

A Focal Press Book



DISABILITY AND THEATRE

A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts



Stephanie Barton-Farcas



DISABILITY AND THEATRE

Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts is a step-by-step manual on how to create inclusive theatre, including how and where to find actors, how to publicize productions, run rehearsals, act intricate scenes like fights and battles, work with unions, contracts, and agents, and deal with technical issues. This practical information was born from the author's seventeen years of running the first inclusive theatre company in New York City, and is applicable to any performance level: children's theatre, community theatre, regional theatre, touring companies, Broadway and academic theatre. This book features anecdotal case studies that emphasize problem solving, real-world application and realistic action plans. A comprehensive Companion Website provides additional guidelines and hands-on worksheets.

Stephanie Barton-Farcas is the Artistic Director of Nicu's Spoon Theater Company. Founded in 2001, it is the first company in NYC history to be fully inclusive (age, gender, color, religion, disability, nationality). She is also the co-founder of the Disability Cinema Coalition. She recently directed *Richard III* with a disabled cast except for the title role, and her company Nicu's Spoon is the subject of the documentary *Two and Twenty Troubles* which follows the production of *The Cherry Orchard* and four of the disabled actors in it. She has been profiled in *The NY Times*, *Variety*, *American Theatre Magazine* and *Playbill* as a director and advocate. As a writer she has been published in *Backstage*, *Howlround* and many other disability or theatre publications as well as lecturing and teaching at SAG-AFTRA, AEA, and many film and theatre industry associations and colleges (Columbia, NYU) in the US and in Europe (CEU in Hungary, University of Riga, University of Kiev, Royal Conservatoire Scotland among others) about inclusion in the arts.



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DISABILITY AND THEATRE

A PRACTICAL MANUAL FOR INCLUSION
IN THE ARTS

Stephanie Barton-Farcas

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Dedicated to my mother, and every mother that has given their child a gift of a diverse and inclusive world, not an 'us vs. them' world.

Dedicated to my child, and every child with an artists heart. Go and change the world and never give up.



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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Sean Williams is a playwright/actor/producer living in New York. He has written for *Slate*, *The Huffington Post* and *The New Yorker*, and has a memoir coming out in 2018. He's been the executive producer of Gideon Productions for the last sixteen years, where he has produced shows that have consistently earned rave reviews (including critic's picks in *The New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Time Out New York* and *The New York Post*). He's produced shows at 59E59, The Lucille Lortel, 45 Bleeker, The Harry de Jur, Soho Playhouse and The Gym at Judson. He has acted in more than sixty plays.

Bryce Alexander (Artistic Director of Naples Players in Naples, Florida) was Artistic Director of Phamaly Theatre Company from 2009 to late 2016. Two of Bryce's major accomplishments include leading Phamaly on its first international tour to Osaka, Japan, where he facilitated a series of community workshops to promote inclusion and the effective application of disability theory in both western and traditional Japanese art forms; and helping to lead a regional 'Sensory Summit' in Denver, CO, to provide arts and cultural organizations with the knowledge and tools they need to produce their own sensory-friendly programs – an initiative that garnered Phamaly two Denver Mayor's Awards for Arts & Culture. Bryce is a member of the Society of American Fight Directors and an associate member of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, and his work from major regional theatres to various small community venues around the US has given him a well-rounded perspective on the significance and importance of accessibility in the arts.

Christine Bruno is an actor, director, acting coach and disability advocate, and received her MFA in acting and directing from the New School in New York. She is a lifetime member of the Actors Studio and has worked across all mediums. A proud union member, Christine is Chair of the New York SAG-AFTRA Performers with Disabilities Committee and serves on the SAG-AFTRA National Performers with Disabilities and the Actors' Equity EEOC Committees. As Disability Advocate for Inclusion in the Arts, she has represented the organization at symposiums, film and theatre festivals, forums, panels, resource events and television and radio outlets across the US and internationally. Her selected theatre, film and television credits include *The Maids* (adaptation by Jose Rivera, INTAR), *The Glass Menagerie* (Fulton Theatre), *The Good Daughter* (NJ Rep), *The Ugly Girl* and *Raspberry* (musicals, UK), *Screw You, Jimmy Choo!* (UK and Australia), *Law & Order*, *iCreep*, *Flatbush Luck* and *This is Where We Live*.

