

DISABILITY VISIBILITY: ON STAGE AND IN THE AUDIENCE

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Master of Arts

In

Theatre Arts

by

Greta Louise Marti

San Francisco, California

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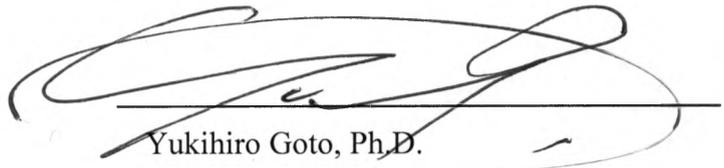
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

I certify that I have read *Disability Visibility: On Stage and In The Audience* by Greta Louise Marti, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Theatre at San Francisco State University.



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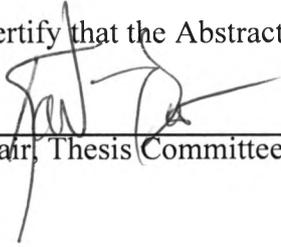
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DISABILITY VISIBILITY: ON STAGE AND IN THE AUDIENCE

Greta Louise Marti
San Francisco, California
2018

The intersection of disability and theatre combines access and art. Theatre, at its best, shares stories of the human experience yet traditionally stories of disability have been excluded. In an effort to include and increase disability visibility in the theatre world, select theatre companies have created accessible opportunities, training programs, and performance content for people with disabilities. I will explore the range of disability theatre that exists today by looking at accomplished companies in the field including Graeae Theatre Company, Hijinx Theatre, and Nicu's Spoon Theatre Company. In addition to inclusive theatre on stage, inclusive audience practices will be introduced in part by looking at the work of Jess Thom and her play *Backstage at Biscuit Land*. By looking at the successes of these existing companies and techniques, I will assemble a vision for a San Francisco theatre company specializing in inclusive theatre practices.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.



Chair, Thesis Committee



Date

May 23, 2018

PREFACE AND/OR ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Most importantly I would like to thank Judy Goodman and her students for elevating my love of theatre with new purpose and agency. Thanks to my cousin Simon for sharing a theatrical passion with me, and to the rest of my family and friends for their constant support and encouragement. And thanks to Kurt Daw and Yukihiro Goto for their guidance.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Graeae Theatre and Hijinx Theatre.....	9
Nicu’s Spoon Theatre, Stephanie Barton-Farcas, <i>Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts</i>	24
Inclusive Audiences: Jess Thom, “Extra Live” and Relaxed Performances	37
San Francisco Inclusive Theatre Company Vision and Inclusive Audience Letter.....	54
Concluding Statement.....	60
Bibliography	61

Introduction

The intersection of disability and theatre combines access with art. Theatre, at its best, shares stories of the human experience yet stories of disability have traditionally been excluded. In an effort to include increase disability visibility in the theatre world, select theatre companies have created accessible opportunities, training programs, and performance content for disabled people. I will explore the range of disability theatre that exists today by looking at accomplished companies in the field including Graeae Theatre Company, Hijinx Theatre, and Nicu's Spoon Theatre Company. In addition to looking at inclusive theatre on stage, inclusive audience practices will be explored. Designated 'relaxed performances' and other inclusive measures that reach disabled audiences will be explored not only from the work of the aforementioned theatre companies, but from more streamlined theatre companies as well. Looking at the artistic activist work of Jess Thom and her play *'Backstage at Biscuit Land'*, will give unique perspective on the need for a more understanding audience. Community members with experience in disability theatre will also provide insight on the need for designated performances in the immediate Bay Area. The successes of these disabled theatre companies, techniques, and overall inclusive practice will be informative in assembling a vision for a San Francisco based theatre company specializing in inclusive theatre practice. I will conclude with an approach letter recommending inclusive audience practices to be shared with Bay Area theatre companies in hopes of expanding these programs.

The thesis is outlined as follows:

Chapter 1 - Graeae Theatre Company and Hijinx Theatre

Chapter 2 - Nicu's Spoon Theatre, Stephanie Barton-Farcas, *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*

Chapter 3 - Inclusive Audiences: Jess Thom, "Extra Live" and Relaxed Performances

Chapter 4 - San Francisco based Inclusive Theatre Company Vision and Inclusive Audience Expansion Plan

The history of disability theatre, is rooted in the political activism surrounding disability rights. Though communities through centuries have experienced and witnessed disability, until recently accessibility and equality did not exist in mainstream culture and law. Activist communities in the 1970s, began to focus on disability rights, and with political pressure and change, came art and expression. By the 1980's the United States and United Kingdom were establishing a culture of disability art including theatre. Kirsty Johnson writes in *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism*, "...by claiming a place for disability experience in the arts as worthy and valuably different, the movement took aim at hackneyed stereotypes and the recurring use of disabilities as metaphors for something else." Reconstructing the narrative of disability became a theme in theatre arts and the early emergence of disability theatre companies. Graeae Theatre Company and Hijinx Theatre, groups I am focusing on in my paper, were both

established in the early 1980s and correlate to the historical beginnings of the movement. Graeae co-founder Richard Tomlinson and author of *Disability, Theatre and Education*, mentions the historical importance of the year of 1981, as the “International Year of Disabled Persons”, a significant year in disability activism and art. The United Nations proclaimed the International Year of Disabled Persons (IYDP) and created an action plan at local and international levels on the issues of equalization of opportunities, rehabilitation and prevention of disabilities.¹ With the close of the decade, continued significant legislative improvements occurred. The United States’ American Disabilities Act passed in 1990 followed by the 1995 Disability Discrimination Act in the United Kingdom. While these laws have improved opportunities and access for disabled people, there is still a long way to go. Offering another perspective on disability theatre’s history, HowlRound, an online disability forum coming out of Emerson College, had a ‘Disability in Theatre’ series that highlighted many issues of disability visibility the theatre industry is facing. Christine Branco, an actor with disabilities offered this statistic. “People with disabilities are America’s largest minority, representing 20 percent of our population—an estimated 58 to 62 million—yet disabled artists remain virtually invisible on our country’s stages. And while our screens are doing marginally better, only one-half of one percent of all lines spoken on television or in film are spoken by an actor with a disability.” Stephanie Barton-Farcas’ 2017 publication, *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*, is demonstrative of inclusive theatre progress

¹not perfection. This thesis will try to create an active example of the kind of idealistic, and more importantly-necessary, inclusive theatre that belongs in the mainstream.

The ‘Social Model of Disability’ is a recent creation to better discuss the ways in which we as a society view disability. The model was created by disabled people as a way to better define language and perception of disabled people. It is preferred by disabled communities when compared to the medical model. “The social model has been developed by disabled people in response to the medical model and the impact it has had on their lives. Under the social model, disability is caused by the society in which we live and is not the ‘fault’ of an individual disabled person. Disability is the product of the physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers present within society, which lead to discrimination. The removal of discrimination requires a change of approach and thinking in the way in which society is organised.” Language like ‘disabled’ versus ‘handicapped’, ‘wheelchair user’ versus ‘wheelchair bound’, ‘has learning disabilities’ versus ‘mentally retarded’, are some examples. This thesis will do its best to actively use the ‘Social Model of Disability’ as a point of reference to reduce ableist rhetoric.

Graeae Theatre is one of the United Kingdom’s leading disability theatre companies, putting visible disabilities on center stage, literally. Working primarily with people who are deaf and disabled, the company puts on production of disability centered

¹ The International Year of Disabled Persons 1981. United Nations Engage.
<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/disidydp.htm>

² Sealey, Jenny (and Graeae Company Members), A Guide to Inclusive Teaching Practice in Theatre. September 2009. Downloadable Online Access, graeae.org

theatre at a professional level and offers education and training programs to create more inclusive training practice. Graeae is worth exploring in depth in my thesis because not only are they turning out exceptional work as a company, they are also a “disabled led” company which offers important perspective on the way disability arts is handled in mainstream culture. Productions like *Sideshow* (1981), one of the earliest, and more recently *The House of Bernarda Alba* (2017), used disabled actors to participate in theatrical storytelling that received critical acclaim. The company has been an advocate of “creative captioning” and is dedicated to creating inclusive audience practices that create opportunities for visually and hearing impaired, and sensory sensitive audiences. Co-founder Richard Tomlinson wrote in his book documenting Graeae’s early work *Disability, Theatre, and Education*, “There are (other) reasons why theatre is such an important medium for disabled people. It allows for enlightenment and education; it is a tool whereby the reality of disability and the realities of people who have disabilities can be introduced, demonstrated, and discussed.” Graeae has done exceptional work to improve disability visibility in a professional theatre context. By looking at past productions, critical responses, and education workshop tactics I will be able to draw from their successes as I start to assemble a model for a San Francisco theatre company of this nature that will benefit from their example.

