

Modern day Vaudeville: Representation of Disability on Broadway

by

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Abstract

This paper will discuss a brief and relevant history of vaudeville and the disenfranchisement of disabled individuals on stage. It will discuss how the framework of vaudeville performances has evolved into modern Broadway theatre, and will show how ableist producing, casting, and language continue to be harmful to disabled communities. To properly gauge the use of ethical language and representation of disabled individuals in Broadway, a Disability Representation Checklist will be introduced. This checklist will note: openly disabled individuals on the production team; openly disabled individuals in the cast; and the use of ethical and inclusive language openly used by non-disabled cast members, producers, and reviewers. Three Broadway productions will be analyzed through the Disability Representation Chart: “Spring Awakening,” “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,” and “Wicked.” The analysis of these performances through the Disability Representation Chart will show a major lack of representation of disabled individuals on Broadway, and a lack of knowledgeable and inclusive language when discussing disability in these performances. The conclusion will reexamine the relationship between vaudeville and modern Broadway performances, discuss short-comings and road-blocks in the stated research, and give recommendations on best practices for the ethical inclusion of disabled individuals in performance.

Keywords: disability, vaudeville, Broadway, representation, theatre, performance

Disclaimer of Disability Ethics

A warning that there are potentially harmful words in this essay that could be triggering to individuals who are disabled or otherwise impacted. Identifying what language is harmful when used in ignorant ways is necessary to provide historical context about and acknowledgement of ableist phrasing. These conversations are crucial to bring awareness and to educate individuals unaware of these marginalized communities (Brown, 2014; 2022).

Disabled individuals and disability advocates have discussed the ethical differences between using person-first language versus the traditional adjective-noun phrasing. This language looks like “person with autism” versus “autistic person,” respectively. There is equal discussion supporting both types of phrasing separately, and even support of using both together. Many disabled individuals believe that as long as the language is being used ethically, the phrasing is less important (Brown, 2011). For the purposes of this paper, both “person first” and “adjective-noun” phrasing will be used interchangeably.

A clarification on the use of “deaf” and “Deaf:” lowercase deaf refers to “the audiological condition of not hearing;” uppercase Deaf refers to “a particular group of deaf people who share a language - American Sign Language (ASL)” (Padden & Humphries, 1990). Note that “Deaf” and “deaf” will not be used interchangeably; in addition, “d/Deaf” will be used to refer to both communities at the same time.

It is important to state that there would be no ethical discussion of disabilities without mentioning the intersectionality of personal identity and experience. Intersectionality is how an individual’s social identities and related systems of domination, oppression, and/or discrimination overlap and intersect to create a unique experience. These systems and identities can include race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, religion, and disability

(Crenshaw, 1994). While this paper will be specifically focusing on the systems of discrimination and the identities of disabled individuals, it is crucial to note that these individuals' disabilities are not the only aspect of their personal identity or experience.

Introduction

Starting in the 1800s, vaudeville performances in America showcased disabled individuals onstage for non-disabled individuals to gaze upon. These disabled performers were presented on stage by non-disabled “ring masters,” who framed their disabilities through an industrialized and mechanical lens (Rovito, 2019; Garland-Thompson, 2018). This specific presentation directly encouraged audience members to compare the “broken” and “different” disabled performers to their “normal” non-disabled bodies. Not only did this create a social barrier between those disabled performers and the non-disabled audience members, it reinforced the societal ideals of what a “normal” human body is expected to be (Garland-Thompson, 2018; Davis, 2018).

In discussion of ethical representation of disabled stories onstage, it is important to understand who is writing, producing, and crafting these performances. The production team creates the foundation of the performance; they determine the plot devices created, the marketing of the production, the actors on stage, and the words and actions that those actors perform (Davenport, 2020).

Disability advocates and disabled individuals believe that disabled people have the most accurate and ethical knowledge of disability. A non-disabled individual should not be chosen to lead a narrative on disability issues (Pulrang, 2021). Non-disabled production team members cannot make ethical decisions regarding disabled experiences, because they simply have no first hand experience to compare to. Exclusion of disabled individuals from these leadership roles in theatre reinforces the narrative that disability on stage is performative, and the accuracy of those disabilities is unimportant (Kim).

Although sideshow performances historically showcased disabled individuals, modern theater more often refrains from hiring disabled performers at all. Even in shows with plot lines or characters with specified disabilities, non-disabled individuals will be hired for those roles (Considine, 2015). When non-disabled people are hired to represent a disability, the societal focus is on the non-disabled actor's performance of the "impairment" (Brown, 2022). As a result, the reviews and word-of-mouth marketing of the production then focuses on how the non-disabled actor overcame the "challenge" of pretending to be disabled (Pontelandolfo, 2022).

While the language surrounding disabilities has evolved since the early 1900s, modern contexts limit how disabled people are perceived onstage (Brown, 2022). The framework that disabled individuals perform within enforces the idea that an individual's "impairments" are something they need to overcome in order to be successful. In theatre, this language is reflected: in interviews with non-disabled production team members; in the dialogue and content of the performances themselves; and in reviews written by non-disabled audience members (Considine, 2015).

Ableist phrasing infantilizes disabled individuals, oftentimes praising them for being able to complete a task *despite* their disability (Kuppers, 2015). People should not praise disabled individuals for their ability to "overcome" their everyday disadvantages; humans should reflect upon why those disabled individuals needed to "overcome" those disadvantages at all (Lew, 2018). Society is created by humans for humans; it is important that it adapts to support the needs of those individuals who are marginalized. Disability should not be the limiting factor in an individual's ability to participate in the arts and theater (Considine, 2015).

To create theatre that represents disabled individuals ethically, Broadway performances should have: a majority openly disabled production team; a majority openly disabled cast; and

ethical and intersectional language seen used by non-disabled producers, in the dialogue and performance content, and by non-disabled reviewers. In order to ensure a safe space for disabled communities in theatre, and ethical representation of those communities in performance, disability representation must be seen in these aspects: production team, casting, and language.

History of Vaudeville

Vaudeville and sideshow productions started emerging in America after the American Civil War, and were a way for poor, homeless, Indigenous, people of color (POC), assigned female at birth (AFAB), and disabled individuals to make money (Adams, 2001). Though American vaudeville directly stems from medicine shows, minstrel shows, and circus performances, the Industrial Revolution and Victorian freak shows also had a large influence on its development (Carter, 2018; Rovito, 2019).

According to Garland-Thomson, the Industrial Revolution had an effect on the public's reflection of their own bodies; bodies began to seem like extensions of machines (2018). It created the binary between “normal functioning” body parts, and “broken” body parts; like machines, not humans. People became obsessed with viewing “broken” bodies, as a way to confirm that their own bodies were “functioning” and socially acceptable (Davis, 2018). The voyeurism of this “functioning/broken” binary extended into Victorian freak shows. Disabled bodies were put on display for the public to come pay to see. Signs were posted outside the performances stating phrases like, “Hall of Ugliness,” and “Greatest Deformity in The World Within,” in attempts to lure curious non-disabled passerbyers into purchasing tickets (Rovito, 2019).

