

Application of Universal Design in Theater

By

Zorell Havercome

Submitted to the Department of Theater and Performance

Conservatory of Theatre Arts

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

May 2024

**Introduction:**

Universal design is a concept that aids in creating inclusive spaces for society. Applying UD in Commercial and Educational theaters in New York City can address the existing representational gaps within their communities (students, theater makers, and supporting staff). Inclusive theater is a production or creative space that incorporates all differences, i.e., racial, political, sexuality, religion, and disability, in all aspects of their work. A commercial theater is a theater house that creates shows with the intent to make money from its productions. An Educational Theater is a company whose primary purpose is to teach performance and its related skills to people at all levels. These skills include singing, dancing, acting, technical stage production, stage management, and ensemble building. There is some overlap between these company styles because some projects are collaborative, and many preprofessional/professional artists work across all stages in order to be consistently working.

Artistically, I desire to be an artist who generates conversations around equity, inclusion, and diversity. Values are evident in art despite the medium. The values are the beliefs that the observers of the art leave with and the first things that are pumped into the body of work by artists. These values are infused into artists' work and received by audience members. Because these beliefs create values, art teaches us what and whom to value. Over time, these choices, based on perceived artistic and monetary exchange value, become internalized by consumers.

Inclusive theater is not shown consistently compared to its commercial counterparts because it is often undersupported (financially). When there are productions that have an "Inclusive night," it is designed to make the institution of the

commercial theater appear as if they are regularly inclusive. All theaters serve as hosts for artists to cultivate more art. It is not just that they serve as hosts for artists and creators, but they also often serve other interests. The art created is heavily policed, and the powers that be (producers) are always only looking for certain types of people to play characters within productions. Most of the people who play the roles happen to be white and able-bodied. These characters are not standard ensemble members but instead are more than supporting the main company through playing supporting and leading roles. Some people will fit into the existing frameworks and ways of doing things. The “old ways” (pre-2000) are traditions that were initially a group of normalized behaviors that became readily practiced and whose remnants are still a part of today's business practice. The problem with doing things the “old way or traditionally” is that it is whitewashed, heteronormative, and ableist. It places able-bodied people and white people at the top. If you are not one or both of those things, you are not welcome into “The Club.”

The world's systems fell apart during the pandemic, and the existing gaps were highlighted. Within these gaps, many people are open to the theater, but it has traditionally been inaccessible to them because of disabilities. Now, subscription-based digital streaming services like Broadwayhd and Disney+ allow you to watch plays and musicals, expanding access to those who historically have not had access. Specifically, Commercial theaters on Broadway and off-Broadway have had few neurodivergent-friendly multi-level disability-friendly performances. This reflects society's perspectives, viewing individuals as less than others or not a demographic to heed. Moreover, the theater has traditionally been an exclusive venture for the wealthy.

(Stewart 2023) That excludes some of the other stories and struggles of citizens that existed simultaneously because they are not reflected in art. **Therefore, challenging binary approaches to educational and commercial theater post-COVID-19 will redefine theater and mold it into a space that is equitable, flexible, and accessible to all.**

Theater attendance landscapes could include every level of ability and be representative of all margins of people. This would include the blind or low vision B/LV, D/deaf, mobility device or wheelchair users, and people on the autism spectrum or with sensory processing disorders. Performances by the artists on stage will integrate ability levels. Who has decided what society at large should value? Who has decided whom society should value, and why? How can one challenge and think critically to ask questions and develop their ideologies about commercial and educational theater?

Creating a new cultural perspective on theater that leads to actively carrying out mission statements is crucial because it impacts artists' work environment.

Environments based on Universal design are life-changing because they allow you to see the world from a different perspective. My experience in the All Inclusive Ensemble with the New York City Department of Education changed me from a self-centered theatermaker to a more community-minded artist. A richness is transferred into the art when you find ways to incorporate various experiences in the formulation. The ensemble fueled my interest in inclusive theater-making with its framework because it includes elements similar to UD's. Production development with All-In was about making space, building community, and being a friend. Everything I value in my creative life is through a theater lens. The teaching artists from All-In understood that cultivating a space for people (students) to thrive would make them begin to feel comfortable. By

applying Universal Design principles, others can experience theater spaces that feel like a second home. I am validated by being in inclusive and diverse environments, and in turn, I validate others. I learned values through character education classes taught by Baha'i faith teachers at the Children's Theater School in Union Square's Baha'i Center. Those classes taught me about why having character is vital as a person. I was taught values like honesty, courage, loyalty, strength, and honor, as well as what to value in others. The theater was like a church, and the stage was where I found faith. Without universal design implemented in theater-creating practice, the theater will remain elite and unreflective of the world people live in outside of the world we create as theater artists on stage. This will help get back to using the instrument of theater to showcase the truth.