Deborah Emmy Nowinski is the founder of Dionysus Inclusive Theatre Company in Texas (www.dionysustheatre.net). She is a director, educator, speaker and playwright. Deborah also leads workshops and seminars for Texas educators on the benefit of inclusion theatre. She served on the City of Houston Commission for People with Disabilities where she chaired the Emergency Preparedness Committee. Deborah has received the City of Houston's Mayor's Advocate of the Year, American Blind Council Vision Award and the City of Houston Commission for People with Disabilities Care Award.

Stephanie Barton-Farcas is the founder and Artistic Director of Nicu's Spoon Theater Company (www.spoontheater.org), based in New York City and Hawaii. She is also the co-founder of the Disability Cinema Coalition and sits on the board of Identity Theater Company. Nicu's Spoon has been a WNYC's 'Salute the Arts (STAR)' Initiative winner, an *Off Off Broadway Review* (OOBR) award winner, a multiple New York Innovative Theatre Award (NYITA) winner, the Thom Fluellen Award winner for service to New York City as well as winner of the

Snapple/NYC Mayor's Office Best People to Work For Award and many more. The company has been spotlighted in *Playbill*, *The New York Times* and many others, and was also the subject of the documentary *Two and Twenty Troubles*. Stephanie herself is a mother, writer, speaker, actress, director and producer and has been nominated for the Encore Award from the Arts and Business Council of New York, is an Alliance of New York State Arts Organizations 'Advancing Cultural Development' Award nominee, a NYITA winner, an OOB award winner, a runner up in the L'Oréal Humanitarian Award as well as Reviewfix naming her as one of Top 10 Off or Off-Off Broadway Professionals in New York City. She teaches privately for acting, auditioning and accent work on takelessons.com and is at work on a second book, *Acting & Auditioning for the 21st Century*.

Joan Lipkin divides her time between New York City and St Louis, where she is the founder and Artistic Director of That Uppity Theatre Company (www.uppityco.com). She is also the co-founder of The DisAbility Project, one of the oldest ensembles in the US to produce original work about disability who are also included in the permanent collection of the Missouri History Museum. In addition to people with disabilities, she has also devised work with numerous populations including women with cancer, LGBTQIA youth and adults and their families, seniors, adolescent girls, college students, women who have been sexually trafficked and exploited, people in recovery from substance abuse, communities of faith and youth at risk. An award-winning playwright, director, educator and producer, Joan has received the Association for Theatre in Higher Education Award for Leadership in Community-Based Theatre and Civic Engagement, a Visionary Award, the Arts Innovator of the Year and the Ethical Humanist of the Year, among many others. Her writing is widely anthologized.

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To Julie Campbell and Natalie Blair, my co-founders from day one. And for my mother, Mihai, and Sam who keep me sane. To the Spoonies – all 2,500 plus of you around the world. I love you all.

To Henry Holden, John Belluso, Ike Shambelan, Joe Genera and Nicu. All gone too soon.

Special thanks to contributors and inspirations Bryce Alexander (Bryce was Artistic Director of Phamaly Theatre Company until late 2016 and now is in Naples, Florida making art there), Christine Bruno, Talleri Macrae, Lawrence Carter-Long, Deborah Nowinski, Joan Lipkin and her assistant Becky Galambos, Sean Williams and Brad Rothbart. Deborah has written a book already, but every one of you should too!

PREFACE



Figure 0.1 *Displaced* by S. Barton-Farcas, Natalie Blair, Gina Daniels, Julie Cambell and Jo Yang. Directed by S. Barton-Farcas, *Nicu's Spoon*, 2001. L to R Natalie Blair, Julie Campbell and Gina Daniels. (Photograph courtesy of Nicu's Spoon Theater Company.)