These performances also shifted away from catering to only assigned male at birth (AMAB) audiences. Previously, many of the popular sideshow performances were burlesque shows, and typically sold beer to help profits. Vaudeville shows shifted to create a “family-oriented” performance style that wasn’t only exclusive to the adults; these performances were seen as fun, harmless, and educational (“Vaudeville,” 2022). This only made it easier for those voyeuristic ideals to be implanted in casual everyday society. From a young age, people

were taught that it was socially acceptable to stare at people who looked or acted differently. Since people of all ages were coming to these vaudeville performances, it only became more socially acceptable to seek out those who were different (Rovito, 2019).

The Industrial Revolution in America had also created a society in which the entire family was expected and financially required to work. This created tension both socially and economically (Rovito, 2019). While tired middle class individuals were looking for cheap performances to spend their weekend time on, producers had adapted the Victorian freak show formula that employed disenfranchised individuals across the country for cheap variety style performances. Non-disabled individuals like B.F. Keith, E. F. Albee, and P. T. Barnum were looking to employ anyone “unusual” or “different” they thought would draw in a crowd; they were banking on the lack of public knowledge about disabled individuals in order to make money (Carter, 2018).

While there were many opportunities for non-disabled people to work, individuals who were blind, deaf, or had any other disabilities struggled to work. Employers would not hire them due to their “impairments.” Individuals like Helen Keller and Anne Sullivan Macy struggled throughout their youth to find consistent employment. Keller was Deaf and blind, and Macy was blind in one eye. B. F. Keith had offered Keller and Macy a spot in vaudeville when Keller was only 19 years old. She turned the “deplorable theatrical exhibition” down originally, having previously discussed that she often felt that she only went into the public eye in order to be looked at (Crutchfield, 2005). Keller and Macy chose to work as educators, giving lectures and teaching classes to students instead; however, they were never able to properly financially support themselves (Crutchfield, 2005).

After years of inconsistent work and financial trouble, both Keller and Macy accepted employment at B. F. Keith's Palace Theater in 1919. Together they performed two 20-minute sets, where they let the audience members ask them questions on stage. For a few performances, Keller and Macy were able to respond to audience questions honestly. However, Keller was a progressive anti-war, pro-disability rights socialist who had very little issue sharing her opinions with the public. Producers did not like her progressive style, and wrote her an "acceptable" script of answers to respond to the public too (Crutchfield, 2005). Audience members weren't getting "Helen Keller," they were getting a "socially acceptable" version of who Keller really was. The last thing producers wanted was to make the non-disabled audience members uncomfortable; the priority was money, not education and inclusion (Crutchfield, 2005).

Over time, a 2-hour vaudeville production could include: a gymnast with one leg performing an aerial circus act, comedy shows performed in blackface, medicine and "elixir" diagnostic routines, cross-dressing presentations, and the display of disabled individuals ("Vaudeville," 2022). A major issue with hiring individuals because they are disabled, is that the opportunity to share an accessible story is lost in the "performance" of a disabled actor's disability (Brown, 2022).

The creation process and structure of vaudeville performances followed a certain formula that kept it profitable and functioning (Carter, 2018). Non-disabled producers, writers, and production team members specifically created performances that highlighted individuals' disabilities for voyeuristic non-disabled individuals (Crutchfield, 2005; "Vaudeville," 2022). The language used: by the non-disabled production team while marketing the performance; by non-disabled audience members and reviewers; and during the show itself through written scripts, reinforces the idea that disabled individuals only exist for spectacle (Garland-Thompson,

2018). This ableist and exploitative structure kept vaudeville alive until 1932 (“Vaudeville,” 2022).

It is important to note here how ableism existed and thrived in these vaudeville performances. First, non-disabled production team members were creating, directing, and producing performances about disabled individuals; non-disabled individuals cannot authentically produce a disabled experience (Pulrang, 2021). Next, the casting of the roles was done in an exploitative or ableist way. In vaudeville, this meant producers would employ homeless and unemployed disabled individuals because they were the only ones willing to work in sideshows (Carter, 2018). Today, this looks like not casting disabled people at all, or casting them in roles specifically outside their stated disability (Schultz & Choen, 2016). Finally, the language used by production team members, and reviewers in vaudeville was ableist. While ableist language historically created and enforced a “scary” stereotype of disabled individuals, today’s ableist language infantilizes and pities disabled people (Kleege, 2015; Koppers, 2015).

Language and Disability

Before breaking down the specific sections of the Disability Representation Checklist, it is important to understand how ableist language is harmful to disabled communities.

Disability advocate and openly disabled individual Lydia X. Z. Brown shares numerous important words, phrases, and terms to avoid when discussing accessibility and people with disabilities in their online blog. They warn against words and phrases like: “blind to __,” “bound/confined” to a wheelchair, crazy, cripple/d, deaf-mute, “deaf to __,” handicap, handicapable, insane, and “suffers from __” (Brown, 2022). They also discuss that ableism is violence, and there are a lot of oppressive tools that exist in society. For the people who have the ability to change their language, they have the responsibility to do so. They state, “Ableism is a systematic, institutional devaluing of bodies and minds deemed deviant, abnormal, defective, subhuman, less than” (Brown, 2022).

In another blog post, Brown goes on to list the different aspects of linguistic ableism. They note how linguistic ableism: doesn’t exist in a vacuum, and is part of an entire ableist system; shows how deeply ableism is accepted in society; reinforces and normalizes violence towards disabled people and perpetuates ableist social norms; re-traumatizes disabled individuals and actively creates less safe spaces for them; and uses ableism to create other forms of oppression (Brown, 2014).

Brown states, “Language isn’t important for silly semantical reasons, but because it cannot be separated from the culture in which it was deployed” (Brown, 2014). They stress that the focus shouldn’t be on censoring and policing language, but on understanding that language and culture are intertwined and have a critical effect on disabled communities. The more this

language is used and enforced in casual conversations, and performances, the less safe space exists for disabled people (Brown, 2014).

Even though ableist language exists in all aspects of society, disability advocate Gregg Mozgala, an actor with cerebral palsy (CP) and the founder of the Apothetae Theater, has specifically talked about the problems with the lack of inclusive and ethical language in theatre and Broadway. Mozgala warns against language that infantilizes disabled individuals; he notes that every single disability exists in tandem with another aspect of a person's identity. There are so many different levels of disabled experiences, that to infantilize and minimize an individual to their disability is ableist (Mozgala, b).

Mozgala also stresses the importance of having open, intelligent, and honest conversations about people's lived experiences with disabilities. He shares that he has experienced so many non-disabled people being afraid to talk with him or ask him questions about disability. Mozgala states, "We can always course correct in terms of semantics, but people are so afraid to even speak about it for fear of making a mistake, they won't even try to engage in a conversation" (Luthy, 2022).

Growth and inclusion of disabled communities in theatre is dependent on non-disabled individuals having ethical and informative conversations with disabled people about their lived experiences. It is crucial that these conversations happen, and that they happen ethically. While Mozgala believes theatre and the arts are the best vehicles for emotional storytelling, without ethical representation of the disabled individuals in those stories, no helpful or educational conversation will ever happen (Luthy, 2022; Mozgala, b).