## **Background**

The Coronavirus pandemic reached American soil in January 2020. The virus's impacts were evident by mid-February, and it spread into a global pandemic after originating in Wuhan, China. It lasted two and a half years and significantly affected communication methods, business practices, and international health awareness. (Bergquist, 2020) Two of the affected entities were the commercial theater and the theatre arts education sphere. Commercial theater is comprised of all the theater houses that create shows in order to gain profit from it. Pre-covid, commercial theater grossed about \$1.83 billion. (McPhee, 2019)

The theater has been a pillar of the arts community for centuries and continues to be a platform for truth-telling. In order to sustain themselves, theatermakers/truth sharers came together to create unions. Artists have formed unions and solidarity

groups to hold the institution of the theater accountable for its inclusivity, diversity, and work cultures. These actions are based on desires to improve and assist the leaders in fulfilling the terms written in their official statements (i.e., mission statements and Bylaws). These unions include the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) and the Actors Equity Association (AEA). Some of the people within these groups are teaching artists, and they have been responsible for enriching students' lives with life skills.

Before COVID, people knew actors and theater-teaching artists with disabilities, but they were not advertised. The statement mentioned earlier does not imply that those responsible for profiting from commercial theaters have refrained from contributing to causes that support individuals with such experiences. On the contrary, they have actively engaged in donating as a philanthropic endeavor to avoid being perceived as discriminatory and align themselves with the politically correct stance while ensuring their profitability continues to grow. Nevertheless, through this framework of universal design, access to resources, such as education and opportunity, has yet to be spread to all people, regardless of their ability level. In fact, without universal design implemented in theater-creating practice, the theater will remain elite and unreflective of the world.

### **History of UD**

'Universal Design (UD) is a term Ronald Mace coined in the early 1980s.'(Balaram 2001) "It was designed in an architecture movement at North Carolina State University.... to make structures accessible to the broadest range of users, including exceptional people."(Shaw,2006). Mace was incentivized to advocate for inclusion because he required a wheelchair to move through the world. He is seen as the

pioneer of this concept and methodology of creating equitable spaces with architecture. His terminology has been around since the 1980s, but the concept has been around for centuries because differently-abled people have always existed, and their communities have had to accommodate them. Standardly, businesses and services are not made to be easily accessible/useable to people with different abilities. They accommodate able-bodied people and include a few modifications. If they include any modifications, at best, it is only ramps, elevators, and, in notable spaces, an audio description. An example of Universal Design in fashion is “In Indian culture, they wear clothes called saris and dhoti.” (Balaram,2001) The clothes can be worn by anyone, no matter what. Therefore, the concept can be used to solve a series of challenges the world faces.

UD suggests that anything can be altered to be accessible to everyone. T It is often used interchangeably with inclusive design. Inclusive design aims to help specific underserved groups (one size fits some), while Universal design helps everyone with a one-size-fits-all approach. These concepts require hegemony to create space for others, including those deemed inferior (Disabled people). Inclusive design is a more targeted approach, which is helpful when dealing with specific issues. However, it can be deemed problematic because it encourages a divisive them vs. us mindset. The focus should be on acknowledging and honoring differences to make space for everyone in all of the sectors of the theater world.

Universal Design is a concept that has been traditionally applied to architecture. Applying its simple principles to the theater creation process can benefit society because the art will reflect the natural world. Adding people with varying ability levels makes the art interpersonal and emotional in a way that traditional theater is

inadequate. More information about applying this concept to other disciplines, such as theater, is needed. The application of universal design and its supporting principles concerning theater have not been recorded upon preliminary research. Only one scholarly source included theater and Universal Design (UD). Inclusive Design, Audio Description and Diversity of Theater Experiences was written in 2013 by Margot Whitfield and Deborah I. Fels and published in Toronto, Canada. It does not simultaneously include the specific post-COVID-19 time frame and Universal design, noting that we are currently in the period.