Hijinx Theatre is another champion of inclusive theatre practices based in the United Kingdom. Hijinx Theatre practices inclusion by casting actors with and without disabilities together in productions like *Meet Fred*. The company collaborates and creates

residency programs with other theatre groups, regularly diversifying its theatre base. Impressively, Hijinx has also pioneered its own casting agency in Wales for disabled actors with a variety of disabilities. By looking into their past productions and established professional development programs, this research will continue to be useful for the future of San Francisco's inclusive theatre company.

Stephanie Barton-Farcas, founder of Nicu's Spoon Theatre, recently published the book *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* where she outlines ways to create inclusive theatre based on her twenty plus years of experience. Nicu's Spoon Theatre demonstrates an American experience surrounding disability theatre. I will examine the work of Nicu's Spoon Theatre Company's production of *Richard III*, and will use Barton-Farcas' manual to map out ideas for the proposed San Francisco company. "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 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." (Barton-Farcas).

In addition to creating visibility of disability on the stage, the mentioned companies do an exceptional job of encouraging inclusive audiences. The concept of relaxed performances (sometimes referred to as "extra live") invites people of all ability

and sensory control levels to the theatre. It's perhaps expected that companies like Graeae have "creative captioning" and interpreting for the hearing impaired, but more recently larger companies like the National Theatre of London and notable theatre festivals like the Edinburgh Fringe Festival have started to adopt accessible practices. Jess Thom's *Backstage in Biscuit Land* is a play created around the idea of inclusive audiences. Thom has Tourette's syndrome and created a play about the disease to increase awareness and reduce the associated negative stigmatization. She also describes her experience of what it means to be an actor with Tourette's and as a theatre audience member and how there needs to be more access. Through my work doing theatre with people with disabilities I know of disabled individuals who have their own experiences to share of what it's like to be disabled as an audience member. By examining the work of Jess Thom and collecting other testimonials of relaxed performances and inclusion, I will create an action plan to share with existing Bay Area companies to encourage the creation of more inclusive performances in their traditional season.

The final chapter will take the valuable information and insight gathered about these companies and provide a vision for a disability theatre to be based in the San Francisco Bay Area. I wish to map out a mission, exemplified season, and tactics that a disability theatre project would benefit from. I have concerns that as a non-disabled individual "running" this company should not be up to me, but by consulting professionals and visionaries in the existing field I will attempt to do this community project justice. My own history of accessible theatre is not irrelevant, in fact it is why I

have found myself writing this thesis. My acting background exposed me to a drama class for disabled people at City College of San Francisco. Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSPPS), is a department focused on bringing opportunities of education and training. The Accessible Acting Class caters to a variety of students with a range of disability and ability levels. The class serves as any other theatre class; a rewarding exploration of art, project-based activity, in addition to community building. The students come from a variety of Bay Area adult day programs and gather together weekly. In over six years of volunteering and now teaching experience, we explored themes of loss and life, acted in our own play versions of classic stories and myths, worked with puppets, and recreated fairy tales. The class challenged my own views of need and accessibility of the theatrical art form which I am eager to explore. The vision for a San Francisco based company is greatly influenced by this experience.

Graeae Theatre Company and Hijinx Theatre

Graeae Theatre Company is a leader in disability theatre in the United Kingdom, and widely respected internationally. Graeae fearlessly puts disability on stage in a professional theatre context. Graeae's inclusivity model focuses on creating accessible theatre opportunities for Deaf and disabled actors. The company is also "disabled-led", providing insightful perspective on the needs of disabled actors and audiences. Based in East London, Graeae partners with other theatre companies, bridging gaps to create inclusive productions of high value. The evolution of the company has been progressive over the course of almost 40 years. By looking at the early work of founders Nabil Shaban and Richard Tomlinson, their workshop efforts and their original devised piece *Sideshow* in 1981, and by looking at the creative direction of Jenny Sealey and her 2017 production *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca in a new translation by Jo Clifford, we can better understand their work and need for accessible theatre opportunities everywhere. The Graeae commitment to access has resulted in the creation of their signature "creative captioning" in performance – a creative way to use sign language and audio descriptions to accommodate sensory and visually impaired actors and audiences alike. In addition to its successes on stage, Graeae has reacted to a need for education and training programs for disabled actors, providing resources for teaching artists who are interested in creating accessible options for disabled students. Graeae's

range of experience and programs, I will influence my vision for a similar San Francisco theatre company.

Graeae's history is exceptional and unique. Nabil Shaban and Richard Tomlinson started the company in 1980 out of a need for representation and inclusion in theatre on a community and professional level. Nabil Shaban, a disabled actor with Osteogenesis Imperfecta, or brittle bones disease, and Richard Tomlinson, an educator with specific interests in disability theatre, were responsible for the creation of the Graeae group. Graeae's rooted philosophy of access was evident from its creation by a disabled actor and disability educator. The group also included 6 other disabled people with interest in acting and storytelling. Richard Tomlinson published *Disability, Theatre and Education* in 1984 to better document the founding of the company and the type of work he and Shaban were committed to creating in the beginning years. The United Nations designated the year 1981 as "the International Year of Disabled People," which made a particular impact on the start of the company. "I comment briefly on some of the work that was done in 1981: that year had been designated the International Year of Disabled People, and it was inevitable that writers, theatre, and actors should show some interest as indeed they did. Naturally some companies-usually those with their own disabled actors-had been working long before 1981 and will be working for long after. It is hoped that the exposure that 1981 provided for them will generate sufficient impetus to keep them going for a long time" (Tomlinson 5). It was not as if disabled actors and theatre did not exist before this year, but an evolving, more inclusive and accessible vision began to emerge.

Tomlinson wrote, “Never before had disabled people had the chance to talk about their experiences in such a way. Political meetings, discussion groups, awareness classes had provided one sort of forum, but theatre was a totally different one. I believed at the time, and I still do, that theatre can present things more dynamically, more excitingly, more memorably than any number of talking heads on TV or than cosy discussion classes. In a phrase, it was the sense of danger in theatre that I found attractive. In exposing an audience to real experiences in a theatrical context there was bound to be some sort of frisson” (Tomlinson 4). The company began assembling original work to better document experiences, and sometimes struggles, of disabled actors and people with shows like *Sideshow* and *M3 Junction 4*. In addition to creating original work the company created workshops granting access for people with disabilities to theatre, exposing them to theatre techniques and practices. By bringing their original work on tour, visiting various schools, day centers, and sometimes hospitals, accessibility was increased. The workshop format involved the sharing of devised plays the company had created, collecting reactions from the audience and or participants, followed by efforts to make an original short play or performance centered around the people. This act of giving voice to disabled people’s stories was often empowering for the participants: Tomlinson remarked that their early workshops created performance opportunities for people that otherwise have been told they have no power, and that the simple act of performing gave an individual a sense of empowerment. “Now this may all see rather academic, but for a disabled person it can be nothing short of revolutionary. For it is not generally accepted

by society that disabled people are initiators of activities, that they are in charge, or can take command” (Tomlinson 10). Company members began devising work together that documented experiences they had being disabled. One devised piece explored the story of a person who had suffered brain damage after a car accident.

“A more recent production presented a particular challenge because the person talking about his accident had no memory of it. Will had had quite severe brain damage as a result of being hit by a car. He had been in a coma for three months, and his memory was severely affected as a result. This meant that not only was his memory of the accident extremely hazy, but he couldn’t remember his lines on stage. I felt though, that it was important to portray his accident on stage because the accident was important to Will. The problem was how to do this without placing Will in the impossible position of causing a breakdown of the scene at every performance. It was resolved by first setting up an improvisation whereby all the company sat round and asked him questions about the accident, how he felt and so on. We then sifted those questions down to about ten or a dozen. I directed the company to ask them at every performance, and I asked Will to answer them. In this way he didn’t need to learn lines. This improvisation in performance continued over some forty or fifty shows. The results were often staggering. I remember on one occasion, when he was asked the standard question, ‘You were once able-bodied, now you are handicapped, how do you feel?’, Will replied, ‘Useless, I feel useless.’ He had never said that before. As the company on stage recognised the total honesty of the response, the effect was electric. This communicated itself to the audience, who were also aware that something special had occurred. The amusing sequel to this is that when I complimented Will on that superbly effective answer he denied he had ever said such a thing and continued denying it for the next couple weeks.” (Tomlinson 33-34).