I am not a disability scholar, although I do know quite a bit about the history of disability and the study of it. Disability history is our shared history as a country whether we acknowledge it or not, as we will all be disabled one day. I am not an activist, although I am an advocate for full inclusion in all things, free expression of art and thought and am a believer in a new theory of accessibility which demands full accessibility for all people in all places at all times. This capitalizes on the growing universal design movement, which seeks to create buildings not specifically accessible for the disabled, but which encompass the spirit of being completely accessible for all people equally. It is a matter

of equity, not equality. Equity is inherent fairness in all ways, equality means everyone gets the same thing. Not everyone needs the same things, however, which is why equity is what we need, not equality. Imagine a world in which every person can enter, move around in and access every room in every single building.

I have been told I am an idealist in my goals to have fully inclusive theatre and full equity as a true functional and ongoing aspect of our artistic society. Yet, I am not an idealist, I am in fact a realist. As cultures shift and politics and paradigms change, it seems the artists who survive the change are the realists. I just do not think many theatre makers, universities, regional theatres, board members or funders (whether they be state, federal, local or independent foundations) are being attentive to the reality we have in this increasingly inclusive and global world.

My company, Nicu's Spoon Theater, fosters inclusion and disability culture and artists with disabilities, staff, boards, designers, composers and playwrights in theatre. This is distinguished from 'disability theatre' in that my company's work refers to making art that defies the social norms and includes disabled people, whether in themes, ideas, performance or the creation of the artwork, rather than works focusing on disability as the central theme (although we have done disability theatre works on occasion). We practice what I term 'cross-disability casting' which is the casting of artists with disabilities, but frequently not in a role with the disability they possess. Our inclusive casting (which also includes colors, genders and ages) and the word inclusion can also refer to any work we make that is made as a political or social act geared toward shaping a new theatrical community which then enhances disability culture, or in our case inclusion culture.

The term 'disability' in actuality usually refers to about six distinct types of disability: visual impairment, hearing impairment, mobility impairment, cognitive or developmental impairment, degenerative diseases which impair the body, and then the umbrella term 'general impairments' which is used to encompass every other disability. In the USA, because of diet and health care we have eliminated disabilities that are common in other parts of the world (gout, elephantiasis and cleft palate are only a few examples) and what we have not eliminated we can quickly do plastic surgery on. We

eradicate. However, this does not mean we can eradicate the larger picture and the much larger politically and socially aware disability population as a whole.

My company, now in its seventeenth season, is by no means the be-all and end-all of theatre. We have been a small to medium group in the very large pond that is New York City. We became known because we fought against convention, did not accept the status quo and came prepared to argue our point and fight, if needed, for the vision of inclusive theatre that we had. We spoke out, hosted panels, invested energy in community and disability groups and activities, experimented onstage with language, bodies, text and kinesiology, wrote articles, cast entirely in new and risky ways and produced endlessly. We tried and tried and sometimes failed. We tried to use our failures as the gateways into creation, investment and risk-taking on stage. We then picked ourselves up and continued to try and then, to teach. We became very well known in that small pond. I am certain this book may provoke strong reactions as we expand outward and put forth our own theories and experiences (our work goes into a global setting in our seventeenth season, with a multi-country project, GLOBE), as I have already been taken to task during the very writing of this book by one company director for not wording their case study, which I had written for them, in ‘person-first language’ (PFL).

Although I do not practice person-first language and prefer identity-first language (IFL) which names someone as autistic much as someone would be called gay or Jewish (my belief being that saying disabled person or autistic person validates them as that person, that individual, as a person of worth as a disabled or autistic person), many do prefer PFL. Thus, I immediately apologized to this company director as this is only one of many polarizing issues within the vast disability community. If you yourself do not know what person-first or identity-first language is then read on, this book is for you.