The American theater has historically been an exclusionary space both on and off stage. The forms of exclusion include financial, racial, and social. The tickets range from \$20-145 per person (*Statistics - Broadway in NYC | the Broadway League*, n.d.), only accessible to those with a surplus of money after paying all their living expenses. New York is one of the most expensive cities in the world and is known for its professional theater district. 'The average patron comes from an upper-middle-class family with a mean income of \$271,277' (Steward2023). This indicates that the tickets are affordable exclusively for people within that demographic. The run time for a show is between 90 minutes without intermission and 3.5 hours with intermission. It is expensive for a person to spend over one hundred dollars on themselves for such a short period. The relationship between time and money is a contributing factor to the audience members' experience. These experiences can be limited due to financial capabilities.

### **Introducing the 7 Principles:**

Ronald Mace's original framework included these seven foundational principles: Equitable Use; Flexibility in Use; Simple and Intuitive Use; Perceptible Information;

Tolerance for Error; Low Physical Effort; Size and Space for Approach and Use. The principles are the parameters that ensure that Universal Design is being applied.

Equitable Use ensures all things are adjusted reasonably to meet a person's ability level. Flexibility in Use means it can accommodate anyone wanting to use it. Simple and Intuitive Use is the ability for people to use the item without too many instructions because the product is self-explanatory. Perceptible Information is the ability of a user to be aware of all the essential information about the product in straightforward terms.

Tolerance for Error is the ability for a user to make a mistake and they are returned to the beginning. Users can also make mistakes, which does not create a negative result.

Low Physical Effort is the principle that suggests the product should not require users to exert large amounts of energy to be used. Size and Space for Approach and Use is the principle that ensures everything is conducive for a person to participate in terms of room for activities based on a person's size and ability to move around a space.

### **Equitable Use:**

Equitable use describes the item or idea's ability to be used by anyone without infringement. things will only benefit some if they incorporate fairness. Adrea Kovich is an accessibility consultant and dramaturg who writes articles for Howlrounds online publication. Kovich has experience in the artistic world, and in collaboration with Howlround, she wrote an article about the future of theatre looking collaborative and inclusive. Some of the productions that happen in collaboration can include equitable/inclusive elements (Audio descriptions and noise-canceling headphones). Clay and Paper Theater creates productions that include audio descriptions and generates space for people with challenges interpreting language. Audio description is

usually used as an adaptive strategy, not a creative one, which leaves space for people to grow because it is only done sometimes. There is a difference between including headphones for everyone to hear the performance with sound control as an element of the experience for all viewers and using headset accommodation for the few patrons that need it. In the future, artists can further develop innovative methods for incorporation. (Udo and Fels,2009a) Equity is not just for the differently abled; it allows inclusion and universality to be the norm instead of the anomaly. Thus, it is a bond-creator.

### **Flexibility In Use**

Flexibility in use is the ability to incorporate adjustments for anyone. Performance is used in many capacities and has adaptable capabilities (wheelchair ramps/ headphones/ glasses for strobe lights). The adjustability of performance for audiences impacts an individual's ability to get maximum enjoyment and/or participate.

Accessibility must be the bridge that connects flexibility to all conversations around theater-making. Inclusion and accessibility must not be treated as separate issues that can be addressed at different times (Kovich 2021). Commercial theaters create material that will generate money. Thus, they will not advertise to them if they do not identify them as a group that has money. Money is a critical factor hindering access for the average person in today's society.

Systematically, if Commercial theaters were strongly urged to have people like accessibility coordinators on their creative project teams who ensure that flexibility, inclusion, and accessibility are a part of all projects from inception, people would be more likely to attend. Some blind and low-vision (B/LV) audience members have been

to less than five shows their entire lives (Whitfield, Fels 2013). This reinforces the previous idea that commercial and educational theaters that have all their performances include a level of inaccessibility financially or beyond the wheelchair-standing room, contributing to disabled people's inability to attend shows. Here are some things that might change issues with accessibility: creating more programs for affordable ticket sales, having audio descriptions incorporated into the performance with the use of headphones for audience members, and wheelchair-standing room seats on most of the rows of the theater seats.

People who had disabilities were invisible and non-existent on the stages of commercial theater. Limited efforts have been made to include a range of ability levels in its creation and consumption practices. At the same time, ability levels exist on a spectrum, and no two can be treated the same. This is why there are tools to ensure that universal design is being used. When it is understood that Universal Design is beneficial to theater education and profitable to commercial theaters, it will be infused into the workspaces and impact society's awareness of diversity. A prime example of this being incorporated is when audience members at the Clay and Paper Theater have the ability to touch the masks and other props, which enhances the viewer's enjoyment of the art (Whitfield, Fels 2013). However, not all commercial theaters have transitioned to audio-assisted performances. This flexibility in action benefits students because they can learn through activating senses that are not traditionally used in the theater. This includes physically feeling the props or smelling them. Clay and Paper Theater (an Educational Theater company) created an experience for audience members after the show, allowing them to feel the props they saw in the show. Commercial theaters do

similar things with student audiences, where they have talkbacks. Nevertheless, the students are not permitted to touch any of the props. Commercial theater props are more expensive than the average non-profit because the production budget is grander.