This example provides insight of the nature of Graeae’s early work: the company not only found a way to tell this person’s story, but also accommodated his disability, including him in performance despite the difficulties. It was not an easy feat but a valuable one that resonated with company members and audiences alike.

Soon after the formation of the company in 1980, the group was invited to travel to Canada and attend the International Conference on Rehabilitation and Disability. The play *Sideshow* was created to share with the conference in addition to touring to various education institutions. *Sideshow* is a play with a familiar and traditional variety show format, that includes, skits, songs, poems, etc. about the experiences and pressures of disabled people. Some of the short scenes put disability prejudice front and center. There is an element of mockery at the amount of condescension or pity that disabled people regularly have directed at them. There is even a song about getting pats on the head, which Richard Tomlinson documents in his aforementioned book. “*Sideshow* deliberately set out to enlighten attitudes, either by lampooning stereotypes [as in *Beauty and the Beast*] or by confronting an audience with a direct challenge as in this piece of verse:

The world is so twee and nice
It's full of candy and spice
We gets pats on the head
For being good

It's full of people who care
Who are kind-hearted and fair
They feed us with
Saccharine food

We smile in sweet gratitude
And act as all cripples should
Like marzipan figures
On a cake

We're filled with cream and meringue
And we're sweet to the tongue
We're gaudy and gay
For your sake

Do we have to pretend
That this in the end
Is all that
We're living for

To entertain throngs
With laughter and songs
Is this all inescapable
Law

Is each man in his place
And does impairment debase
So that we are put
Where we belong

For a sweet tooth decays
And the roles that we play
Have words
That don't go in songs

And the ache in my mind
Rots from my soul from the inside
And the taste in my mouth
Makes me spit

Let me be what I am
I don't give a damn
It's me that I've got
And that's it

The bitterness with which the final stanzas were delivered was a deliberate shock tactic. Audiences were often totally silent at the end of the scene, although disabled members sometimes indicated their approval and identification with the sentiment expressed.” (Tomlinson 20). The BBC made a documentary about the early work of Graeae and *Sideshow* which included a video excerpt of the poem above. The actors moved about the space with their wheelchairs, walking sticks and other modes of transportation reflecting the inclusive nature of the play and also serving as a reminder that the voices should not be discounted. In the BBC documentary, Elaine Roberts an original company member explains audience members reactions, “No I don’t feel bitter at all...people have said to me, even friends of mine, that the show is bitter. Like having a knife thrust in you and twisted around. But maybe it’s their inability to cope with what actually happens to people in life. Because it does happen. And we’re saying it, stating it. The audience are really put on the spot. Tables are turned, we’re in charge, and they have to watch.” This reflection is important because the way a play is received can be indicative of how comfortable a society is being confronted with difficult subjects. If audiences are made uncomfortable by the visibility of disability on stage, I would argue that is valuable insight into what is needed in society, and what kinds of content should be more readily available in a theatre setting, and beyond. It is also worth noting that this production took place in the early 1980s, and it is impossible to measure what a modern audience’s reception would look like.

After a couple years of touring with their educational workshops and devised plays, the direction and content of the company began to shift. Tomlinson notes in his book that the need for better acting education within the company became obvious. “...greater exposure demanded a certain acting competence. The act of performance is perhaps the greatest education. Once the initial fears of forgetting or missing out words or making wrong moves are over, then the real problems of acting start to emerge. The actor has to start working at his abilities to communicate, to analyse whether he is playing in a way that actually assists the production and his fellow actors. And this is all part and parcel of growing into and understanding the part that he is playing...” (Tomlinson 47). Graeae began to shift from creating original work to using traditional plays and scripts and instead making adaptive changes when needed. The company had successful production runs of Harold Pinter and Eugène Ionesco plays, while still creating new work with disability content, but eventually the company faced leadership changes. Nabil Shaban and Richard Tomlinson both left Graeae in the mid 1980s. The company managed to exist, sometimes sporadically through the rest of the 1980s and 1990s. In 1997 Jenny Sealey became the new artistic director. Graeae continued its “disabled led” leadership trend by hiring Jenny Sealey, a Deaf woman. In addition to providing theatre training opportunities for disabled actors, Sealey began emphasizing a new commitment to audiences as well. “Graeae continued to commission new works, but with an additional emphasis on questions of access. In addition to generating scripts, the collaborative process adopted by the company began to address the question of how different

audiences and actors might require different inclusion tactics to perceive the work and perform in it... As a result, new attention was paid to incorporating live audio-description into plays for blind audience members, and sign language for Deaf audiences.” (Johnston 87). Jenny Sealey began taking chances and casting disabled actors in traditional “non disabled” roles and found the experimental productions to be a success.

More recently, in 2017, still under Jenny Sealey’s direction, Graeae produced *The House of Bernarda Alba* by Federico Garcia Lorca. It was the second Lorca play that Graeae endeavored, following *Blood Wedding* in 2015. Put on in partnership with the Royal Exchange of Manchester, the production was equipped with an all-female cast and creative crew. The story centers around a mother and her five daughters and the ways they are treated and expected to mourn the death of their father. The “creative captioning” with which Graeae has become synonymous, effectively weaved (British) sign language and audio description in the performance, creating a seamless performance experience for audiences of different accessibility requirements. The audio descriptions are intended for visually impaired audiences and actors. Lyn Gardner of *The Guardian* wrote, in regards to Graeae’s creative captioning, “They are fully incorporated into the action from the first day of rehearsal, adding layer after layer of meaning to Lorca’s text. Which sister signs for which sister, when Bernarda Alba does sign or refuses to sign for her two Deaf daughters, and which characters can and can’t see all become meaningful. Such creative decisions underline the themes of power, status, punishment, intimacy and blindness that haunt Lorca’s original text, which was finished just a few weeks before he

was executed by a fascist firing squad in Spain in 1936.” Jo Clifford was in charge of creating a new translation of Lorca’s piece for the Graeae production. Her insight on creative captioning technique is worth quoting as well. “I should have known better, really, because the main purpose of Graeae is transformation: transformation of ideas and transformation of perception through the very simple, but profoundly revolutionary, act of placing Deaf and disabled actors centre stage; and through integrating sign language, captioning and audio description from the very beginnings of the creative process to make theatre that is inclusive for everybody. I’ve come to writing this programme note just after adapting a scene of the play so it can be performed by a Deaf actor who communicates through sign language and a hearing actor who communicates through the spoken word. And the task of making sure that these two amazing actors can communicate with an audience as they communicate with each other, and that they can do so in a way that is absolutely accessible to a hearing and D/deaf audience, and a seeing and blind audience alike... it all asks profound questions as to what communication truly involves, and demands the creation of a new theatrical language in the process” (Education Packet 28). This revolutionary formatting of inclusion provides an exceptional example for creating accessible, inclusive, and professional theatre practices. It challenges the idea of what theatre looks and sounds like. The Graeae website itself does an immaculate job of providing accessible resources for varying disability to better accommodate readers and viewers. The downloadable education packet for *The House of Bernarda Alba* production, provides valuable information with show details, interviews,

and standard press materials. The set design description offers information about the practicality and functionality of the set, in case of visually impaired actors. For example,

“The floor boards are painted: a merged moon and cloudscape, pale in the centre, darker on the outskirts. There is then a larger circle of intricate off-white lace, broken up in places and fading in and out. Painted over this, on the floor, are the words ‘DOOR, THE DOOR, FRONT DOOR. The entrance that Bernarda Alba guards bears the words DOORWAY TO THE YARD’. At the entrance into the rest of the house are the words: BERNARDA ALBA’S HOUSE, GLASS CUPBOARD, IT IS SUMMER, THE WALLS ARE THICK and LOW SEAT. In the other entrances the words say ANOTHER DOOR. The words are in a STENCIL font, originally created in the 1930s and used by the military and others to give information. It is functional and instructive, using only capital letters. The words continue on the face of the second gallery in the same style. Around 360 degrees it says: THE WALLS ARE WHITE, DECOR UTTERLY SIMPLE and PICTURES OF UNLIKELY LANDSCAPES, NYMPHS OR LEGENDARY KINGS. All of these words are Lorca’s stage directions to the director, actors, and designer” (Education packet 18-19).