Representation and Disability

While Gregg Mozgala auditioned for performance roles after undergrad, he noted that he was only being called back for characters who had different disabilities than him (Luthy, 2022). He noted that there is an unfortunate lack of, “the number of disabled actors appearing on stage and in the authentic representation of people with disabilities when they are on stage” (Luthy, 2022).

Mozgala created The Apothetae theater in order to tell stories about disabled individuals, performed by actors with those specified disabilities (Mozgala, a). He wanted real people with real disabilities representing characters with similar lived experiences to themselves. Mozgala believes that seeing accurate representations of disabled individuals in theatre allows other disabled individuals who identify with the performance to take agency and ownership of their own experiences. He believes that theater is a beautiful vehicle for telling these stories, if represented and talked about in an ethical way (Luthy, 2022).

Openly disabled individual and writer Sarah Kim talks about how important it is for disabled people to be seen in typical social places and situations. If people are not seeing disabled people included in a variety of spaces, she states, “It becomes easy to assume that disabled people do not belong in that space” (Kim). Not only do disabled individuals need more ethical performance representation, but disabled individuals with related disabilities need to be casted in disabled roles. As Kim states, “Nothing about us without us” (Kim).

In addition, if the disability representation comes with ableist media tropes like “inspiration porn” or infantilization of disabled people, it only harms disabled communities (Kim). Kim goes on to talk about how disabled people are always treated like a

novelty—something breakable and different. In Kim's personal experience, disabled individuals in performance and media only exist to feign inclusivity (Kim).

Much of the ableism in framing disabled stories would not happen if there were actual disabled individuals involved with their production. Non-disabled individuals cannot lead a disability discussion, because of their lack of first-hand disability experience. When non-disabled people produce content about disabled individuals, it reinforces the ableist idea that disability onstage is performative, and the accuracy in the representation of those disabilities is unimportant (Pulrang, 2021).

An effective way to create safe and inclusive theatre for disabled individuals is to employ disabled individuals. This is most important when it comes to producing and casting a performance that discusses and includes disabilities.

Criteria and Performances

When creating a performance space for a disabled individual to work, it is important to look at: who owns the production of the creative work, the representation of the cast, and the language used by non-disabled producers and reviewers in discussion of the performance. In order to reflect on how disabled people are being represented on Broadway, three Broadway performances will be assessed through the Disability Representation Checklist (DRC).

The performances to be analyzed through the DRC are: *Spring Awakening* performed by Deaf West in 2015-2016, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (CIDOG) performed at the Ethel Barrymore Theater between 2014-2016, and *Wicked* performed at the Gershwin Theatre in 2003-present day. It's important to note that to analyze the demographics more specifically, the opening night cast will be analyzed for *Spring Awakening* and *CIDOG*; the most recent cast from December 2022 will be analyzed for *Wicked*. Each of these performances has been chosen because the production either has a disabled character and/or has disabled actors on stage. The majority of Broadway performances do not have any disabled characters or actors in them (Theatre Access NYC). The focus of this paper is on productions that attempted or are attempting to represent and discuss disability in some way.

It is important to analyze these performances through the same criteria that is based on the foundational organization of vaudeville. Firstly, it is important to know who the production team is. These individuals choose the performances that they fund, and have a crucial hand in determining the representation of the casts seen on Broadway (Heartley, 2019). This is particularly important when the characters written by these individuals are disabled; you cannot write about an experience ethically and accurately if you have not lived it (Brown, 2022). The production team has the final say on what the production is going to look like; they decide what

the bodies on stage will do. If these individuals do not have disabled experiences, they will not be able to ethically dictate how an individual with disabilities might move in a given situation (Brown, 2022; Koppers, 2015). This section will look at: the producer, managing director, casting director, director, playwright, composer, and choreographers' disability statuses.

The next important criteria to analyze is the casting; this is the demographic breakdown of the cast. It is important that disabled characters are being portrayed by actors with those specified disabilities. It's also important to note that there are a plethora of roles for non-disabled individuals, and a select few for those with specific disabilities. Disabled individuals do not only have to be cast as disabled characters; their disabilities do not define them as an entire person (Considine, 2015). In order to determine if these performances have ableist representation, the casts' demographics will be analyzed for: non-disabled characters played by openly disabled actors, disabled characters played by openly disabled actors, the cast consisting of more than 50% openly disabled actors, and if all cast members are openly disabled. For the purposes of narrowing the scope, the focus will be on all named characters in the play; this excludes ensemble members, understudies, and swings, but will include double cast roles.

Lastly, there will be an analysis of the use of the language about the disabled actors and characters on stage by non-disabled producers, actors, and reviewers. This section will focus on looking at the language used in reviews written by non-disabled individuals, and the language used by the non-disabled owners and cast members. The producers, choreographers, directors, and artistic directors do crucial marketing and interviews during the early stages of the performances in order to increase their chances to sell out their shows. Today, these can be seen on social media platforms like Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube (Pontelandolfo, 2022).

The language individuals use affects who attends performances (Pontelandolfo, 2022). If that language is ableist, it does not create a safe space for disabled individuals to attend, and can also influence non-disabled individuals into believing that ableist language is acceptable to use. To see if that harmful language is repeated and travels beyond the theatre itself, it is important to look at reviews of these performances written by non-disabled individuals (Brown, 2014). The language used here shows the influence the performance had on the reviewer; if the language being used is harmful or ableist, there is no ethical conversation happening for disabled communities (Luthy, 2022).

The Disability Representation Checklist dictates each section of the ableism criteria. Each box that is checked off signifies the ethical representation of a disabled person, the employment of a disabled person, or the consistent use of intersectional language. The more boxes that are checked off, the more disability representation exists within that specific performance.

Disability Representation Checklist

Production Team	<input type="checkbox"/> The Casting Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Producer is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Artistic Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Managing Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Playwright is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Composer is openly disabled (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> The Choreographer is openly disabled (if applicable)
Casting	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input type="checkbox"/> Disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input type="checkbox"/> The cast more than 50% openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> All cast members are openly disabled
Language	<input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used by Production Team <input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used in reviews

The purpose of this is to observe how Broadway's roots in vaudeville affect the representation of disabled individuals onstage. The first step in improving any unethical situation is to acknowledge it exists and learn about it. The second is to listen to individuals who have experienced those unethical situations, and to have honest and informed discussions on how to improve it. Without learning about and acknowledging unethical casting, production, and language on the Broadway stage, there will never be open and honest discussions on the steps that need to be taken to achieve ethical disability representation.

***Spring Awakening* - Brooks Atkinson Theatre**

Spring Awakening is a musical performance by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik; the performance that will be discussed is the 2015 opening night Broadway performance by Deaf West at the Brooks Atkinson Theatre. This performance was a revival of the original Broadway production. Even though the original script doesn't state that any characters have disabilities, this production casted nine disabled individuals as major cast members (Franklin, 2020).