### **Simple and Intuitive Use:**

Simple and Intuitive use is synonymous with not requiring an instruction manual because common sense is used to interact with it, and is easy to understand. Theater has a principled basis including voice/speech, the body as an instrument, and stage presence. These principles are all taught and enforced through the introductory classes for emerging artists. The methods that are part of the curriculum are complex and challenging for the most experienced artists in the business.

Since this concept has made infrastructure inclusive, it could do the same thing to theater education and be sustainable. Providing options for knowledge acquisition is helpful when dealing with students with varying ability levels because it gives them the ability to choose. So, providing printed text options and a PDF version accessible on smart devices ensures simple and intuitive use. (Rose, D& Dolan, R.P 2000) Students will be able to access the information in the way that makes the most sense to them. The options create a sense of agency for the self, and learners have a level of responsibility for their own development.

Instincts are behaviors that come naturally to people, such as fighting or flying when someone is in an unsafe situation. They can also be instilled in children when they are young as principles or guidelines to ensure survival. Thus, if theater education is taught to younger children, they will be able to develop the mindset that issues that affect the global community all matter, their opinions are valid, and no one should be left

behind or excluded. There is only one world, and they are all a part of something bigger than themselves. Making these ideas understood superficially will impact the future because it is teaching, whether through businesses or recreational activities. (Balaram 2001) There are many different types of disabilities, learners, and people in the world who need guidance through the tumultuous constructs of the learning environment. (Shaw) Finding ways to break these ideas into palpable portions expands this thinking style (Universal and inclusive-based mindset).

### **Perceptible Information**

Perceptible Information is the ability for users to understand the presented data easily. This includes statistics presented numerically, visual aids (props), and data in charts. For theater, however, this is represented in props, both tangibly through a picture or the item specifically and a description of the item in the play's stage directions. Commercial theater productions are the working spaces of professional actors, singers, and dancers. They are trained to understand the workplace's expectations and its varying communication styles. Theater Education students are in the medium between complete comprehension and novice-level understanding. The information will be presented verbally or written initially, and then it can be reiterated in easily understood ways. The concepts that are challenging for patrons to understand are that they can interact with each other and the artists to discuss misunderstandings.

### **Tolerance for Error:**

Tolerance for error indicates that it poses a failsafe to protect users if they make mistakes. This is helpful to students with different abilities because they may not be

aware of the solutions to any problems that arise. Everyone makes mistakes, and creating a space where making mistakes is okay is imperative for students to play freely. When a theater arts student forgets a line, they can choose to play off the mistake and make it appear as a character lost in thought, or they can call for a line. The options are contingency plans that create an added level of safety for learners.

Individuals just have to be willing to learn from those mistakes moving forward. If a differently abled person were to yell during a dramatic part of a Broadway show, an usher could ask them to keep their voice down. While that situation happens, the artists continue performing to keep track of the production rhythm. Theaters are confined places during performances, so patrons must be vigilant of themselves and others. Those who create theater etiquette rules must remember that everyone consumes art differently. Students, theater patrons, and artists have different levels of training. Mistakes are unavoidable when experiences coincide. What works for one disability might not work for others (Meyers 2007). Understanding that there are nuances between individuals' ability to interact with each other and their surroundings affects how we deal with them.

The United States Department of Education has funded Universal Design's development for over 37 years. (Ostroff 2001) In doing so, there is support for people creating educational theater projects. Some integrated ensembles throughout the country's fifty states have support professionals assisting productions (paraprofessionals and speech therapists). Those professionals, such as sign language teachers and paraprofessionals, are helpful because they can quickly mitigate the student's needs in case of a mistake. This supports the importance of having original theatre designers and any teaching professional adept in special needs participate in

creating and adapting improved theatre practices that include a more diverse range of human experiences. Art created in this environment has the potential to be better or different but not worse.