By the very nature of inclusive theatre and the push towards ‘reality-based’ casting, inclusion is political in essence and has many social ramifications. The very makeup of the sheer diversity of types of disabilities within the disabled spectrum lends itself to the fact that oftentimes it is the social, political and activist connections that bond these differing disabled bodies together. If then artists with disabilities are to be cast in leading roles on stage and in film, then

society must adjust accordingly and provide for them in all ways, in all places and spaces at all times, and that is not how it currently works. When an actor with cerebral palsy (CP) is employed or cast in a role, it advances all artists who happen to have CP, however it does nothing for blind artists, those who are little people, those on the autism spectrum and so forth. Again it is the diversity of the 'disability story' that can make it seemingly work against itself.

The study of disability culture is a study then of not just the blind, or those with multiple sclerosis (MS) or traumatic brain injuries (TBIs) but a study of the entirety of those who do not match the physical and societal status quo. In reading disability history, and in fact in creating it, do we then choose the history of the blind artist, the little person, the girl with autism, the boy with a spinal degeneration? There are so many roots in the ground that make up the tree of disability history, culture and studies. That is why we must look at the tree as a whole.

Universal design encompasses this concept and indeed the concepts behind much inclusive theatre. Many workplaces, schools, theatres and offices continue to not be accessible (and any time the word access is mentioned one should also automatically attach the word 'egress' to it – entry *and* exit – it may seem the same thing to you until you are in a wheelchair which does not enter *and* exit unless you have space to turn around) even though there are laws in place to force them to be accessible. There are even places with what Blogger Mike Ervin calls 'coattail' access. These are places where the accessibility is purely accidental, such as shopping malls or grocery stores with automatic doors or ramps which were built in the back of buildings to allow for the removal of the large garbage cans or containers, but which made the building 'coattail' accessible. This access was never planned, but it now exists and literally is a way of slipping (or rolling) in the back door. The very act of slipping in the back door and practicing inclusive theatre or disability theatre is, in itself, a political and social statement.

I have written about inclusive theatre many times both online and in print as well as having spoken and lectured about it and hosted panels on it for the past seventeen years. I was lucky enough to attend a conference in 2005 hosted by The Public Theater in New York City where I met many of those whose shoulders we all stand

on. Simi Linton, the bawdy and beloved author and activist, and John Belluso, the intensely brilliant playwright (I admit to a horrible crush on John) were only a few I met then and what I remember is how clearly they all spoke. How clearly we all need to speak to each other to be understood. Thus, I prefer to speak in the plainest terms possible at all times in this book so that practitioners, academics, teachers and artists alike can understand and use my points and ideas. Clarity encourages understanding. The artists and designers and staff I have worked with over the past seventeen years and the disabilities they have represented have schooled me well on being clear with them as opposed to pedantic, verbose, politically or socially motivated and overly academic. So, this tome will invariably be in plain language terms, as will the case studies presented by the various practitioners. The case studies are likewise presented in three clear parts, History, Plan and Outcome (outcomes are the bulk of Chapter 16) and in simple non-academic English. This book set out to be one thing and that was, and is, practical thus plain English is needed.

In early 2001 I co-founded, with two other actresses, the first fully inclusive theatre company in New York history (and still continue to be stunned nobody else was doing this inclusive work at all then in New York City, the apex of new works and ideas). I had been lucky enough to have been raised to appreciate people for who they were with no regard to disability, color, sexuality or nationality. I remember as a young actor watching my very heavy and adored acting teacher, Diana Bellamy, perform as Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams and feeling my brain expand. She was the finest Amanda I have ever seen before or since, and I have seen many. Why couldn't a very heavy actress play the role? Or a black one? Or one with one leg? Or one who was deaf? Being exposed to disability in my own family as well as colors and nationalities imbued me with an open mind. It helps if you have one as well.

It seemed, in 2001, almost every New York City theatre company was spouting the word 'inclusive' yet very few had people of color performing, disabled writers writing, women on their board, older company members and so forth. Exhausted with the lip service, and exhausted by those telling me to produce works about white men and women because audiences would like that, we founded Nicu's Spoon. There is a story behind the name of the company.