The director and choreographer worked with Sara Novic, a deaf author (Novic), to modify the script slightly to include the Milan Conference in 1880 (Ulaby, 2015). This was a historical event for deaf people in the EU, as it banned the use of signing in school, and forced deaf children to read lips and speak (The Deaf Museums Project). The goal was to make deaf and hard-of-hearing actors relate to the script on a more personal level, and to educate audience members who did not previously know about this historical injustice.

The director's goal was to start a conversation with unknowing people about disability injustices in history as a way to educate while entertaining (Ulaby, 2015). While educating people on disability history is important, it is even more important that these stories are being told ethically through people with those specified disabilities (Luthy, 2022). Analyzing *Spring*

Awakening through the Disability Representation Chart, will provide clarity on the representation of disabilities in its production team, casting, and language.

Production Team

The production team is funding, cultivating, and producing this performance for audience members. The production organization that produced *Spring Awakening*, and a majority of the performances on Broadway, was the Nederlander Organization. The chairman at the time of this production was James M. Nederlander; he has never self identified as disabled on the Nederlander Organization website or any professional website (The Nederlander Organization).

The main casting director from Telsey and company was Craig Burns; Burns has never shared having any disabilities on their instagram (Burns; Playbill, c). The artistic director of Deaf West Theatre at the time of *Spring Awakening* was David J. Kurs; DJ is a deaf producer, and is open about his experience as deaf individual (Kev Davenport, 2020). The managing director was Beverly Nero; although she is fluent in ASL, Nero has never been open about having any disabilities (Heffley, 2000).

Neither the playwright of *Spring Awakening*, Steven Sater, nor the composer, Duncan Sheik, have any known disabilities, nor have even openly spoken about any disability advocacy (Sheik; Wadler, 2006). Director Michael Arden has also not publicly disclosed having a disability (Arden), and the choreographer, Spencer Liff, has no known disabilities (Liff).

These people listed were the most involved with the creation and production of this performance, and seven out of eight of those individuals are non-disabled. This is not an appropriate representation of disabled individuals.

Casting

The analysis of the representation of *Spring Awakening*'s casting will confirm if disabled characters were present, and if they were being represented by actors with those disabilities. Even though none of the original characters in the musical were written as deaf, hard-of-hearing, or as wheelchair users, actors with those disabilities were hired.

The roles in this performance were double cast; for each role that was played by a deaf or hard-of-hearing actor, a hearing actor spoke the lines aloud (Ulaby, 2015). All of the cast members, regardless of disability status, signed along with the dialogue they spoke. Out of the 22 actors casted in this performance of *Spring Awakening*, 9 actors had disabilities; 8 actors were hard-of-hearing or deaf, and one actor used a wheelchair (Playbill, b).

Actors Miles Barbee, Joshua Castille, Daniel N. Durant, Treshelle Edmond, Sandra Mae Frank, Russell Harvard, Amelia Hensley, and Marlee Matlin are all deaf or hard-of-hearing actors who were hired for this performance; Ali Stroker uses a wheelchair (“About,” a; “Bio,” a; “Bio,” c; “Biography,” d; “Deaf Talent;” Gioia, & Viagas, 2015; Harvard; Starr, 2022; “Who is Treshelle;”). The rest of the characters and the cast hired for those roles have not disclosed any disabilities (“Alexandra Winter,” “Bio,” d; “Biography,” c; Boniello; Diamond, 2015; “Girlhouse;” “Katie Boeck;” “The Latest;” Manheim; McKenzie; Mientus; Millward, 2017; “Sean Grandillo”).

Based on this information, there are no disabled characters being played by non-disabled actors; however, only about 40% of the cast is represented by disabled individuals.

Language

The last section will analyze the language used by non-disabled owners, actors, and/or audience members of *Spring Awakening*. The chairman at the time of the Nederlander Organization of *Spring Awakening* was James M. Nederlander (The Nederlander Organization).

Even though the official Nederlander website says its goal is “diversity, equity, and inclusion,” James directly refused to fund performances that involved “disaster and disease.” He famously turned down the production “The Elephant Man” and was very disapproving of the funding of the 1997 revival of “The Diary of Anne Frank (The Nederlander Organization; Weber, 2016).” These are neither topics of disaster or diseases; these were stories of disabled people. This mindset that disabilities are equatable to disaster and disease is ableist.

Another owner to look at is choreographer Spencer Liff, who choreographed an entire performance attempting to use ASL, while not knowing a single sign of ASL. In his interview with the Hollywood Reporter, it opens with a quote of Liff saying, “People don’t do musicals with deaf actors for a reason,” and then goes on to compare the performance to “a foreign movie with subtitles” (Lee, 2015). This kind of language negatively affects disabled individuals, forcing them into an “othered” and “different” category of society. Liff is implying here that deaf actors are difficult to work with because they are deaf, and that it is a hardship for non-deaf directors and choreographers to find ways to communicate with those cast members. Liff talks about how inconvenient it was that not all the cast members were “hearing actors,” and that it would take an hour to explain things to his deaf cast members. He notes that he was not communicating with them in ASL; he was speaking and yelling at them (Lee, 2015).

Liff also talks about how he did not like the way a lot of the traditional and recognizable, ASL signs looked onstage; they were not “interesting-looking enough.” He made up his own hand gestures that imitated signs for the actors to perform, and placed all other ASL signs out of grammatical order (Lee, 2015). This is an incredibly appropriative act. Non-deaf individuals are not even allowed to give themselves a name in ASL; it must be given to a non-deaf individual by

someone in the deaf community (Hand Speak, b). For a non-deaf individual to create fake signs in ASL is egregiously ableist.

The last thing the Liff states in this interview is that he, “Watched the show with earplugs to see what the deaf audience sees.” Liff watched the performance, appropriated the deaf experience, and made assumptions on what individuals with those experiences would think (Lee, 2015). Putting in ear plugs, or putting on a blind fold, or sitting in a wheelchair, does not give an accurate or ethical representation of what disabled individuals experience. The only ethical way to learn about how disabled individuals experience a performance is for those individuals to *experience* that performance and give honest feedback (Kuppers).

Reviews from non-disabled audience members do not show much improvement from the language from the owners. Charles Isherwood, a non-disabled reviewer from the New York Times, calls the disabled aspects of the performance “novelties” to which the audience can “assimilate” (Isherwood, n.d.; 2015). Being deaf is not a novelty, and saying so is ableist (Luthy, 2022). Isherwood also discusses that non-disabled people might get “sensory overload” trying to adjust their concentration while watching a performance with ASL (Isherwood, 2015). Using ASL is an honorable part of being in the Deaf community, which does not view being deaf or hard-of-hearing as an “impairment” or something wrong that needs to be changed. In fact, they believe that hearing individuals who think that are ableist (James & Huang, 2006). ASL is the first and primary language of members of the Deaf community; non-disabled individuals should not be praised for tolerating people communicating in their first language (Brown, 2014).