### **Low Physical Effort:**

Low physical effort allows people with varying mobility levels to participate. The maximum weight that should be able to be used/ lifted is between 5 to 10 pounds or 2.2 to 4.5 kilograms. Theater-making practices can be physically taxing due to long rehearsals and limited breaks. Incorporating several breaks for snacks and water can be a great way to keep the room's energy up. Finding people from the target audiences to market and promote the plays is helpful because it is relatable. On a primary level, all humans want to feel connected to something. Audiences do not always connect to every story or actor, but they look for the one relatable thing.

The ways that people did audio descriptions in the late 20th century are considered conventional because it is based on 1985 principles. They make it simple enough that it will not require anyone to exert a significant amount of energy to interact with it. Audio description and braille playbills can be practiced more frequently so the disabled theater patron community can enjoy their art alongside their able-bodied counterparts. These modifications are low effort for those who use them because they usually have to do more to get any enjoyment out of the theater-going experience without them. Additionally, if those modifications are available for all theater artists, it would make everyone more aware and make the lives of those who use it more accessible.

### **Size and Space for Approach and Use:**

The size and space for approach and use must be significant regarding space awareness of all types of accommodations that might be needed. This includes both hand and foot grip tension points. Space for shows and rehearsals has to be feasible in order to accommodate any type of challenge or disability that exists (wheelchairs, walkers, canes, etc.). In order to maintain a space of that magnitude, the budget is significant. There must be an elevator for wheelchair users and a series of fire safety exits with supplemental plans to get everyone out safely. It should be able to be navigated by the smallest (children/people with dwarfism) and largest people (6 ft+, obese, etc.). Disabled seats are available in theaters, so people with those needs are placed in the designated section when they attend the theater. Having people who work in the theater who have experience working with different types of abilities cultivates a space that disabled people can use because they have an advocate built into the space. It transforms the place into a welcoming environment.

### **UD: Global Impact**

UD is based on the idea that diversity and inclusion should not just be a checkbox on a curriculum's to-do list but a fundamental principle guiding all aspects of the lesson. Teachers' values, policies, and practices will integrate diversity and inclusion. Theater education incorporating Universal Design in its' curriculum creates a space that fosters unity amongst the students. The concept has always been around and will continue to do so with new application methods over time. However, the methods of its application have changed when dealing with commercial theater houses. In design, you follow the questions that correspond with each principle. In theater education, you must take a script, read through it, and discover an angle you want to

incorporate. Then, you do the dramaturgical work of building the world of the play.

Within the play, there are rules for different types of interactions. Offstage commercial theaters and educational theaters can use the same policies when accommodating audience members' needs, which would be supported by trained staff members.

'The International Association of Universal Design (IAUD) held a conference to expand and awaken the mainstream about UD.' (Premises and perspectives). It helped the Japanese spread awareness of the method within their country. Universal design has been practiced in India through Fashion, in Canada through teaching, and in Japan through architecture. Considering its aging population, Japan also had to include UD in its architectural design practices. Canada uses universal design to teach university students about the arts. In India, they use universal design in their daily cultural garb. Universal design can combat many issues the world faces because things can be altered to work for the masses. The solutions created are about how things can be mitigated if things are challenged or mistakes are made.

### **Connecting UD with humanity based theater:**

Using this approach means that all students will feel valued and included regardless of their differences, leading to a more positive and productive work environment. This feeling will be cultivated through support professionals, snacks, and numerous rehearsal breaks. Schools can foster a culture of understanding and respect by recognizing and valuing individual differences. Inclusion is more than just a buzzword on a website to fill a quota. It is about building connections, seeing people, reaching out, fulfilling a need, and bridging the gap. That way, we can live in a world where people see each other and make one another feel seen.

Domonique Morisseau, a renowned playwright, wrote an article called “*Why I Almost Slapped a Fellow Theatre Patron, and What That Says About Our Theatres*” about her uncomfortable experience interacting while attending a show due to a fellow theater customer's microaggressions. A woman gave her a ticket and told her not to pop her gum during the performance because she hated the sound. The statement is a microaggression because Morisseau in fact, was not chewing any gum. These micro-aggressions and levels of entitlement are supported by the years of racism within the fabric of American society. There is an added layer to the lack of inclusion; not only is it challenging to access spaces... when you do access it, you are met with apprehension from others already in that space. Its **remnants** are why Universal design should be incorporated into theater. After all, it would change the place from which people interact because it functions as a guide for practice.