Part of their success was because of the training and education programs that Graeae have developed. *Graeae Theatre Company’s Acting and Auditioning: A Practical Guide* and *Graeae Theatre Company’s A Guide to Inclusive Teaching Practice in Theatre*, provide practical information and tips for disabled actors and theatre practitioners. Jenny Sealey’s introduction to *Acting and Auditioning: A Practical Guide*, stresses the importance of inclusive arts, “Disabled people need to continue to challenge the industry and increase their visibility across the arts to reflect the diverse society in which we live. In order for this to happen, we need to address the attitudinal barriers in casting disabled actors.” Most of the tips emphasize the imperative need for disabled actors due to representation issues in the arts and societies as a whole. The guide includes standard

information on how to properly format resumés and CVs, and headshot details. And also gives tips on script reading and access for actors with visual impairments. Highlights from *A Guide to Inclusive Teaching Practice in Theatre*, include “the Social Model of Disability”, as cited and described in the introduction to this paper, understanding the need for adequate access support, i.e. providing interpreters for individuals with varying communication and language abilities, and establishing “creative enablers” for people who need more specific one-on-one work. They stress the need to be straightforward and to address the existence of the disability in the work. As an educator, being sensitive to a certain group of people, and disabled actors and students, does not mean having to be afraid of disability. Instead it means to find ways to work and embrace disabilities on all planes. In summary, the information in these guides is more common sensical than you might imagine, and appropriate for a wider variety of individuals than we might think.

Jenny Sealey and Graeae’s commitment to inclusive theatre practices is best summed up by the artistic director herself. In an interview for Kirsty Johnston’s book *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism* Jenny Sealey was asked:

KJ: How do you understand the concepts of theatre accessibility and inclusion?

JS: Accessibility and inclusion are absolutely permeated within Graeae’s DNA. So, it’s not a question of understanding it, it’s a question of feeling it and knowing it’s your right and responsibility to create accessible theatre. As a deaf person, I want to go see more theatre, and I can’t because there is such a lack of signed performances or captioned performances. So for me, making the work that I do as Graeae, it has to be accessible for a Deaf audience. But at the same time, it has to be accessible to blind and visually impaired people, and the set and everything has to be accessible for any wheelchair users or people with mobility issues in the play. We only perform in theatres where the backstage is accessible, and the

auditorium has access for more than one wheelchair user, which sometimes is the case with some old theatres. Inclusion is well, its everything we do. Some of the mainstream theatres now are including at least one disabled person. I'm waiting for the day when they might include more than one. And i'm waiting for the way when they might include real accessibility in terms of sign language, captioning, and audio description into their main productions (Johnston 154).

Hijinx Theatre, a theatre company based in Wales, is focused on creating Inclusive theatre using disabled and non disabled actors together. Hijinx Theatre's practice of creating professional grade theatre by including a diverse cast of differing abilities is exceptional. Their website states, "What makes us different is that our casts always include actors who have learning disabilities. The ability of these effortlessly talented performers is at the heart of every show we produce, creating work that is utterly absorbing, surprising and provocative" (hijinx.org.uk). According to the National Health Service (NHS), *learning disabilities*, is a common term in the UK for people with autism, down syndrome and other disabilities. (I cite this distinction because in the US, learning disability is more commonly referred for people with learning "difficulties" like dyslexia.) Hijinx Theatre has also pioneered its own casting agency in Wales for actors with learning disabilities. Researching the celebrated production of *Meet Fred* and looking at the establishment of their professional development program, *Hijinx Actors*, will continue to be useful for the vision of San Francisco's inclusive theatre company.

Meet Fred was put on by a production partnership between Hijinx Theatre and Blind Summit, a puppet theatre company. As is the nature of Hijinx Theatre, the production used actors with and without disabilities. Using a traditional bunraku puppet

format, the play follows the story of a puppet Fred who is struggling through life, trying to figure out his own way. Originally created for the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the play received great reviews. *The Stage* website remarked, “This mixture of meta-theatre, puppetry and comedy is nicely handled by the company and there are some lovely sequences, particularly a scene in which a depressed Fred drinks himself silly, but there’s also something more political going on. The piece has points to make about independence and empowerment, about care, support and society. Three cast members have learning disabilities – including Martin Vick, who plays the stage manager – and the show is a celebration of cooperation and collaboration, of people combining their strengths to create something joyous” (thestage.co.uk). It has continued to be developed and performed by the company, winning a ‘Best Ensemble’ award at the 2017 Wales Theatre Awards. Reading about this production gave me insightful ideas on creating original work that incorporates casts of diverse abilities. In modern society we are struggling with separation of people with disabilities from “the mainstream.” Hijinx Theatre and their production of *Meet Fred* sets a good example for inclusive theatre that represents different people in society working together as a whole.

Hijinx Actors is the professional casting agency associated with Hijinx Theatre. The casting agency and database serves actors with disabilities in Wales. In addition to providing representation for actors with learning disabilities, the company has training programs in acting and other professional development workshops, called the *Hijinx Academies*, for their actors to remain current and maintain professional relevance. The

database has a search option that enables theatre companies to search for actors based upon their gender, “impairment” or disability, age, language capability, and location. Individual profiles provide resumés of theatrical experience, a biography of training and specialities, and headshots and pictures of actors in production. The database is easy to use, making it simple for casting directors and theatre companies to appropriately cast and hire disabled actors. Hijinx Actors’ example of providing professional representation for disabled actors, makes accessible and inclusive theatre easier than in decades past. This supportive casting agency is an addition for the vision for a San Francisco company.

Graeae Theatre Company and Hijinx Theatre set strong examples for inclusive theatre companies everywhere. Graeae’s unique “creative captioning” is an inclusive practice, stressing the importance of script adaptation for varying communication capabilities, with sign language and audio description being incorporated into scripts. From its beginning, with its early workshops, Graeae has given voice to disability through original work while not shying away from traditional scripts and plays. Adaptation is one of their greatest strengths, providing resource materials for theatre educators in hopes of creating a more accessible theatre world. Inclusive productions create unique opportunities for actors to work together despite differences. The inclusive casting agency Hijinx Actors, makes a clear and accessible database, creating opportunities for disabled actors. These companies have provided foundation building practices worth incorporating into any inclusive theatre model.

Nicu's Spoon Theatre, Stephanie Barton-Farcas, *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*

Stephanie Barton-Farcas and her book *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* present an extraordinary example of a disability theatre in America. Her theatre company, Nicu's Spoon Theatre, based in New York City, created opportunities for disabled theatre practitioners for 18 years. By looking at the company's mission and their 2015 production of *Richard III*, we will better understand the efforts and experiences of Stephanie Barton-Farcas. Her book, *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* gives practical, matter-of-fact, guidelines on how to create a company specializing in inclusive theatrical productions and how to handle the needs and expectations of disabled actors. Her emphasis on practicality and a problem-solving attitude is useful for other inclusive driven companies- something she argues all theatres should be moving towards. The practical advice and unpretentious nature of her writing, makes her book useful for the developing vision of a San Francisco based inclusive theatre company. "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 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" (Barton-Farcas preface).

Nicu's Spoon Theatre was founded in New York City in 2001. At the time there weren't many, or any, accessible theatre or inclusive companies existing in the area; Barton-Farcas sought to change that. She named the company after her son Nicu who she adopted from Romania, with multiple disabilities. Nicu passed away at a young age and his struggles and advancements holding a spoon in his short life inspired the company's name. The off-off-Broadway theatre company, was created to present "socially reflective theatre" that would enhance the experience of New York City by better representing the diversity of the city, including all abilities, on the stage. The website states, "We are completely committed to involving the full spectrum of diverse and multi-abled in everything we do. From our play selections, programs & internships, artistic productions, to volunteer staffing, and (of course) our audience." Their inclusive theatre productions challenged the idea of who and how disabled actors are cast." 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" (Barton-Farcas).