In a review from the Hollywood Reporter, non-disabled reviewer David Rooney calls *Spring Awakening* an “admirable undertaking” that he wishes that he could support (New York Film Critics Circle; Rooney, 2015). This language infantilizes disabled performers, and

unnecessarily praises non-disabled producers for including these disabled actors in the first place (Brown, 2014). Rooney then goes on to call ASL “gestures.” He says the use of ASL was distracting, and that he could not focus on watching the deaf performers while looking for the actors who were speaking the lines (Rooney, 2015). Denoting ASL as simply “gestures” because of a lack of understanding about that language is ableist. ASL is NOT English; a sign is a “word,” not a gesture. Equating an entire language to gestures is the same as calling a language gibberish (Hand Speak, a). All this harmful language shows a lack of understanding about disabilities, and the people who have those lived disabled experiences. The language used by the non-disabled reviewers and owners of this performance are ableist and harmful to the disabled community. This language infantilizes these individuals, and does not tell disabled individuals that this performance is a safe space for these communities.

Disability Representation Checklist - *Spring Awakening*

Production Team	<input type="checkbox"/> The Casting Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Producer is openly disabled <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The Artistic Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Managing Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Playwright is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Composer is openly disabled (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> The Choreographer is openly disabled (if applicable)
Casting	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Non-disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Disabled characters played by openly disabled actors – not applicable to this performance <input type="checkbox"/> The cast more than 50% openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> All cast members are openly disabled
Language	<input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used by Production Team <input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used in reviews

Deaf West, and the production team at Deaf West, attempted to capture a d/Deaf experience through the slight shifting of the *Spring Awakening* plot. Regardless of the success of the performance, the representation of the production team of *Spring Awakening* shows a complete lack of disabled actors, more specifically d/Deaf individuals. In addition, the language used by the production team and reviewers was harmful and ableist. A lack of ethical representation of disabled communities on the stage for these productions resulted in the increase of the damaging use of ableist language.

Deaf West's performance of *Spring Awakening* was a forerunner in the casting of disabled actors. At this time, the total number of actors' equity members who had self-identified with a disability was 219 members out of the total 50,920 members (Lehrer, 2017). While less than 1% of total people employed with actors' equity were disabled at this time, just about 40% of the actors in this cast were disabled. While this is a huge improvement from other performances on Broadway at this time, *Spring Awakening* had a lack of disability diversity amongst the owners, presented a cast that was less than 50% disabled, and reinforced harmful and ableist language in interviews and reviews.

***The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* - Ethel Barrymore Theatre**

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time (CIDOG) by Simon Stephens is a play originally based on a book by Mark Haddon of the same name. *CIDOG* originally debuted through the National Theater in London in 2012; however, the performance analyzed here is the opening night Broadway performance in 2014 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre (National Theatre Archive). This show focuses on a 15-year-old Christopher, a character identified as having "Asperger's syndrome," an outdated term for autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Cohen, 2014; The National Autistic Society, n.d.). It will be here henceforth referenced to as ASD.

Christopher is described as a child with an extraordinarily intelligent brain and a complete lack of social skills (Gioia, 2014). Mark Haddon, author of the original book, wrote in his blog that this story was not meant to be a discussion on ASD. He states in his blog that he knows very little about ASD. Although he admits that Christopher has ASD, he did not intend for it to be the focus of the story (Haddon, 2009).

In an interview with the National Theater, Stephen and Haddons discuss how hard they worked on trying to captivate an experience and different ways of thinking that they were unfamiliar (Curiouswestend, 2014). Not once in the interview do they discuss talking to an individual with ASD to ask them how they might experience or interpret a situation.

Production Team

The first section in analyzing *CIDOG* is the production team: who is presenting the play to the public, and what are they saying about the disabled characters in that performance. The playwright, Simon Stephens, has specifically stated that he does not have ASD or any related disability (Curiouswestend, 2014).

The two major producers were Stuart Thompson and Tim Levy, and neither of these men identifies as having any disabilities, nor speaks openly about disability rights (Mele, 2017; “Tim Levy”). The director, Marianne Elliott, has never talked openly about having any disabilities (The Encyclopedia of Britannica). The composer, Adrian Sutton, and the artistic director, Kristen Hughes, have not discussed experiencing disabilities either (“Kristen Hughes;” Sutton, n.d.).

The two casting directors on *CIDOG* were Daniel Swee and Cindy Tolan (Playbill, e). In their interviews, neither of them disclosed having any disabilities, or even mentioned casting disabled characters (American Theatre Wing, 2014; Breakdown Services, 2016). The choreographers, Scott Graham and Steven Hoggett, have not openly talked about having any

disabilities (Frantic Assembly, n.d.; Sagolla, 2022). Neither had the general manager, Lizbeth Cone (Association of Theatrical Press Agents and Managers; 2019).

The number of disabled people represented in the ownership of *CIDOG* is zero. Although not counted in the criteria, it is important to mention that Mark Haddon, author of the book *CIDOG*, also does not have ASD (Haddon, 2009). This does not show proof of intersectionality and representation of individuals with disabilities; this production team is ableist.

Casting

When examining the casting of the characters and cast members it is important to see if disabled characters are portrayed by disabled actors. The only character in *CIDOG* that has a clear disability is Christopher, who has autism spectrum disorder (ASD) (Cohen, 2014). There are no other clearly defined disabilities in the character descriptions of *CIDOG* (Playbill, a).

Alex Sharp, who played Christopher in the opening night production of *CIDOG*, is openly not disabled nor a disability advocate (Juilliard, 2016). Unfortunately, the rest of the characters have been casted similarly. Supporting leads Ian Barford, Francesca Faridany, and Enid Graham also have not disclosed being disabled (“Biography,” e; Juilliard, n.d.; “Meet Francesca,” n.d.). The rest of the named cast is the same; neither Helen Carey, Mercedes Herrero, Richard Hollis, Ben Horner, Jocelyn Bioh, nor David Manis are openly disabled (“About Mercedes Herrero,” n.d.; Bioh, n.d.; “Helen Carey,” 2019; Horner, n.d.; Lemon, 2012 “Richard Hollis,” n.d.;).

CIDOG is a play that tries to communicate how Christopher processes and experiences different things as a boy with ASD. Nobody in the cast, most importantly the lead actor Alex Sharp, have lived their lives openly with ASD. In this production of *CIDOG*, all non-disabled characters were played by non-disabled actors, the disabled character was played by a

non-disabled actor, and there are *no* known disabled actors in the performance. This is not what ethical representation of people with disabilities looks like.

Language

The last section of *CIDOG* will analyze the language used by non-disabled owners, actors, and reviewers regarding the disabled characters' experiences in this performance. It is important to note that in the original book *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon, the copyright page states that Christopher is an “autistic fifteen-year old boy” (Haddon, 2004). The first two genres of the book listed are: “Autism–Fiction” and “Savant (Savant Syndrome) –Fiction” (Haddon, 2004).

On Mark Haddon’s personal blog, Haddon stresses that his book is not about ASD even though Christopher is autistic. Haddon states that, “labels say nothing about a person” (Haddon, 2009). Later in an interview with the playwright Simon Stephens, he implies that *CIDOG* does *not* represent an individual with autism; and that describing Christopher as autistic is wrong (Meacham, 2016). This is despite the fact that he *wrote* in the original book that Christopher is an “autistic fifteen-year-old boy” (Haddon, 2004).