Universal design in theater education can bridge the gaps between the different needs of children with all abilities. Arts education allows students to learn better and develop critical thinking skills. ‘It can even be found that arts education builds pupils' self-esteem, self-worth, and confidence level’ (Lewin 2003). Youngsters can develop social-emotional skills such as social and self-awareness through the arts. This is beneficial because they learn to include students with a history of being excluded from peer interactions because of their challenges. “A learning model called Universal Design for Learners (UDL), has technological innovations that are utilized to expand students' access to an array of instructional strategies designed for their particular mode of learning; students have the opportunity to participate in learning environments and methodologies in which their brain is best suited.” (Shaw 2006) Students get the

opportunity to have a teaching style that focuses on comprehensible input and gears away from legacy teaching. Legacy teaching favors lecture-style classes and limited sensual stimuli. Hands-on environments significantly impact sensory memory and pupils' ability to retain information. Getting into the body with theater stimulates muscle memory, which can help students' cognitive development in core subjects. Stephen Krashen coined the term comprehensible input. It is a teaching method that prioritizes the acquisition of languages. It could be applied in a theater class for skill-based units such as voice and speech or stage combat. Pupils can learn the same skill by watching a video or the teacher explaining the procedure with supporting worksheets.

### **All-Inclusive NYCDOE**

The New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE) created a theater group coined the '*NYC DOE All IN(clusive) Ensemble.*' It started in 2018 and represented the diversity of New York City (NYC) students. The NYCDOE serves the largest student population in the United States, representing all demographics. Kimberly Hale is the ensemble's current Co-Artistic Director. Inclusive theater is what they were successful in creating.

The students devise the productions with support from teaching artists and translators. During the interview, Kim highlighted the importance of showing grace and kindness to students and herself when making mistakes. (low tolerance for error) "Modeling patience, understanding, and forgiveness after mistakes take the group to the next level."(Hale 2024) Universal design creates space for representation and has built-in access that helps to create community. Nothing has to be done in order for everyone to be able to use it compared to inclusive design requirements of additional

supports. The show-building process takes about six months from start to finish. During that time, relationships are built among ensemble members and the creative team, forming a “Theater family.” This community becomes a part of the individual existing support systems.

While All-In successfully created an inclusive environment, UD takes it forward by breaking down the seven principles. The best ways to teach inclusive design that can be applicable and taken a step further with UD are “Large-class teaching and Interdisciplinary collaboration...Understanding impairments and their consequence.” (Dong 2010) Creating the ensemble is an example of large-class teaching in theater because the scene work is done within a group setting. The goal is to teach people to see different abilities as an opportunity to connect instead of a barrier for them to tolerate. “Accessibility is not a burden; it is an opportunity. It follows the classic theatre improv rule of “Say Yes... And.”, and not just NO” (Hale 2024). Students develop their interpersonal communication skills and the value of perseverance with their peers and use them in the outside world.

### **Student Experience**

In 2019, I was a part of the NYC DOE All-in-All inclusive ensemble comprised of students throughout the five boroughs with every type of ability level you could think of. Some students were D/deaf, legally blind, wheelchair-bound, on the autism spectrum, and neurotypical comingled. From that ensemble, a piece, “*Next Stop*,” was devised with inclusion at the forefront of everything, including the people in the art piece created due to the generated environment. The barriers outside the rehearsal room did not confine our ability to interact/connect. I still have friendships that I maintain today with

the people that I met. Ensemble members learned phrases in different languages to communicate with one another. The environment fostered interpersonal learning of American Sign Language (ASL). ASL was incorporated into the musical numbers while other students rolled around in wheelchairs. In that group, students learn to be aware of the obvious things that make people different and the truths that make us all the same. We are all just people, and experiences will vary, but life is universal. When people are represented and see themselves reflected, they move through the world differently. Theater, both commercial and educational, like most art mediums, has prioritized white able bodies. When you create a space that does not, paradigms shift. People brave enough to challenge the binary, like Ronald Mace, change societal perspectives and highlight collective interconnectivity.

The beauty of humanity is that no two experiences are alike. Through that sentiment, UD stimulates awareness of yourself and the world around you. Thereby developing an appreciation of the world when done effectively. The ensemble enacted all of the seven principles from Mace's UD list. Equitable use: all students could participate in the devising process. Flexibility in use: wheelchair-bound pupils accessed the studio through ramps or peer assistance. Simple, intuitive use was represented by accepting instinctive movements in the rehearsal space. Perceptible information was used because all students living in NYC understand that the train is a primary source of transportation for most people. Tolerance for error is illustrated by the creative team's openness to mistakes. Low physical effort is demonstrated by the several breaks taken throughout the rehearsal process and the short rehearsal times. The sun is in space for approaching to use, which could be found as a large rehearsal room and the ramps to

enter all of them. The ensemble was doing universal design before they knew what UD was.

