the audience. The audience converts the disabled body into a metaphor that inserts this body again into the representational

space of the drama. The disabled body comes to represent evil, misfortune, accident, social disorder, etc. The disabled body signifies not itself but beyond itself, by which I mean that it holds a symbolic position in the plot of the drama. The drama recovers the emotional effects of the disabled body and makes them serve its own aesthetic purposes

But a second response is also possible, one that makers of theater most fear, where the rush of emotions fails to be recouped in the service of the drama. Here the audience becomes riveted by the emotions produced by the disabled body. The spectators turn their attention to the disabled body to the exclusion of everything else, growing rapt before it, making it alone the source of their curiosity, wonder, and focus. Their feelings run the gamut from pleasure to pain, from attraction to aversion, from pity to fear.

In other words, the disabled body is both a spectacle and the occasion for many powerful emotions, and yet the disabled body, despite its obvious theatrical effects, is not viewed as an aesthetic resource for the theater. Rather, it is labeled as an obstacle, an aesthetic disruption, whose presence on the stage grinds to a halt the conceit of theatrical representation.

At this point, the appearance of disability on the stage should raise a few critical questions. What would happen if disability were not conceived as an obstacle on the stage but as a resource for different aesthetic effects? What would these effects be, and how would they transform the experience presented on the stage? In short, how do we begin to theorize a disability aesthetics for the stage?

6. The ideological rejection of disability, found in almost all forms of actor training, makes it nearly impossible to cast disabled actors as nondisabled characters. Actors are trained to perfect their theatrical presence and physical control, to assume a neutral aesthetic appearance that maximizes the ability to live the part of any character, no matter the physical and mental attributes of that character (Sandahl 2005). In this scenario, heavily instilled with the ideology of ability, disability on the stage becomes a distraction at the very least, an obstacle at most, because it has no reason to be there, just as disability supposedly has no reason to exist in the real world, except as a demonstration of personal misfortune. The audience is supposedly unable to believe that disabled actors can play nondisabled characters. The disabled actor, too visible, simply fails to disappear into the part. But similar doubts do not make it impossible for nondisabled actors to play disabled characters. They do not make it impossible for nondisabled actors to play characters with super abilities. In short, able-bodied actors can play more able-bodied characters, but disabled actors cannot play more able-bodied ones. What are the aesthetic and theoretical underpinnings of this contradiction? What assumptions are being made by actors and audiences? How does the ideology of ability control what is being seen on the stage?

One key to answering these questions is to probe the aesthetic effects attributed to disabled bodies on the stage. Disability on the stage, we are told, produces emotional disruptions, and yet we assume that there is a difference between the aesthetic effects of disabled bodies on the stage and those of nondisabled actors playing disabled characters. If the performance of a disabled character were successful, should not the performance produce the same emotional reactions as a disabled body on the stage? But this is not the case, and it is not the case because when nondisabled actors play disabled characters, the performance is always a failure—and meant to be. The actors are not meant to pass as disabled. Nondisabled actors preserve a distance from their

disabled character by keeping ever present in the audience's mind the fact that they are not really disabled, only playing disabled. In this distance lies the greatness of the actor's performance. The audience, then, must keep in mind a double image of the performance, at once taking comfort in the fact that the actor will resume a nondisabled state when the performance ends, while marveling at the fact that the actor dares to represent disability. Nondisabled actors do not disappear into their roles when portraying disabled characters, and we celebrate the performances for this reason.

The strong tendency to accept the performances of actors who play characters with superhuman abilities points to similar conclusions. No one seems to doubt that actors can disappear into the portrayal of characters with super powers. In film and on the stage, there is an increasing tendency to represent superheroes with abilities far beyond those of mortal creatures. If actors successfully portray superhumans, why must audiences see double when nondisabled actors try to portray disabled characters? One answer is that the ideology of ability places no limits on our imagination of human power and achievement, and we take great pleasure in the vision of human beings become gods. For the same reason, an audience has difficulty believing a performance when actors play older, but the same audience is thrilled when old actors grow younger before its eyes (Gullette 13). Audiences are most comfortable with artworks that serve the ideology of ability. Disability, however, disrupts the spectacle of ability, for disability represents its complete opposite. We easily believe what cannot be true: men fly, women have superhuman strength, and people are immortal. We are terrified by the truth, that we are fragile, that we will become sick, that we all grow old and die. The first idea gives us pleasure, the second, displeasure.