I worked with abandoned kids in Romania in the 1990s and the most amazing one was Nicu, who was five. Nicu was in diapers and did not walk, talk or feed himself. They told me he was deaf and mute and ‘retarded’ and hopeless. Nicu had spent five years on his back in a crib. They told me he was a lost cause and could not be worked with. I got angry at that and said “I’ll take him.” Six months later he did all those things. He and I fought some big, bad battles together to get him there – to get him to choose life. And in the process he changed my life. Though he was mentally and physically challenged, Nicu viewed the world with wonder. He spent hours bouncing sunlight off of a spoon. When he began to eat solid food at the age of five, his spoon was everything to him. Nicu’s spoon became the symbol for us for all the impossible things that were suddenly possible. Things like walking, talking, thinking and living. He was HIV positive and we lost him five years later in 1996. Nicu’s life was about quality, not quantity, about life’s impossibles becoming possible. The company thus echoes those things and works with and for people who may be told “it is impossible.” Because it is possible, it is all possible.

Over the past seventeen years I have produced over forty full length plays (every one with artists with disabilities in them) off and off-off Broadway and directed over half of them as well as produced over forty-five workshops and staged readings of new plays (twenty-two of which featured disabled roles and/or were written by disabled playwrights). We have worked with well over 2,500 actors, writers, designers, composers, directors, crew, staff and board and artists of all kinds in that time. They delight in calling themselves Spoonies. My company, Nicu’s Spoon, actively recruits and works with every disability imaginable as well as every age, gender, color, sexual identity, religion, language and nationality.

I define the artists I speak about in this book as anyone (actors, writers, composers, designers, staff and crew) who creates art. I also use, except in two cases, full and real names of the artists I speak about in my own company case studies. Why? So that you will search them out and hire them, of course. Disabled artists need employment. They have huge value in artistic society and their value is not dependent upon them becoming the norm, but in showing us and teaching us an entirely new ‘norm.’

There is a long, frustrating and fascinating history in disability studies, about the history of the struggle for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) signed in 1990, or the UK's Disability Discrimination Act (1995), the history of the language we use or do not use in order to label varying disabilities, the ongoing struggle and history in regard to equal training and employment and some of all of that we will touch on in this book, but this book is not about those things. This book is, quite simply, about how to recruit, cast, staff, produce and create professional quality fully inclusive theatre with an emphasis on working with artists with disabilities. This book proposes a new theory of accessibility, postulates new ways to problem solve and encourages new modes of thinking to replace archaic ones.

This book is about how to invite disabled people and artists to be on your boards, direct your plays, be your dramaturgs, crew, playwrights, designers and actors. This book is about how to do it right, like true working professionals do, with humor and love, how to work directly with all kinds of artists while ignoring the myths about it. This book is a confirmation that your needs, the project's needs and the disabled artists' needs cannot be approached separately. There is always a balance, a yin/yang in this kind of theatre. This is the theatre of the future, an all inclusive future. No matter what political or social restrictions may come in the arts, this is the theatre of the future. This book is about how to implement it all one step at a time and how to come out of it with a great artistic experience for everyone including your audience. Of course a great audience experience translates into a healthy box office, reviews and artistic satisfaction.

However, none of this can continue to work without the growing systemic change in how we recruit, educate, create and open up jobs for artists with disabilities. It is not enough for a university campus to be ADA compliant if they do not actively recruit, encourage and grow new artists, writers and thinkers. This doesn't even count the disabled stage managers, facility managers, the non-creative staff of the theatrical and academic world. The system itself must change. Theatres and universities must change. This book then gives everyone some of the pathways where they can stop wondering about working with disabilities in theatre and thus, take action.

I am often asked if I am disabled myself. I choose not to answer and here is why. If I am disabled then the story becomes about this brave

disabled woman who makes theatre, and that is not the story I want to tell. If I am not disabled then the story becomes about this good Samaritan who helps those less fortunate, and that is not the story I want to tell. I choose not to answer because the story I want to tell is about the disabled artists, writers, designers and thinkers and the creation of new performance styles, ways to problem solve and creatively perform. That is the story we need to focus on in this country.