### **Theater Education**

Theater education can be improved through UD. Thus, it should not be considered tertiary to the science and language arts because it can be used to assist in developing well-rounded artists and, most importantly, well-rounded people. UD impacts the lesson's execution by placing importance on the collective class. Learning transfers into other facets of life because of the developing skills, such as problem-solving and critical thinking. "It is also a demand for recognizing the importance of visibility and the intersectional identities of disabled people." (Kovich 2021) These experiences are not mutually exclusive but are treated as such when they co-occur, which is unfair to those in intersectional demographics. Education is the building block for all information and skill development. Instincts can become learned when values are instilled from elementary school. Students with theater classes have developed social intelligence that benefits all aspects of life. (Lewin 2003)

### **Future Forward**

Inclusivity is required today because, if we do not change current practices, the theater will continue to exist as it has always done. People and their stories will be forgotten. The coronavirus spanned 2.5 years, limiting our ability to interact and connect. The best way to move forward in theater on all levels is through UD because it allows us to see others. By looking past the parts of others that are sources of oppression, like sexuality, ability, race, and religion, we can fully experience their

presence. Brisa Areli Muñoz is the former Artistic Director of the All-inclusive ensemble. “In my works with artists, peacebuilders, mediators, government employees, and social workers with unifying aims. I have realized that artists' are untapped tools that can be valuable across every sector, aiding toward equity, inclusion, and access.” Expanding access to all job sectors informs the world we live in because the theater is a place where we can reflect our world on stage. “The theatre needs to be a place where EVERYONE is welcome in all ways, backstage, onstage, and in the audience. “ (Hale 2024). This indicates that everyone has value, and no person holds more. The Epic Players Theater in New York City works significantly with the autistic community through theater arts. If one company can find ways to be inclusive and incorporate everyone, I believe that there is no justifiable reason to continue exclusion. When “Audio description is woven into the dialogue, and captions are integrated into the production as a design aesthetic.” (Kovich 2021) Audiences realize that accessibility does not have to be exclusive to the different abled. Instead, it should be viewed as a facet to elevate audience experiences through aesthetics and functionality.

## **Conclusion**

Our world contains a plenitude of beauty and richness that audiences eagerly embrace when art can capture and convey it effectively. They are left thinking, asking questions, and starting discussions. Universal Designs framework being applied to theater allows students, commercial theater, educational theater, and all patrons to see the colors of their truths reflected in art. There is value in the community and seeing the people sitting next to you as more than just a series of numbers but as a being with

experiences and lessons to share. It matters, and all people do, too. Progress is a process that only learning through access can teach.

**Works Cited**

*Alexander Street, a ProQuest company.* (n.d.). Alexander Street.

<https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/introducing-arts-education>

Bergquist, S., Otten, T., & Sarich, N. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. *Health Policy and Technology*, 9(4), 623–638. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.hlpt.2020.08.007>

Bowe, F., *Universal Design in Education: Teaching Non-traditional Students*, Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1999.

*Broadway ends 2018–2019 with highest gross and attendance in recorded history.* (2022, January 5). Playbill.

<https://playbill.com/article/broadway-ends-20182019-with-highest-gross-and-attendance-in-recorded-history>

Burgstahler, S. (2020). *Creating inclusive learning opportunities in higher education: A universal design toolkit*. Harvard Education Press, p. 47–8.

*Creating inclusive learning Opportunities in Higher Education: A Universal Design Toolkit*

|*DO-IT.* (n.d.).

<https://www.washington.edu/doit/creating-inclusive-learning-opportunities-higher-education>

Dong, H. (2009). Strategies for teaching inclusive design. *Journal of Engineering Design*, 21(2–3), 237–251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09544820903262330>

Elsaesser, T. and Hagener, M. (2010). *Film Theory: An Introduction through the Senses*. New York: Routledge.