7. Aristotle was the first to describe the theater on the basis of feelings of pleasure. The Poetics comes to two conclusions about the pleasure of the theater, both of which lead to a deeper appreciation of disability on the stage. First, Aristotle finds that we take pleasure in successful imitations. The heart of the theater is the recognition of imitations on the stage, a process of identifying the moment when the actor embodies the character—in modern terms, when the actor disappears into the portrayal of the character. At this moment, the actor becomes invisible, the character is made visible, and the audience identifies the character as a type, exclaiming with pleasure, "That is he!" (IV.5). The audience enters the drama at this instant of identification, but Aristotle is careful to explain that the pleasures of drama derive not from the formal aspects of the imitation, from its execution or coloring, but from the fact that spectators recognize the similarity of the imitation to a previous experience of the world. Spectators take pleasure in the repetition of personalities and situations from their own lives. The spectator exclaims "That is he!" when he or she identifies a character on the stage, but the spectator also realizes at the same moment that "I am this!" "That is he! I am this!" would be the short-hand formula of dramatic pleasure in Aristotle. Spectators discover in the drama a relation of identity between first and third persons, experiencing pleasure because they see at a distance their own human relationships being replayed for them.

Second, Aristotle notices that our pleasure in imitation has little to do with our pleasure or pain in the thing imitated. "Objects that in themselves we view with pain," he concludes, "we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most despicable animals and of dead bodies" (IV.3). Aristotle has in mind the diagrams used to study human and animal generation, but he extends his observations to all forms of aesthetic representation, including the stage. Regardless of

the state of the object, whether it is disabled, deformed, or dead, the imitation of the object will give pleasure to those who experience it. Aristotle's ideas are suggestive for a theory of disability on the stage because they lead to the conclusion that the appearance of disabled bodies need not disrupt the aesthetics of the theater.

8. Sigmund Freud offers perhaps the most concise theory of the aesthetic disruption created by physical and mental disability on the stage. Freud's "Psychopathic Characters on the Stage" argues—similar to Aristotle—that theater gives "an enjoyable shape" to suffering, injury, and misfortune (306). In fact, Freud explains that "this relation to suffering and misfortune might be taken as characteristic of drama. . . . Suffering of every kind is thus the subject-matter of drama, and from this suffering it promises to give the audience pleasure" (306-7). Remarkably, Freud argues that the essence of drama relies on the representation of suffering on the stage—an insight of great significance to disability studies.

However, there are forms of suffering, according to Freud, that cannot be converted into aesthetic pleasure, specifically the appearance on the stage of physical and mental disability. The audience cannot tolerate physical disability on the stage because it disrupts the ability of spectators to identify with characters. If an audience identifies with someone who is physically disabled, Freud claims, it loses the "capacity for enjoyment or psychical activity" (307). Consequently, a person who is physically disabled can figure on the stage only as a "piece of stage-property" (307). Freud ascribes an even greater aesthetic disruption to mental disability, specifically to the presence of neurosis on the stage. He argues that "the precondition of the enjoyment" of mentally disabled characters in drama is that "the spectator should himself be neurotic" (308). "In anyone who is not neurotic," Freud concludes, the appearance of mental disability on the stage "will meet only with aversion" (309). To Aristotle's exclamation, "That is he!," Freud responds, "I am not that!" The audience in the Freudian theater refuses to identify with disabled characters.

9. Aristotle and Freud provide basic theories about how bodies on the stage make other bodies feel, but disabled bodies summon aesthetic responses unanticipated by both theories. For Aristotle, imitation produces an aesthetic distance that permits the enjoyment of objects that are themselves displeasing. The emotions usually thought to attend disability on the stage—fear, pity, aversion, and sadness—are purged by putting them in the service of dramatic representation. Presumably, no object is beyond the transformative powers of imitation, as long as the object belongs to experience. Aristotle's theory compensates for its painful subject matter by transforming pain into pleasure and by emphasizing the identity between audience and characters rather than their difference. Imitation produces pleasure when spectators identify with characters on the stage and observe patterns replayed from their own lives. But if Aristotle were entirely correct, there would exist no history of expelling disability from the stage. No one would experience disability as a spectacle in itself disruptive of drama, and disabled actors and characters would be pointed out and recognized with pleasure by audiences.

For Freud, disability is the exception to the capacity of imitation to make pleasure out of pain, injury, and misfortune. Spectators fail not only to identify with disabled characters but also to experience them as dramatic representations. Disability summons an experience of pain and suffering that disrupts the goals of the theater. Given Freud's analysis, it is little wonder that actor training discriminates against disability. Disabled actors and nondisabled actors who successfully play disabled characters produce

disruptive emotions for which the pleasures of the stage cannot make amends. Psychoanalysis explains the history of expelling disability from the stage, but if Freud's theory were entirely correct, disability would emerge as an object that cannot be imitated, a thing existing beyond the transformative powers of aesthetic representation. The appearance of blind Teiresias would bring Oedipus the King to a dead halt rather than propelling the tragedy forward. The neuroses of Hamlet would be unwatchable for all people but those sharing his mental indecisiveness. Moreover, modern drama would not exist. Freud claims that the first precondition of the art form is that drama "should not cause suffering to the audience, that it should know how to compensate . . . for the suffering" that it arouses, but he notices that "modern writers have particularly often failed to obey this rule" (307). Modern theater does not compensate for the pain that it creates, according to Freud, and he is hard put to explain its attraction to audiences.