Nicu's Spoon Theatre Company's 2015 production of *Richard III* presented an original interpretation of the traditional play. Put on in association with Identity Theatre Company, the production effectively used Shakespeare to highlight disability in an untraditional way. Using a traditional script like a Shakespeare play is possible for an inclusive theatre company's productions. While creating original works is good for any theatre company, disabled theatre companies have just as many options. *Richard III* famously centers around the story of crippled hunchback King. Nicu's Spoon Theatre's

interpretation used a form of “reverse casting” in which the lead character of Richard III was the only character not disabled, therefore not played by a disabled actor. Instead the rest of the characters were played by disabled actors—in effect making the non-disabled actor the odd man out. The disabled actors had a variety of disabilities, visible and invisible including cerebral palsy and autism, in addition to physical impairments. A *Playbill* blurb about the production states, “Lady Anne will be played by Rachel Handler, who lost her left leg below the knee in a car accident. Espen Sigurdson, a little person, is playing the Prince of York. Ian Gregory Hill, playing both Hastings and Tyrell, is on the autism spectrum and has Sensory Integration Disorder (SID). His first language was ASL, and he will be using that and spoken English in the show.” (Playbill) Stephanie Barton-Farcas managed to create an alternate reality, while still honoring the outsider function of the Richard III character. The “alternate reality” may be even accurate portrayal of society on stage, being that about 20 percent of the population is disabled² and the population is destined to become more visible as time moves on. The production had characters embrace their disability, not shying away from them on stage, which is important for audiences to see.

Seeing disability on stage can help dismantle harmful ideas about what disabled people can and cannot do. In *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*, Barton-Farcas further described the auditioning of actor Ian Gregory Hill, “As we talked he discussed his autism and the fact that ASL was actually his first language, as

² According to the 2010 U.S. Census Bureau, cited in bibliography.

his family had thought he was deaf for the first few years of his life. I already knew in my head by then that I was definitely casting him in the show, but his saying that immediately made me see a scene full blown in my head. He ended up playing a few roles in *Richard III* for us, but my favorite one and a real show-stopping moment was when he played Tyrell (who murders the young princes) as a deaf man, so he signed and softly spoke the role. When Tyrell has his speech about the deaths of the princes we orchestrated the music, lights and his own movement and signing to all represent the sadness he felt for carrying this out. To this day people mention this scene to me and how affecting it was, and I literally ‘saw’ it happen in my mind’s eye during our first audition meeting by using information which was true to life about that specific artist. Ian is now union and touring with shows and working like mad, so our show was a great place for him to be seen and to show off his talent both verbally and with ASL” (Barton-Farcas chapter 4). This creative way of using Ian Gregory Hill’s disabilities to enhance his character’s performance provides great example of the possibilities disability theatre presents.

Parts of the *Richard III* production are available to watch on YouTube. In keeping with Stephanie Barton-Farcas own advice for critiquing disability theatre as one would any other, I will say this: the YouTube clips show a patchy and sometimes awkward show. Some of the actors give an exceptional performance, while others need more work. As both Jenny Sealey of Graeae and Stephanie Barton-Farcas of Nicu’s Spoon, point out, there needs to be better accessible actor training programs. The industry is still lacking

this essential component and it feels evident in production clips from Nicu's Spoon. However, that does not discount the fact that this production provided opportunities to a large ensemble cast of disabled actors, creating disability visibility on stage.

Stephanie Barton-Farcas spoke at an Accessibility NYC/A11y NYC in March of 2018 to discuss inclusion in the arts and her book. The discussion was an insightful look at the experience-driven frankness that Barton-Farcas presents. Barton-Farcas is self-admittedly not an academic and prefers to identify as a problem solver. The work of her theatre company solved problems of accessibility for her actors, technicians, designers, creative team, etc. in every production. According to Barton-Farcas, her book *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* comes at a time when accessibility is becoming more popularized. The book's organization and design is practical in such a way in that theatre artists and activists who are interested in disability theatre are emboldened to create work with a solid model and using advice from someone with eighteen years of experience.

One of her many critiques of the status quo is of people's discomfort of disability visibility and a "casting hierarchy" that exists in theatre and culture as a whole. She describes how audiences have a hard time understanding disability. Seeing a wheelchair makes sense for some, but wrapping their heads around the idea of invisible disability can be a challenge for audience members.

Another exceptional point she made at the discussion is the issue of a pitying audience. (As noted in my first chapter, Jenny Sealey of Graeae Theatre made similar

comments about people's pitying concerns) The reality is, if the theatre is bad, then you can say it. Just because the actors are disabled doesn't mean you have to compliment them. They are just people, and that does not change that bad theatre is bad theatre.

It is important to be reminded that disabled people are not looking for pity. The quality of their performance is really more indicative of the presence or lack of accessible training. Barton-Farcas faults universities, drama schools, and other higher education institutions for being afraid of providing accessible program for aspiring actors with different abilities. Due to the lack of training, there can be a disconnect between disabled people and level of skill they display. The professional pool of disabled actors is small. In my research I have developed some inkling of this, given that both Graeae and Hijinx Theatre had to create their own acting "academies" and training programs to promote professional level programs. Additionally, based upon my own experience in a specialized arts high school majoring in theatre, countless summer theatre programs at esteemed universities including CalArts, UC Berkeley, Northwestern University, and receiving a BA in Acting from Sonoma State University, I did not once have any interaction with fellow students who were (visibly) disabled. I completed a summer Shakespeare intensive program at London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA) where I had my first encounter with a disabled actor and fellow trainee. I bring up these examples to highlight that reality that there is little to no inclusion in theatre training. It is hard to believe that a major city in a prosperous area has a lack of disabled people interested in theatre training.

“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” (Barton-Farcas preface).

The opening passage of *Disability and Theatre: A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts* displays a passion and vision for inclusive theater that is electric. While Stephanie Barton-Farcas views herself as an idealist—as a veteran in theatre she understands the high need for accessibility in the industry. The practical handbook comes at an essential point in time. The book, organized into 16 chapters, discusses details of inclusion in recruiting, auditioning, casting, hiring, and production for a variety of theatre practitioners to implement into their practices. This book is approachable. It’s written in an easily interpretable format that is encouraging.

Barton-Farcas describes it in a straightforward way, “This book will be anecdotal in many sections as it is the true human experience that needs to be shared to begin this de-mystifying process. Frequently in a historical, political or social context it has been

the reluctance to view disabled people (and all the other marginalized groups I have worked with) as human that has propagated the mistreatment of them. Thus, anecdotal information and real-world experience casts us all in a real light and reveals artists with disabilities as the human beings they have always been. It serves as a reminder of the process we need to undertake. It's not that academic English has no place in this, it is simply that it can be used as a distancing mechanism, in a way becoming a dialect of privilege, and that we do not want in this book" (Barton-Farcas preface).

Every chapter has a "case study" that presents a real-life situation involving an accessibility problem in the theatre. The challenges that a real-life disability theatre company face gives specifics about the challenges of inclusive theatre and its outcomes. The upcoming paragraphs will highlight the book's main points, and extract solid concepts and ideas for the creative model for the San Francisco based theatre company I am proposing.

The social model of disability and vocabulary are introduced early on, to clarify widely accepted terminology and views on how disabled people wish to be described. To review: the social model of disability is the idea that the barriers against disabled people are socially constructed. Graeae Theatre's *A Guide to Inclusive Teaching Practice in Theatre* defines it thus: "Under the social model, disability is caused by the society in which we live and is not the 'fault' of an individual disabled person. Disability is the product of the physical, organisational and attitudinal barriers present within society, which lead to discrimination. The removal of discrimination requires a change of

approach and thinking in the way in which society is organised. The social model takes account of disabled people as part of our economic, environmental and cultural society. The barriers that prevent any individual playing a part in society are the problem, not the individual” (Sealey 6). Both Graeae Theatre and Nicu’s Spoon Theatre make a point to include this terminology model in their work. The other terminology specifics explored include describing the difference between person-first and identity-first language, for example “person with disabilities” versus “disabled person.” While the preference varies between individuals and groups, Nicu’s Spoon Theatre and Graeae both reflect that identity-first has become more widely accepted and is appreciated, so as to not disassociate the person from their disability. Barton-Farcas reminds her readers that most often, that like everyone else, disabled people would like to be referred to by their name. In the model proposed in this thesis, I intend to use identity-first language.

Recruiting disabled theatre artists for a disabled-specific theatre company is the first topic to be addressed in the book. Whether it is to audition and cast a show, or to hire disabled technical theatre artists, the theatre company must not shy away from the importance of using words like ‘disability’ and ‘disabled’ in any marketing and recruiting material. Barton-Farcas reminds that it is important to find ways to pay your artists, always, and sometimes that means in the form of transportation costs. In efforts to recruit disabled artists, it can be effective to do outreach to people who may have encountered disability later in life. People who may have become disabled through disease or physical accidents may have had major training, probably want to work, but now have

encountered more limited opportunities. Audition, callback and rehearsal space, and restrooms all need to be accessible for wheelchair users, indeed, multiple wheelchair users at one time. She suggests avoiding an open casting call to avoid the mess of too many wheelchairs and other walking aids in a space at once. Providing calm and organization is essential for disabled actors. Some of the best auditioning tips include having an audition coordinator who can check in with disabled artist about their needs and concerns about auditioning, whether it be in regards to the audition space or the format of a cold read script. It is important to provide scripts in braille, large or small print, and to be able to provide actors with an interpreter if needed. It is also imperative to be mindful about the fact that not all disabilities are visible. People are disabled even when it is not immediately and visually obvious. Barton-Farcas discusses the trend of casting people with “easily identifiable disabilities” like those in wheelchairs or with walking sticks or people who use sign language and interpreters to communicate. This checking of a diversity box by including one disabled actor in a cast is a beginning move but theatre companies should be challenged to cast more disabled actors.