Theatre should be innovative, fresh, shocking, creating active debate and thought. Rarely should theatre be safe and boring. Even if you do a revival of a well-known play it can still be filled with excitement and newness and passion. If not, then why do it? Why do “Meh, it was ok...” theatre? That is the death of art and theatre. If theatre does not reflect our true global society, in all colors, abilities, genders, ages, lifestyles, religions and nationalities, then it does not reflect society at all. Not truly. It is just another play written by a white, male playwright (and yes, I know many great white, male playwrights, but I am making a point) directed by the same and starring the same. Boring with a capital B.

That ‘same-ness’ is not my daily reality, not the world I see on the streets of New York, not on the streets of Europe, not in this global and increasingly high-tech world. Theatres that have their heads stuck in the 1930s where, “Gee, we’re all white fellas and we’re going to do a show!” are sadly and horribly out of touch with twenty-first century reality. The über wealthy patrons and the foundations that support these theatres are out of touch as well, and it both saddens and angers me. Do not get me started thinking about opera houses funded by the wealthy, although they are already rolling in funds and wasting \$5,000 for a gold gilded pair of shoes for their soprano, or the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and its active funding primarily of the same companies over and over again who do not always do anything new and creative to earn it. For younger and newer companies in the US, the NEA application process is so complicated and convoluted that it alone often stops them from applying for funds. This is an artistic pity, as these smaller companies are the ones actively writing the new plays, producing new artists and exploring new theatrical boundaries.

We need as artists, directors, writers, companies and academic institutions to not only produce more reality reflective, socially

challenging theatre, but we also need to bring more educators, funders and donors to it and by bringing them to it we then educate them. Too often theatre companies and individual artists may take the role of educator upon themselves when they should not have to, teaching prospective funders what working with artists with disabilities really means. Academic and arts training programs need to open up nationally and both actively recruit and accept more disabled artists into their ranks as well. If training programs do not do this they will rapidly find themselves falling behind as the disability community grows in social and political power. In the twenty-first century the disability community in the US is rapidly becoming more vocal, more political, writing books, sitting on panels, snagging those university jobs, doing public speaking and becoming a major political force for cultural change.

Sharon Barnartt is professor and chairperson of the Department of Sociology at Gallaudet University and has argued that usage of the concept of 'culture' does not adhere to the usual anthropological definitions. Rather, she suggests that the concept of collective consciousness much better describes what is occurring in the disability community in the twenty-first century than does the term 'disability culture.' While a culture functions to maintain the social order, a collective consciousness impels the actions which comprise social and political movements. This is what is happening in the disabled communities across the US this very day. Those who make art are on the front lines of reflecting to the rest of the world what the world really looks like (when you pay attention to it) so we ourselves must pay attention to it.

You, universities, training programs, academics and academic recruiters, audition boards, theatre companies, regional theatres, you must begin to broaden your creative horizon, begin to look at colors, ages, genders, disabilities, nationalities. There is literally a rainbow of different artists waiting for you to work with them in this world. Do not miss it because you are stuck in a rut or afraid to start, or your board doesn't get it. There is no 'Pride' group which represents the disabled community. Yet. However, it is coming, in one way or another. The world is changing fast, you need to take risks, make big moves and keep up or you will find yourself, your company, your university wondering where your students and audiences went.

WHY THIS BOOK?



Figure 1.1 *Richard III* by William Shakespeare, 2015. Our production had every cast member except Richard III, and thus the society of the play, as disabled. L to R back row, Jessica Levesque as Clarence, Guy Ventoliere as Richard III, Estelle Olivia as Prince Edward, center L to R Perri Yaniv as Clarence (yep 2 Clarences!), Stephanie Gould as Norfolk and Joe Genera as Catesby. (Photograph courtesy of Nicu's Spoon Theater Company.)