There are problems with both Aristotle and Freud, but their ideas can be combined to realize an alternative theory in which disruptive emotions are not resolved by the pleasures of dramatic representation but placed in the service of an aesthetics based on disability. The appearance of disability on the stage represents an aesthetic resource for modern dramas and performances that do not seek to redirect disruptive emotions into a theater of pleasure—a theater of pleasure in which the pain given by objects of our attention is soothed by the ability either to identify with them or to expel them from consciousness. Rather, for dramas and performances rooted in disability, the emotions summoned by disability on the stage—fear, pity, aversion, and sadness—are not rejected but elaborated as the basis of a disability aesthetics. Disability aesthetics names a critical concept that seeks to emphasize the presence of disability in the tradition of aesthetic representation, theorizing the disabled body and mind as unique resources discovered by modern art and then embraced by it as one of its defining concepts. Disability aesthetics refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body—and its definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty—as the sole determination of the aesthetic. Disability aesthetics embraces beauty that seems by traditional standards to be broken, and yet it is not less beautiful, but more so, as a result. Disability does not express defect, degeneration, or deviancy in modern art forms. Rather, disability enlarges our vision of human variation and difference, and puts forward perspectives that test presuppositions dear to the history of aesthetics (Siebers 2010, 2-3). Disability aesthetics accepts bodies thought inferior by society as resources for art—a historical development demonstrating that disability aesthetics represents a continuum of responses that links the social world and the world of art.

The stage does not exist either to cleanse emotions thought painful to society or to provide a rationale for their exclusion. The choice, then, is not between Aristotle and Freud—neither the Aristotelian moment of recognition in which painful emotions turn enjoyable and the performer's body achieves fusion with the character, nor the Freudian moment of catharsis in which physically and mentally disabled characters, thought too painful to identify with, are purged and expelled from the stage. Disability aesthetics combines the insights of Aristotle and Freud. Rather than experiencing the pleasure of either Aristotle's recognition ("That is he!" and the concurrent self-identification "I am this!") or Freud's rejection of identity ("I am not that!"), disability rendered aesthetically on the stage makes possible a form of identification that neither accepts nor rejects identity but transforms it. The figure on the stage splits body and dramatic character to represent multiple and partial aspects of the self, producing an aesthetically pleasing, though perhaps slightly masochistic, discovery of our inaccurate identifications in the world

(Bersani 415). The stage no longer favors the image of the able body. Rather, the stage breaks the mirror image of health, beauty, and perfection that so fascinates us as spectators. In this moment of emotional self-discovery, we find that fragility trumps strength, sickness outlasts health, loss overwhelms wholeness, and disability, not ability, defines the human condition.

10. Unearthed in 1820, the Venus de Milo was immediately hailed as the ideal of both aesthetic and feminine beauty, despite the fact that she is missing both her arms. Found with the Venus was her left hand, but it was never attached to her body because it was less finished than other parts of the artwork and considered an affront to her perfection. For the Venus was conceived at the moment of her discovery as most whole and beautiful in her fragmentary state. Today the silhouette of the Venus remains an image worthy of veneration and imitation, as painters, sculptors, and photographers from all over the world pay homage to her beauty again and again. No one bats an eye at the fact that the Venus, although damaged, holds an honored place in the Louvre. The Venus's beauty is imagined to be flawless. The Venus is the perfect work of art and the perfect woman.

In the 1990s, Mary Duffy, an Irish performance artist, began to inhabit the Venus de Milo, representing the artwork as a disabled body on the stage (see the performance in Snyder and Mitchell). Born without arms, Duffy presents herself to her audience fully nude or draped, while reciting statements challenging the vision of her as defective and claiming her place alongside the Venus as a disabled beauty. The Venus de Milo, I want to assert, represents by virtue of her place in our cultural imagination one of the great dramatic roles, on a par with Hamlet, Lady Macbeth, or King Lear. Mary Duffy lays claim to this great role, becoming a modern day Venus, not by shunning disability but by incarnating it.