Disability advocate and autistic individual Lydia X. Z. Brown, strongly disagrees with these statements. In Brown’s opinion, “it is impossible to affirm the value and worth of an Autistic person without recognizing /their/ identity *as* an Autistic person.” Denying that Christopher is autistic shuts off an entire section of his identity for the comfort of the non-disabled people talking about him. It implies that Christopher has a certain framework of thought because he is “wrong,” not because his brain is hardwired to respond in a different way (Brown, 2011). In an interview with both Stephens and Haddon, it is clear that this is exactly how they feel about Christopher; they stated how important it was for them to capture

Christopher's "profoundly mistaken view of the world" (Curiouswestend, 2014). Just because an individual is autistic does not mean that their viewpoint of the world is "wrong" or "mistaken," it means they have a different lived experience than someone without autism. Believing that an autistic person's perspective of their world is wrong because they are autistic is ableist (Brown, 2011).

In a review of *CIDOG* in the New York Post, Elisabeth Vincentelli praises actor Alex Sharp in his role as Christopher. She stresses that he gives "an incredibly warm and sympathetic performance as someone who, ironically, has no capacity for empathy" (Vincentelli, 2014). Vincentelli is making the assumption that autistic people cannot feel empathy or emotions (Brown, 14). Autistic people feel emotions; they are human beings. Autism can cause a lack of control in emotional regulation; this means that emotions can fluctuate quickly and extremely. This does not mean that autistic people automatically have no capacity for empathy; this false and minimizing language is ableist (Brown, 2014).

In addition to the harmful language use, Vincentelli praises Sharp for making an autistic character relatable and likable (Vincentelli, 2014). Assuming that a character would not be relatable to an audience because they are autistic is ableist; it reinforces the ableist structure that disabled people and non-disabled people are incomprehensibly different (Brown, 2014).

In a New York Times review by Ben Brantley, he describes Christopher as "a parent's nightmare" (Brantley, 2014). Brantley goes on to say this is because Christopher does not like to be touched, does not understand small talk, and has tantrums when his routines are broken. He goes on to describe Christopher as "touch-allergic," and that his interactions with his parents throughout the show are heartbreaking (Brantley, 2014).

Brantley uses the phrase “touch-allergic” here, in place for the actual term for what Christopher is experiencing. Autistic individuals can experience tactile stimuli differently than non-autistic people; this is called hyperresponsivity. It is when certain smells, sounds, textures, visuals and/or tastes make an autistic individual feel overwhelmed. Typically this causes stimming, which is repetitive movements or vocalizations that can help express or release emotions. If it is severe enough, it can be physically painful. Not using the correct terminology for these traits is ableist (Henderson, 2022).

In addition to this, describing Christopher as “a parent’s nightmare,” because he has autistic traits and stims, is an example of harmful language that reinforces the idea that being autistic is undesirable (Brown, 2011). This language can also be retraumatizing to disabled individuals who have ever felt like a burden to their parents or caregivers, and it does not create a safe space for disabled individuals (Brown, 2022).

The language used in and around this production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* has largely been harmful to the disabled, and more particularly the autistic, communities. Many instances of ableist language seen in reviews of *CIDOG* are due to a basic lack of knowledge of the proper terminology to use when referencing disabled experiences (Brown, 2014). Ignoring a central aspect of a disabled person’s life, or demonizing it because it goes against societal norms, is ableist. It is important for those non-disabled individuals who have the ability to educate themselves on inclusive language to do so. Hateful and dismissive language does not create spaces in which disabled individuals may safely exist (Brown, 2022).

Disability Representation Checklist - *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*

Production Team	<input type="checkbox"/> The Casting Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Producer is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Artistic Director is openly disabled
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	<input type="checkbox"/> The Managing Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Playwright is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Composer is openly disabled (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> The Choreographer is openly disabled (if applicable)
Casting	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input type="checkbox"/> Disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input type="checkbox"/> The cast more than 50% openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> All cast members are openly disabled
Language	<input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used by Production Team <input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used in reviews

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time fully enforces the vaudeville foundation. There was not a single person in this production, owners or cast, that had autism, ASD, or any other stated disabilities. Nobody had first hand experience with disabilities. In addition, the play did not cultivate safe and informative language throughout the performance—both owners, and reviewers consistently used ableist and harmful language in discussion of *CIDOG*.

Even though *CIDOG* opened after Deaf West's performance of *Spring Awakening*, there was no evolution in the ethical representation of disabled communities in theatre. There was a loss in accessibility, a loss in representation, and a stagnant lack of change in the language used when discussing disabled people.

***Wicked* - Gershwin Theatre**

Wicked is a musical performance adapted by Winnie Holzman and composed by Stephen Schwartz; it opened in 2003 and is the 5th longest running show on Broadway (Lefkowitz, 2019). This musical takes characters and plot lines from the movie and book, *The Wizard of Oz*. It follows the Wicked Witch, Elphaba, who was born with green skin, and her sister Nessarose, who uses a wheelchair. (*Wicked*)

Elphaba's father believes she is disgusting due to her green skin; he favors her sister, Nessarose. Elphaba is required by her father to attend college with Nessarose to help take care of her. By the end of the play, Nessarose begs Elphaba to "cure" her of her disability, and has become a terribly evil character (Haller, 2003).

When critiquing *Wicked*, disability advocates discuss the dangers of making disabled characters villainous without recognizing the history of disabled people on stage. While the main themes of the musical focus on the social outcasting and labeling of Elphaba due to her green skin color, the musical does very little to properly represent the disenfranchisement of Nessarose, the disabled character on stage (Haller, 2003).

Wicked has been on Broadway for 19 years; for the purposes of analysis in this paper, the current cast will be analyzed through the DRC (*Wicked*). However, since the production was created under the opening night production team, that section will focus on the original production team, not the current ones.

Production Team

To look at the representation of the disabled characters in *Wicked*, first there will be an analysis of the production team; who adapted and composed the musical, and who is showing this performance to audience members.

The artistic director of *Wicked* was James M. Nederlander. When the show originally opened, the Nederlander Organization had control over the Gershwin Theater (Broadway Direct). As stated previously, James M. Nederlander is not disabled and does not support the representation of disabled individuals (Weber). The executive producers in *Wicked* were Marcia Goldberg, and Nina Essman. Executive producers are more hands on in productions than

producers; neither of these individuals have ever disclosed being disabled (Davenport, 2020; O'Brien, 2016; "Our Team").

The adaptation of the script from the original book was created by Winnie Holzman; the composer is Stephen Schwartz (Playbill, d). Neither of these individuals have discussed being disabled, nor have openly talked about disability advocacy (Altmann, 2012; "Full Bio"). In addition to this, neither the director, Joe Mantello, nor the choreographer, Wayne Cilento, have disclosed having any disabilities on their social media, nor in interviews (Cross, n.d.; Dowd, 2018; Playbill, d).