By having a coordinator to facilitate the needs and concerns, you present an organization and understanding of disability. Simple accommodations can make a disabled actor feel welcomed and accepted. Like spaces for auditions, rehearsal spaces need to accommodate everyone. Barton-Farcas recommends the first rehearsal be a big orientation on the inclusive space. “As you have the first full cast/staff meeting and read-through, continue the support you began with and add orientation for all of them to the

room and building you will be rehearsing in. Disability status changes with the environment, so make sure you have an environment where every single performer has access and space. Then you all start from a place of full ability and equity. If you all start from a place of full ability, then you can begin to discover the things that keep people from each other and away from creating art” (Barton-Farcas chapter 6).

Blocking in an inclusive theatre production has its own difficulties and may need extra attention, whether it be the need for chairs in case people need to rest when standing for a long time, or the need extra time to move around in their wheelchair. Barton-Farcas recommends starting the physical blocking early on to best accommodate ensemble members’ different needs on stage and different individual styles for remembering blocking. Fight scenes must be coordinated by a certified fight instructor who understands that disabled actors may need adaptive choreography. “Ask at all times of your artists in fight scenes not what they can do, but what are they physically comfortable doing? These may be two very different things. Then ask them what they are not comfortable doing. Then ask them if they could do anything else what would it be in the fight scene. Tell them your ideas, offer that first and then see what their response is. Sometimes they will counter your wacky idea with an even wackier one and then you all just figure out how to do it safely. Safety is the main thing, even though you are exploring physicalities” (Barton-Farcas chapter 7).

Technical theatre details are included in the book as well. Set, lighting, and costume designs should enhance a production. Costumes should support a character and

their choices, but should never be intended to hide a disability. The use of material is an important consideration to avoid costumes getting entangled with wheelchairs, other supportive devices, or prosthetic limbs. Types of material needs to be considered if an actor has any sensory issues: some material makes extra noise and can distract from or deter a performance. The creative possibilities of the set and lighting can uplift a production and Barton-Farcas reminds us never to shy away from the disability of an actor. It is fine to add lights to wheelchairs and ramps for better accessibility. The concerns of a “performance tech” are similar to those of any theatre company: to be prepared, patient, and to have food and snacks for everyone. It is also vital to remind disabled company members that it will be a long day and to remember to bring necessary medications.

Marketing and other public relations-related issues are again similar for every theatre company. Barton-Farcas does recommend using full body shots of actors on websites, social media pages, etc., to accurately represent the company. Making efforts to have an inclusive audience is important for an accessible theatre company. It is not only important to hire disabled actors, but to have shows that disabled people can easily attend.” If we want to include people with disabilities in our theatres, then we need to better understand them as audience members, the physical and personal barriers they encounter, the attitudes they face and other issues that prevent their full participation...In order to invest in your audiences in performance you can experiment with audio description, also called media narration, which is someone narrating what is happening

onstage in real time for a group in the audience who are listening via headphones...There are many other technologies including closed captioning, which is expensive but worth it if you can afford it. Closed captioning is not a substitute for ASL performances although it may be easier to get funding for. Even if you use closed captioning you should plan for ASL work to be done. Closed captioning is a useful service for the hard of hearing or Deaf community. ASL, on the other hand, is a language and our investment in it as a company has been in an effort to join with the Deaf community in supporting and preserving this language” (Barton-Farcas Chapter 11). The topic of inclusive audiences will be explored at length in the following chapter of this thesis.

Stephanie Barton-Farcas’ expert perspective has provided a useful and practical example of leadership in accessible inclusive theatre. She challenges theatres, and the rest of society, to adopt universal design practices to ensure a more equitable experience for disabled people. Her book and stories are informative for the creation of a vision for a San Francisco based inclusive theatre company.

Inclusive Audiences: Jess Thom, “Extra Live” and Relaxed Performances

In addition to creating disability visibility on stage, there is a high need for disability visibility in the audience. As explored below, accessible theatre opportunities are now more widely being addressed for disabled audience members. Some theatre companies have started creating better opportunities to include disabled people by recognizing the limited accessibility nature that is the traditional theatre viewing experience. Designated inclusive performances, now commonly being referred to as ‘relaxed performances’, provide opportunities for people to attend theatre with varying sensory needs and abilities. Jess Thom, a theatre artist and activist who has created disability awareness using theatre, has made her own contributions to increasing inclusive audiences. Her recommendations for accessibility, and the spreading of an access guide have been useful in my explorations for the purposes of this thesis. Discussing the ‘relaxed performance’ concept with community members gave me a thorough understanding of the need for more accessible live theatre that will foster an inclusive arts community in the Bay Area and beyond.

The companies I have explored in this thesis thus far, like Graeae Theatre, Hijinx Theatre, and Nicu’s Spoon Theatre have all put in the work to increase accessibility as much off stage as on. Their efforts include sign language interpreters, audio captioning for the visually impaired, and even more straightforward, simply having wheelchair access like ramps, seating options that multiple wheelchair users can use at once—something not always the case in theatre spaces. Disability theatre companies who create

accessible opportunities inherently program for inclusive audiences in mind. But other reputable theatre companies have also started adopting accessible practices. The National Theatre in the United Kingdom, arguably the most important professional theatre company of the nation, has started including relaxed performances, audio described performances and signed performances into their usual programming. Their website defines what their interpretation of relaxed performance is: “What's different? The lights in the audience will be up so that it's not too dark. You can make noise during the show. You can come and go as you please. If you need a break there are chill out areas in the foyer. We make small changes to the lights and sound (such as taking out strobes lights) so that the performance is more accessible if you have sensory sensitivities” (nationaltheatre.org.uk). Additionally, the theatre company uses other accessible accommodations similar to specific disability theatre including interpreters, audio descriptors, and captioned performances.

Jess Thom is an exceptional theatre artist and disability advocate. Born in the United Kingdom, Thom was born with Tourette’s Syndrome, experiencing uncontrollable and sometimes debilitating physical and verbal tics. She created *Backstage at Biscuit Land*, an original piece of theatre work aimed at creating positive exposure and information about the widely misunderstood disability. Her creative work aims to dismantle stereotypes and increase comfort through understanding the disability by putting it all out in front of audiences. Receiving critical acclaim, the play premiered at the 2014 Edinburgh Fringe Festival and has since been touring theatre festivals around

the world, placing Tourette's in a new light. Steph Harmon wrote in *The Guardian*, "it aims to celebrate Tourette's syndrome as a harbinger of creativity, encourage inclusivity, and dispel some longstanding myths. Tourette's, we are told, exists on a spectrum. It is not a symptom of anxiety or low self-esteem – or of being possessed by a demon – and it does not always express itself through profanity." "In fact, only 15% of people with Tourette's have obscene tics," Thom says, before a tic – "FUCK 'EM!" – and a perfectly timed pause: "I am one of them."

My own introduction to Jess Thom's work was in 2016, when she travelled to the Bay Area to perform *Backstage At Biscuit Land* at the San Francisco International Arts Festival. The hourlong performance included stories about what it's like to live with Tourette's, and as a theatre maker and enthusiast, about her experiences trying to see theatre. At the beginning of the show, Thom explains her physical and verbal tics. She repeatedly punches or "thumps" her chest and says biscuit and hedgehog, in addition to many other words and phrases. Thom uses a wheelchair due to her being unable to control and coordinate her limbs. During the show Jess Thom discusses attempts made to go see live theatre and the sometimes painful reception she has had by both community and professional theatres. One story includes being forced to sit offstage and out of sight in a soundbooth for the second act of a play after other patrons complained. She is joined on stage by two fellow performers, or sidekicks, as Thom refers to herself as a superhero. (Her non-profit is called Touretteshero.)