Duffy gives a voice in her soliloquy to the Venus by telling the story of her own treatment in the medical world and by bearing witness to the stares of disgust directed toward her. The soliloquy announces the Venus's status as a social reject, "You have words to describe me that I find frightening. Every time I hear them they are whispered or screamed silently wordlessly. . . . The words you use to describe me are 'congenital malformation.'" Duffy brings the Venus into the contemporary moment, making her answer questions about whether she was a thalidomide baby. The effect of the performance is uncanny because the Venus, the great archetype of feminine beauty, expresses her rage at being made an object of revulsion and stares down curiosity seekers. Before Duffy begins, the Venus holds the sacred position of eternal beauty in the audience's mind, and Duffy taps into this vision to beautify herself, but as the images of Duffy and the Venus converge, disability and beauty also overlap, and to the point where they cannot be imagined separately. Duffy's performance also produces a baffling but crucial bending of time in the historical appearance of disability, tampering with its visibility and invisibility. The images that Duffy makes of herself are beautiful because they recall so powerfully the idea of beauty made visible in the history of art by the Venus de Milo. But these same images also change retroactively the perception of the Venus, for her beauty now incorporates necessarily the appearance of disability, where previously it had been invisible.

Duffy's disability makes her the perfect performer to play the Venus, but Duffy cannot be thought to embody her. Duffy does not as a performer disappear into the portrayal of her character—at least not in the traditional way. Rather, at the moment that

Duffy becomes the Venus, the Venus becomes her, and both are transformed. It is not a matter, then, of either Aristotlian or Freudian aesthetics. The audience does not exclaim with pleasure, "That is she!," because there is no recognition of a familiar type. Rather, the Venus's identity is transformed from flawless to disabled beauty. The she that the Venus now represents is familiar with a difference—and the difference makes all the difference because, while her beauty is no longer flawless, she remains beautiful nevertheless. Nor does Freud's theory capture the emotions stirred by Duffy's performance. Aversion before disability appears, but it is itself averted, turned to another aim. The performance obstructs the refusal of disability identity, even though Duffy tells the story of her rejection by society, because she has become the standard of beauty. Similarly, the Venus no longer pleases as the standard of beauty because her beauty now represents something both more and less than itself. The performance neither accepts the Venus as a great beauty nor rejects her as disabled. Rather, Duffy makes us see that the Venus is a great beauty because she is disabled, and with the consequence that beauty and disability are changed forever. We cannot see Duffy without seeing the Venus, and we cannot see the Venus without seeing Duffy. Disability emerges an aesthetic value in itself.

11. Disability aesthetics does not seek to accept or to reject disability but to pursue disability as an aesthetic value in itself, one that takes the theater into the modern era. The result is not a desire to purify humanity, subject to the aims of the ideology of ability, but to understand disability as a resource for enlarging the range of human emotions represented on the stage. Disability on the stage produces what Mark Jeffreys calls the "visible cripple," an embodiment of otherness, fixed in our visual field, that obstructs the vision of our own perfection. The appearance of disability on the stage offers an alternative to the ideology of ability, exploring and expanding the spectrum of humanity that we will accept among us. Rather than purging the powerful emotions experienced before disabled bodies and minds, the modern stage represents them as they are, in all their emotional diversity, asking us to feel what it means to be a different human being.

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<sup>1</sup> Although I understand the distinctions between theater and performance art, I am here collapsing them into the concept of the “stage” in order to explore theoretically what happens when disabled bodies make themselves visible for aesthetic purposes.

<sup>2</sup> Richard W. Mitchell remarks on the lack of diversity of bodies on the stage, offering a challenge to community theater to include mentally disabled people: “As we begin the twenty-first century various ‘minority’ groups are more or less absent from the theatre, and the percentage of people who regularly attend theatrical performances is infinitesimally small” (93).

<sup>3</sup> Petra Kupperts, among many commentators, has captured best the paradox of the in/visibility of disabled performers: “The disabled performer is marginalized and invisible—relegated to borderlands, far outside the central area of cultural activity, into the discourses of medicine, therapy and victimhood. At the same time, people with physical impairments are also hypervisible, instantly defined in their physicality. The physically impaired performer has therefore to negotiate two areas of cultural meaning: invisibility as an active member of the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorization” (25).

<sup>4</sup> The growth of disability theater and performance has experienced a surge in recent years, a phenomena excellently charted by Carrie Sandahl (2008). Sandahl explores changes in casting practices and the growing attention gained by disability on the stage under the heading of the “new disability theatre.” For Sandahl, “New disability theatre aims to explore the lived experience of disability, rather than the usual dramaturgical use of disability as a metaphor for non-disabled people’s sense of outsidership” (226). For additional explorations of the new disability theater, see Fahy and King, Kupperts (2003, 2007), Sandahl and Auslander, and the special issues of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, ed. Kupperts (2001), *Research in Drama Education: Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, ed. Conroy, and *Text and Performance Quarterly*, ed. Henderson and Ostrander.