The casting of *Wicked* was done by Craig Burns through Telsey and Company; Burns has not disclosed in any interviews nor on his Instagram account that he has any disabilities (Burns; Playbill, d). The company/general manager of this performance was Susan Sampliner; on her LinkedIn profile, she has not disclosed any disability status, nor talked about any disability advocacy she might have done ("Susan Sampliner").

As seen above, out of the nine important owners and creators of *Wicked*, none of them are disabled. In addition to this, none of them have talked about disability advocacy, or experiencing theater as a disabled individual. This does not show ethical representation of disabled individuals in the production team of this performance.

Casting

The next section of *Wicked* to analyze is the casting; this looks at the representation of disabled actors and characters in this performance. Even though the lead character, Elphaba, is a social outcast due to the green color of her skin, the only character with any stated disabilities is Nessarose. She uses a wheelchair (Playbill, d).

Mikayla Renfrow is currently casted as Nessarose; she does not use a wheelchair (Renfrow). Other lead actors Talia Suskauer, Brittney Johnson, Sharon Sachs, Cleavant Derricks, James D Gish, Michael Wartella, and Clifton Davis have not discussed being disabled on their personal websites or their social media (“About,” b; “About Talia;” “Biography,” a; Crawford, 2019; “Biography,” b; “Bio,” b; Wartella). Supporting actors Kristina Doucette, Chase Madigan, Michael Thatcher, and Christianne Tisdale also have not talked about having any disabilities as an actor on Broadway (Doucette; Gans, 2013; Madigan; “Michael Thatcher;”).

While *Wicked* does not solely focus on Nessarose, Elphaba’s major conflicts are directly related to keeping her sister “safe” because she is disabled (Haller, 2003). During the performance of *Wicked*, Elphaba “cures” Nessarose of her disability; she no longer needs to use a wheelchair and she performs the rest of her time on stage standing (Magula, 2016). This prevents many wheelchair users from performing as Nessarose. The role requires the actor to get out of their wheelchair; not every person in a wheelchair can stand for long periods of time, if at all (Haddon, 2004). Since 2003, there has never been a disabled individual cast as Nessarose (Magula, 2016). Not only does this story line prevent an actual individual from being cast in this role, it enforces the idea that disabled people need to be “cured” of their disabilities (Brown, 2014).

To recap the disability representation of the 2022 performance of *Wicked*: the only disabled character was played by a non-disabled actor, and the remaining characters were casted as non-disabled actors. This means that there are zero openly disabled individuals in this performance. In addition to this, Nessarose’s storyline makes it incredibly difficult for an actor who uses a wheelchair to play this role (MissSaigonFAN, 2008). This does not create a safe

space for disabled people because it reinforces the societal ideal that disabled individuals need to be “saved” (Brown, 2014).

Language

This last section will look at the language used by the owners, performers, and reviewers of *Wicked*. In addition, it will also look at some of the language used in the script and performance of the show itself. While the interviews and language surrounding the show today are less blatantly ableist because Nessarose is not the main character of *Wicked*, the ableist content of the show itself is enough to make many recent viewers extremely upset.

Throughout *Wicked*, Nessarose’s plot often moves forward because she is disabled; the characters are only motivated to interact with her because she is in a wheelchair (Haller, 2003). Elphaba is forced by her father to bring Nessarose to college with her, and is tasked with making sure her sister is safe; their father thinks Nessarose is incapable of taking care of herself because she is in a wheelchair (Henderson, 2022). This type of language infantilizes disabled individuals and gives the impression to audience members that a disabled person is incapable of advocating for themselves or helping themselves independently. While this is not true for all disabled individuals, the assumption should not be that disabled people are incapable of taking care of themselves.

In Act I, the character Boq asks Nessarose to dance and they perform the song, “Dancing Through Life.” This only happens because Boq is trying to seem sympathetic and desirable to Galinda. She tells Boq she pities Nessarose because no one wants to dance with her. Galinda then states how she would fawn over a man who would dance with Nessarose “even though” she uses a wheelchair. Boq uses Nessarose’s disability to try to seduce Galinda. In addition, Nessarose is only at this dance because Elphaba and Galinda coerced her, so that they could use the sympathy of her disability to become “popular” (Henderson, 2022).

Nessarose consistently uses language that reinforces the idea that disabled people are weak and need to be saved. In the first half of *Wicked*, Nessarose consistently asks for sympathy from the other characters due to the fact that she uses a wheelchair. Nessarose tricks Boq into being in a relationship with her because she is disabled and “needs extra care (Newman-Stille, 2018).” Later in the performance, she begs Elphaba to “cure” her, so that she can walk; Elphaba obliges and gives her magic ruby slippers that will enable her to walk. Nessarose stands up out of her wheelchair, and performs the rest of *Wicked* standing. To seek revenge, Nessarose becomes the Wicked Witch of the East (Haller, 2003).

This narrative that disabled people are “broken” and need to be “saved” or “cured” of their disabilities enforces the idea that disabled people are “undesirable” and “an inconvenience (Brown, 2022).” In addition, the villainous curving of Nessarose is a longtime standing trope in disabled characters in the arts and media (Shakespeare, 1999). Disability studies scholar Tom Shakespeare states that using a disability as a character trait or a plot device “is a lazy shortcut.” It is not an accurate representation of how disabled individuals live their lives. Just because an individual is disabled, does not mean they are evil, or that their disability is the most important thing about them (Gibson, 2021).

While there is no specific evidence of the production team using any harmful language towards Nessarose during interviews, it is important to highlight that in a discussion with Stephen Schwartz on the writing and creation of *Wicked*, neither Nessarose nor disabilities in general are mentioned. This can be seen in an interview released by Schwartz in 2010. Since the playwright is non-disabled and the script contains harmful and ableist language and subplots, the Disability Representation Checklist notes that ableist language was used by the production team.

There are very few reviews of *Wicked* that focus on this specific performance *and* Nessarose. However, one review from the Chicago Sun-Times specifically calls out the ableism in *Wicked*. Flanders points out how Nessarose’s entire character was written around the tragedy of her disability, and that the actor at the time, Kimberly Immanuel, was not a wheelchair user. When Nessarose can magically walk, Flanders states that it was offensive to disabled communities (Flanders, 2022). Disabled individuals do not need to be “cured” of their disabilities; showcasing this on stage today should be seen as wrong and ableist (Flanders, 2022).

In reviews from the other performances of *Wicked*, there is use of ableist language when discussing Nessarose. Former Nessarose actor Stephanie Brown spoke *as* Nessarose in an interview stating, “I am crippled, in a wheelchair, and selfish and self-centered.” She finished the quote by saying that Nessarose wants nothing more than to be “normal.” While it can be ethically acceptable for a disabled individual to reclaim the term and self-identify as “cripple,” it is not ethical for a non-disabled person to use this type of language regarding disabilities (Brown, 2014; 2022).