The performance in San Francisco that I attended included Jess Mabel Jones and Matthew Pourtney. Matthew Pourtney was introduced as a longtime friend and someone who is part of her “team” of caretakers who stay with Jess one night of the week—she needs supervision due to her susceptibility of seizures. This is also explained in case of it happening during the show, but during the show I experienced there was no seizure on stage. The play was wildly original, fun, and very informative without feeling too didactic. A review by Charles Kruger of Theatrestorm wrote of the Bay Area show, “‘Backstage in Biscuit Land’ is unlike anything you have ever seen, or are ever likely to see, in the theatre. The set of ‘Biscuit Land’ is among the first things to be noticed: it is random, like the unexpectedly funny, filthy, bizarre, and oddly insightful verbal tics that explode continuously from the star. There is a portrait of Mother Teresa, various inflatable dolls, puppets, an anvil, and more. During the course of an hour’s performance, Thom might say anything. But what comes out of her is not improvisation, but irrepressible random verbal tics produced by her Tourettes. “Have you helped a sailor f**k a goat” is fairly typical. At the start of the show, Thom invites the audience to “please laugh” if she says something funny or shocking. She is quite often shocked herself.” This passage does a good job at illustrating the tone put forward by Jess Thom. She wants her audience to have fun, learn, and embrace the ridiculous.

Backstage in Biscuit Land is inclusive not just by its content, but for its audiences. She ensures her performances are designated as “extra live”, a term she coined for inclusive audience practice. This means the performance will be a safe space for people

who create extra noise due to disability or otherwise. A 2014 review from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, at the premiere of *Backstage in Biscuit Land* wrote, “In the circumstances, all performances of *Backstage in Biscuit Land* will be entirely relaxed, but Thom says that ‘if there's enough demand we can organise an uptight performance.’ Thom, with her assistant, Chopin, turns out to be brilliant company in this extraordinarily entertaining piece that could teach quite a lot of other theatre a lesson or two because of its sheer unpredictability. You don't need to let rabbits loose on stage when you've got Thom, who is likely to veer off script at any moment. If nothing else, this truly engaging, often joyous hour is a reminder that unpredictability can be a real spur for creativity. There is nothing remotely safe about this performance.”

The first time I had ever heard of a relaxed performance was in Jess Thom’s brief critique of the term and her statement about enjoying the use of the phrase ‘extra live.’ As we have seen, even in this paper, theatres in the United Kingdom have been steadily increasing their designation of relaxed performances. The term has caught on among professional theatre companies especially over the last couple of years. In 2015, Jess Thom reflected on the use of the two terms on her blog *Touretteshero*. She organizes the pros and cons of each term as follows:

‘Relaxed Performance’

Pros:

1. It gives a clear description of what the atmosphere will be like during the show. The responsibility for being ‘relaxed’ is shared by the audience, venue and performers.

2. It's an established term into which a great deal of research, work, and thought has already been put.
3. It's the term which many theatres and performers are already familiar with.

Cons:

1. It's heavily associated with children's performances and with specific conditions like Autistic Spectrum Disorder.
2. It doesn't convey the potential for a more dynamic theatrical experience for everyone.
3. It could be misunderstood to be just for a specific audience, rather than inclusive of everyone.
4. It may be interpreted by some theatre-goers as indicating an inferior performance.

'Extra Live'

Pros:

1. It's a more positive term that's likely to intrigue people and prompt them to find out more.
2. It emphasises the potential benefit to the whole audience – that everyone gets 'extra' from such performances.
3. It feels less rooted in a charitable model of theatre in which access provisions are something to be apologetically grateful for rather than being something that can enhance a show.

Cons:

1. It could potentially undermine the work that's already been done to develop relaxed performances.
2. Introducing new terminology could confuse disabled and non-disabled theatre-goers alike.
3. It could give the impression that disabled audience members are expected to provide the 'extra live' element. (Some of the times when I've felt least comfortable at live performances have been when it's felt like I've stopped being a member of the audience and become part of the show just because of my tics.)

4. It doesn't extend the same warm invitation to the audience.
5. It has the potential to imply that access considerations are only worth being concerned about when they benefit everyone or heighten an experience, and that just giving access to a particular group isn't enough. (touretteshero.com)

“As much as I like ‘extra live’, I don’t think there’s that much wrong with ‘relaxed performance.’ To me, lots of the reasons to change the terminology stem from the public’s unfamiliarity with the concept, or their assumptions about what it means.... To me relaxed performances are useful because they send a clear message: ‘We have thought of you and we want you to see this show’.” (touretteshero.com)

This reflection is valuable coming from the perspective of a disabled artist. As someone dedicated to the accessibility of theatre, Thom does an excellent job of being reflective on the differing reception of the terms. While the points still maintain validity, more recently in 2017, Jess Thom’s return to the stage with Samuel Beckett’s *Not I*, used “relaxed performance” as the preferred term.

Jess Thom has made a point to be an advocate for inclusive practice for theatres on other fronts. Inclusive and accessible audience practices doesn’t just mean an “understanding audience” with special designated performances. Theatres need to find ways to include disabled people with visual and hearing impairments with different sized texts and braille programs, sign language interpreters, and better wheelchair access. Offering a critique in *The Stage* about the Fringe Festival of 2016, Thom described the festival as doing a mediocre job of promoting accessible theatre events. The efforts include symbols next to productions that are wheelchair accessible, have interpreters,

audio descriptions, and relaxed if there are sensory and motor issue concerns. According to Jess Thom, the festival has not done enough to ensure equal access for physical theatres and programming with the symbol system that is not always used accurately, which is unfair to a disabled festival attendee. In Jess Thom's *The Stage* critique of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival's accessibility issues, she cites the resource published by Unlimited, *Demystifying Access: A guide for producers and performance makers; how to create access for audiences to the performing arts*. Unlimited is an organization dedicated to making art accessible for disabled people by supporting artistic and public realm projects made by disabled artists and groups. Unlimited focuses on dismantling stereotypes by creating exposure and opportunities for accessible artistic programming whether it be live theatre or photography exhibitions. The organization is of great resource and innovation. They are highly interested in encouraging accessibility artist to artist as well. The guide, *Demystifying Access: A guide for producers and performance makers; how to create access for audiences to the performing arts* is reminiscent of some of the resources Graeae Theatre and Nicu's Spoon Theatre have put forth for actors in both accessible performance and training situations, however this guide is unique in that it focuses primarily on accessibility for the audience. The guide starts out reminding readers-presumed artists and performance makers that the law (in the United Kingdom and also the United States) requires access to space, but the question of who is responsible remains murky. This revelation ensues, "It is our job as performance makers to think ahead and not discriminate! But who is responsible to ensure this? The receiving

venue? The artists? The producer? The funder? This guide offers tools and examples to empower artists and producers to remove barriers and to make their work more accessible as it is only with investment from all parties involved that progress can be made” (Giraud 3). The intent of the resource is clear. It includes recommendations and link to other resources that promote accessibility in artistic setting and circumstances-examples follow. There are seemingly basic communication pointers involving front of house and other team members being aware of what accessibility options your show has to offer (think audio, visual descriptors for example), to ensure accurate information for inquiring attendees. These clarifications are also useful for marketing purposes. Actors and company members should be adequately prepared for relaxed performances so as not to be surprised by potential disruptions from audience members, and the potential change of lighting or sound cues as sometimes they are adjusted to have less intense visual and auditory purpose.

The resource recommends audio descriptions for visually impaired audiences. The job of a theatrical audio descriptor is a new and blossoming part of the industry. Audio descriptors have to view a complete, performance-ready show in order to know how and what to describe. Descriptions include the actions happening on stage, details about the set, and costumes. This is intended for people who just hear the dialogue of a play or for whom parts of the performance are visually stifled. The recorded descriptors are intended to played over an individual headset or program for a disabled patron.

Touch tours are often affiliated with plays that offer audio descriptions. Touch tours commonly happen 45 minutes before a production and consist of visually impaired audience members being led on a tour of the set, costumes, and props. This tour offers a tactile experience for the parts of the theatre that the more average viewer witnesses through sight. Hearing impaired options include having captioning of what is being said on stage, either previously recorded or with a palantypist, a live speech to text reporter. Like Stephanie Barton-Farcas pointed out in her Accessibility: NYC discussion on YouTube, opera is an art form for which super titles/sub titles have regularly been included, and that practice has never been questioned. Her argument is that because that theatre function is almost universally accepted in opera, there is no reason that it cannot exist in more standard theatre shows. In fact, many theatre companies, including Graeae Theatre, have developed “creative captioning” practices that incorporate the art of captioning with the art of the theatre. Theatres have found ways to artistically weave the captioning into the sets of some plays. Again, while the need is not new, the industry has been blossoming in the last few years, and exciting new practices are emerging and worth watching.