- Glass, D., Meyer, A., & Rose, D. H. (2013). Universal design for learning and the arts. *Harvard Educational Review*, 83(1), 98-119,266,270,272. Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.purchase.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Funiversal-design-learning-arts%2Fdocview%2F1326778711%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D14171>
- Kemp, J., "Foreword," in *Building a World Fit for People: Designers with Disabilities at Work*, E. Ostroff, M. Limont, and D. Hunter (eds.), Boston: Adaptive Environments, 2002.
- Kovich, A. (2021, April 14). *Envisioning change*. HowlRound Theatre Commons. <https://howlround.com/envisioning-change>
- Lewis, V. A. (ed.) (2006). *Beyond Victims and Villains: Contemporary Plays by Disabled Playwrights*. New York: Theatre Communications Group,
- Mace, R., "Universal Design, Barrier Free Environments for Everyone," *Designers West*, November 1985.
- Malone, J. (2011). *Cohabitation: Placing Disability Centre Stage*. Brisbane: Queensland University of Technology.
- McGuire, J. M., and S. S. Scott, "Universal Design for Instruction: Extending the Universal Design Paradigm to College Instruction," *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 19:124-134, 2006.
- Meyers, T., "Free Space," *Metropolis*, October 2007, p. 48.

Milligan, B., Fels, D. I. and Dumochel, P. (2011). The Descriptive Video Production and Presentations Best Practices Guide for Digital Environments (Version 1), Standard Document. Available at: <http://www.mediac.ca/projects.asp> [accessed 1 March 2012].

Mintz, B. S. (2007). *Unruly Bodies: Life Writing by Women with Disabilities*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

Miriam Lewin, Lavine Production Group, KSA-Plus Communications, & University of Tennessee, Chattanooga. Southeast Center for Education in the Arts (Producers), & (2003). *Introducing Arts Education*. [Video/DVD] Annenberg Learner.  
<https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/introducing-arts-education>

Osorio-Gómez, D., Guzmán-Ramos, K., & Bermúdez-Rattoni, F. (2022). Dopamine activity on the perceptual salience for recognition memory. *Frontiers in Behavioral Neuroscience*, (n/a). Academic data search complete search universal design in theater

Preiser, Ostroff, Preiser, Wolfgang F. E, & Ostroff, Elaine. (2001). *Universal design handbook / Wolfgang F.E. Preiser, editor in chief; Elaine Ostroff, senior editor ; foreword by Robert Ivy*. McGraw-Hill.

Rawsthorn, A., "Recessionary Design: A Boom Time for Creative Energy," *International Herald Tribune* online Nov 14, 2008

Rivers, J. (2014). Improving the usability and accessibility in aging rural communities: rural policy for innovation in an aging community.  
<https://core.ac.uk/download/20312498.pdf>

Rose, D. & Dolan, R. P. (2000). Universal design for learning Online. *Journal of Special Education Technology*.

Shaw, A. (2006). Universal Design and Access For Learning: Beyond the Sidewalk. In *The Exceptional parent* (Vol. 36, Issue 6, pp. 40-). TCA EP World LLC.

*Statistics - Broadway in NYC | The Broadway League.* (n.d.).

<https://www.broadwayleague.com/research/statistics-broadway-nyc/>

Steinfeld, E., & Maisel, J. (2012). *Universal Design: Creating Inclusive Environments*. John Wiley & Sons.

*The 7 Principles - Centre for Excellence in Universal Design.* (n.d.). Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. <https://universaldesign.ie/about-universal-design/the-7-principles>

TheaterMania. (2023, December 14). *Story of the week: The average Broadway theatergoer earns a household income of \$271,277 a year - TheaterMania.com.* TheaterMania.com -. [https://www.theatermania.com/news/story-of-the-week-the-average-broadway-theatergoer-earns-a-household-income-of-271277-a-year\\_1724050](https://www.theatermania.com/news/story-of-the-week-the-average-broadway-theatergoer-earns-a-household-income-of-271277-a-year_1724050)

Udo, J. P. and Fels, D. I. (2009a). '\*Suit the action to the word, the word to the action': An unconventional approach to describing Shakespeare's Hamlet'. *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*, 103(3): 178-184.

Udo, J. P. and Fels, D. I. (2009b). 'The development of a new theatrical tradition: Sighted students audio describe school play for a blind and low-vision audience'. *International Journal of Education & the Arts* [online], 10(20), pp. 1-28. September 21, 2011. Available at: <http://www.ijea.org/v10n20/v10n20.odf> accessed 1 September 20121.

Udo, J. P. and Fels, D. I. (2010a). 'Re-fashioning fashion: An exploratory study of a live audio-described fashion show' *Universal Access in the Information Society*, 9(1): 63-75

Whitfield, M., & Fels, D. I. (2013). Inclusive design, audio description and diversity of theatre experiences. *the Design Journal*, 16(2), 219–238.

<https://doi.org/10.2752/175630613x13584367984983>