Disability Representation Checklist - *Wicked*

Production Team	<input type="checkbox"/> The Casting Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Producer is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Artistic Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Managing Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Director is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Playwright is openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> The Composer is openly disabled (if applicable) <input type="checkbox"/> The Choreographer is openly disabled (if applicable)
Casting	<input type="checkbox"/> Non-disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input type="checkbox"/> Disabled characters played by openly disabled actors <input type="checkbox"/> The cast more than 50% openly disabled <input type="checkbox"/> All cast members are openly disabled

Language	<input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used by Production Team <input type="checkbox"/> No ableist language used in reviews
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Even though *Wicked* is one of the longest performing shows on Broadway, it has not seen growth of disability representation in its performances. Not only does it have a lack of representation, the plot devices and language used in the performance itself reinforces that societal standard that disabilities are at the forefront of disabled individuals' personalities and identities. This framework is harmful to disabled communities, and further dismantles safe spaces for disabled individuals.

Conclusion

Analyzing *Spring Awakening*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and *Wicked* through the framework of the Disability Representation Checklist reveals a lack of representation of disabled people on Broadway. Not only is this seen in shows whose characters have specified disabilities, but in shows in which no disabilities are present at all. In a country where 1 in 4 people are living with a disability, there must be more equal representation of disabled people in theatre (Center for Disease Control and Prevention).

Vaudeville productions, while employing certain disabled individuals, unfortunately created an exploitative and ableist narrative around disabilities. Regardless of the evolution of inclusivity of performance in America, modern Broadway is still structured around the same ableist vaudeville narrative.

Vaudeville Traditions in Contemporary Broadway Productions

The creation and success of vaudeville productions was intrinsically connected with ableism. These performances focused on exploiting disabled individuals for the entertainment and comfort of non-disabled audience members. These non-disabled producers created performances involving disabled individuals, specifically designed and cultivated to entertain and lure non-disabled audience members.

Although the finished products look very different today, the framework that created vaudeville still shapes Broadway performances. The production team, the representation of the cast, and the language used throughout the entire process, can either solidify or dismantle the ableist framework that upholds Broadway. Here it is clear that many ableist vaudeville traditions have filtered into the majority of contemporary Broadway productions.

It can be seen from these performances that a lack of representation of disabled people in the administration and cast of these productions caused direct linguistic harm to disabled communities. This language reinforces social assumptions that disabled people are useless, stupid, unworthy of effort or rights, and undeserving of the time it takes to properly represent them.

Spring Awakening, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and *Wicked* all show examples of the harmful and ableist practices that shape today's Broadway performances. The next step in dismantling the ableist framework that shapes Broadway is to have open and honest discussions with disabled individuals about what these performances need in order to be accessible.

Recommendations and Best Practices

Disabled individuals and disability advocates have some recommendations on best practices of the representation of disabled individuals onstage.

In discussion of *Spring Awakening*, Kaj Kraus, a d/Deaf graduate student, talked about how this performance was one of the more accessible shows for d/Deaf people that he has seen. However, one of the largest critiques that Kraus, and other d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals had was the simultaneous use of American Sign Language and spoken language by the non-deaf performers. This is called “simultaneous communication” (sim-com), and is widely regarded in the d/Deaf communities as an ineffective way of communicating (Epstein & Needham, 2015). The syntax structure of ASL is completely different than English; English is formatted as subject>verb>object while ASL is formatted in different ways depending on the context (LanguageBird).

Another d/Deaf reviewer, Max Graham-Putter, goes into more details about his lack of understanding of *Spring Awakening*; not only were the signs jumbled due to the adaption of sim-com, the actors on stage were not always facing the audience. Graham-Putter stresses the importance of front facing eye contact in ASL, as facial expressions influence the meaning of signs. The performers in *Spring Awakening* used ASL while facing *each other*, not the audience (Epstein & Needham, 2015).

In addition, these d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing audience members who rely on ASL for communication noticed how not all of the signs on stage were ASL. There were whole scenes that Graham-Putter could not understand because the actors on stage simply were not using ASL. It made him feel unwelcome in a performance that seemed to be marketed for him, a d/Deaf person (Epstein & Needham, 2015).

These d/Deaf reviewers recommend that in the future casts that combine both d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, and hearing people, double cast both the signing and speaking roles. The use of sim-com in the performance was deemed useless and the imagined gestures created by choreographer Spencer Liff were completely incomprehensible. The performance would have been more accessible to more disabled people if the entire show was fully performed in two languages (Epstein & Needham, 2015).

During the performance of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, autistic audience member Rory Bosley recalls how incredibly overstimulated he was throughout the performance. In a conversation on December 3, 2022, he notes that the show incorporates many sudden, loud sounds and flashing lights to create a simulation of overstimulation for non-autistic audience members (Gioia). For Bosley, who can experience overstimulation from sitting in a high school classroom, the experience was horrifying.

Bosley states how important it is for non-autistic people to better understand his autistic experiences, but not at the cost of alienating and harming autistic people. He goes on to explain that if there was written warning in the playbill when these overstimulating moments would happen, he would have the time to mentally prepare for them. Although this may not work for every autistic person, Bosley says this would be a step in the right direction.

In discussion on the accessibility of *Wicked*, wheelchair user Emeily Flyr discusses the ableist and exclusionary storyline that involve Nessarose. Flyr expresses disgust that such an ableist and exclusionary story line still exists in Broadway, and stresses that disabled individuals should never be made to feel ashamed of being disabled. *Wicked* made her feel like that (Flyr, 2020).

Flyr recommends that in order to improve disability representation on Broadway, shows with ableist topics such as this need to be completely eliminated. Ethical representation is extremely important for not just the disabled communities, but for all marginalized communities. Flyr shares that performances should not be produced if they do not ethically represent “race, gender, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, and everything in between.” Anything less than complete ethical and intersectional representation in performance is unacceptable (Flyr, 2020).

Roadblocks and Future Research

While researching for this paper, it is important to note the lack of theatre reviews written by openly disabled people. While the original goal of this paper was to determine the level of accessibility of *Spring Awakening*, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, and *Wicked*, there were not enough reviews of these shows written by people with disabilities. Since this topic's focus should ethically be based on first hand reviews, the lack of representation of disabled individuals attending these performances led to a topic shift for this paper.

An idea for future research into disability representation would be to analyze the lack of disabled individuals in Broadway audiences, and research reasons for this lack of attendance. A possible focus could be on the mental, physical, and audio/visual accessibility for various Broadway performances. Not only for performances that discuss disabilities, but all Broadway productions. An intersectional dissection of the function and framework of Broadway could create safe and supportive spaces for disabled individuals. Even further, it could create conversations that make theatre an accessible and safe space for all marginalized communities.

Without ethical representation in performance, and without the intersectional and inclusive use of language, Broadway will continue to disregard and disrespect disabled communities. In order to achieve full intersectionality and acceptance of these marginalized communities, non-disabled individuals need to have respectful and informative conversations with disabled communities. In addition, non-disabled people should be putting active effort into switching the ableist and microaggressive language they use, while actively correcting harmful language they notice other non-disabled people using. While this process of language switching takes time and effort, in order to ensure the safety and inclusion of disabled communities, it is absolutely necessary.

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