Other options for hearing impairments include the use of sign language interpreters. Sign language interpreters can have their own way of being incorporated into performance, and many mainstream theatre companies have begun adopting the practice. Those logistical dealings offer practical information into how deal with audience needs. But there is a creative aspect that the resources offers attention to as well. Jess Thom said

in her Fringe Festival accessibility critique, “Think of access as an asset - if you make your work accessible, you open it up to new audiences” (Thom, *The Stage*).

Demystifying Access: A guide for producers and performance makers; how to create access for audiences to the performing arts makes an argument that factoring in adaptive practices can often enhance a show not detract from it. Jack Dean, *Unlimited* commissioned artist 2015, reflects on his process of making his new show, *Grandad and the Machine*, accessible to people with visual impairments: “I was challenged by *Unlimited* to incorporate access elements into my show for the first time, which makes sense since being supported as a disabled artist, while ignoring the needs of other disabilities would be pretty hypocritical. Being new to the whole concept, I was guided by them towards letting the artistic content of the show guide the approach to access, rather than rigidly imposing one method. As a storytelling piece, the show comes with a sort of built in audio description, so the mission became to ‘blind test’ the text and smooth over any gaps in the description of important activities for the characters. All in all, I think this will make the show better for fully sighted people rather than compromising it, which is great for everyone” (Giraud 13).

This example demonstrates how accessible elements can support creative development. Unfortunately, it is a reality that not all theatre or performance pieces will always work for all audiences, and some of that requires acceptance. Artists can choose to focus on accessible elements that enhance their creative vision without making attempts to perfect the experience for all. Adopting accessible practices will cost

something but they should be worked into an initial budget. Part of the draw is understanding that by opening up your performances to wider audience there can be wider economic gains.

The guide also reminds that relaxed performances are easy ways to open up access to audiences with no extra cost. Some final points the guide makes include information on accessible marketing techniques. The information includes text variation options on websites like font and contrast colors, providing captioning on any video marketing, and making audio flyers. The advice in the guide for increasing accessibility for audiences with differing abilities is practical and feasible for most theatre companies- and will be worked into my vision for a San Francisco-based inclusive theatre company.

I asked disability theatre practitioners, teachers, theatre enthusiasts, and theatre company members about relaxed programming, sparking an interest for more emergent inclusive programming in the Bay Area. Some of the responses are included as follows.

“I am the mother of an adult child with Angelman Syndrome (chromosomal deletion causing severe developmental disabilities). I have always felt that culture was important for community and family. I have a degree in music, studied voice and opera. I have taken my son to shows for at least fifteen years and helped start a program for including special needs people in children's theatre after having several bad experiences taking our son to shows. Currently I mostly take him to musicals. He also likes ballet and opera, movies. I find that people at musicals, even not "relaxed" performances, are generally kind and tolerant of my son's movements (he sways with the music, forward and backward) and his sounds (he laughs and makes sounds when reacting to some scenes). This isn't the case in other venues. The most important aspect of relaxed performances is people being tolerant of unexpected laughing or other outbursts and movements. We go to regular "all behaviors welcome" music performances and it's kind of fun to see

the kids being able to stand, move around and even put their ears to the stage to feel the vibrations. Those are relatively small performances, however, and we've never been to say, a SHN show that was relaxed. That would be interesting...regarding "relaxed" performances, we find no need for keeping the auditorium lit - in fact i think this makes it harder to focus on the show and encourages him to interact with the person in front of him or next to him. I also wonder, from attending sensory friendly movies at AMC, if keeping the lights on encourages more wandering around... As far as myself as a family member, I do find it sometimes stressful to think about other people, who paid for their tickets, being distracted by my son's sounds or movements. So it affects my own ability to focus on the show. However, I have not had any bad experiences in SF, where audience members seem to take it in stride without problems."

-Lulu C. San Francisco, Ca.

"I work as a facilitator/director, actor/theatre maker and in casting in the UK. I have been working in the industry for 15 years... We had a disability awareness training day at the National Youth Theatre for associates like myself to share and learn practice alongside companies and artists who specialise in disability within the arts. They are currently working with a school to develop a plan for working with SEN and learning disabled young people with Diverse City over the next six months. I also remember doing a project with NYT when I was a member with a Candoco Dance Company and Graeae Theatre Company - which was a really eye opening experience into best inclusive practice. I went to a relaxed performance of a friend's play, *Jubilee*, at the Manchester Royal Exchange recently. To look around and see such a mixed demographic of people in the audience reinstated what theatre as a place and as a space is about for me - inclusive and accessible."

-Seda Y., London, U.K.

"I am an interdisciplinary artist and art/theater/dance teacher who believes in the disconnectedness of art forms and art expressions. I have been teaching accessible theater and art for 20 years as well as creating artwork that is visual, performance-based, and interdisciplinary. Initially I got into acting because I wanted to be

really listened to (this was somewhat subconscious...) and "seen." As I matured I realized I loved directing because I loved how all those components came together and I really got to be the "creator" of the theater piece. I also got to take in everyone's voice and figure out how to make it all come together. I also love to watch live theater and feel the connection to the actors and be moved by the stories and hear people's experiences that are different from mine. I believe that everyone has a story to tell and everyone's story needs to be heard... What's special about live theater is the connection to the audience and you don't know exactly what is going to happen each time. Its ephemeral. [*In response to a question regarding the reaction to relaxed programming*] I love it. It's such a neat idea. It seems like installation art or site specific theater would lend itself well as long as people can navigate the performances easily. I performed in Israel in the Jerusalem street theater festival a few years in a row and the audience was encouraged to wander from room to room or site to site to interact with the performances. One year I was on a very tall ladder overlooking the old city in Jerusalem, talking down to the viewers. I felt vulnerable that anyone could climb up or rattle the ladder but overall nothing happened. I had actually broken my foot so I was on a tall ladder with a cast on my leg! It was a vulnerable way to perform but the vulnerability connected me to the people walking by. Another year we were all in these bubbles and we were riffing on a Polish author's texts/memories of the Holocaust. It was a very dark piece and musicians wandered around the rooms as well as the audience members. We as actors were encouraged to wander from room to room and perform with each other. At one point during the night a gunshot was heard and we all collected in one spot. What I loved about this performance was there was room for improvisation as well as a general set plan. I think performances need to be flexible not just in where they are located (being accessible) but also the flow of the show... I also created site specific performances in England as my performance thesis in a contemporary arts program and various performances in SF. What I love is the interactive nature. I created a project called "the bus project" where a group of us explored the buses in SF through art dance and theater and interviews. We interviewed muni workers, passengers danced on buses... and the performance itself included a gallery, live muni stories or memories (from the audience too). I also created a residency called "the desire project" the explored desire and interdisciplinary collaboration for six months. The performance was part ritual, part gallery, part performance. I realize that over my career as an artist and teacher I always believe in fluidity between art forms, spatial fluidity and artistic mediums. This allows for

inclusivity. I am not exactly sure what relaxed performance is as a genre but I like it!”

-Judy G., Oakland, Ca.

“.....I am a bodyworker and I teach theater and art for people with disabilities and occasionally without but then some might argue that we all have something "disabling" us and there's a great grey void aside from government standards. I am also a person with a disability, having been born visually impaired with my vision remaining pretty steady over my lifetime. Dance was my primary love until I realized everyone loved me NOT doing it as much as I loved doing it. I did my AA in dance and a BA in Therapeutic Recreation after getting rejected from the dance ed programs I applied for. ...I wanted to teach dance / arts for people with disabilities so the TR program suited that plus I did my internship at the Pomeroy center with their then active Theater Unlimited. Live theater for me includes everything from your commercialized Broadway show like *Hamilton* to the unexpected find of a site specific piece at Yerba Buena... Let's take an example of a show that really lit me up: *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, originally a book written from the perspective of a teen with autism. The backdrop was a grey grid - a line down the middle had an arrow pointing up that said "up." Boxes along the stage walls lit up at different times and included props for the show. There were moments of overly loud and bright video and lighting offering us a view into a world where even a train passing can be traumatic and over stimulating. The blocking was incredible and the lead actor was definitely a dancer who embodied his role. There was a moment when the father got upset and the son was afraid of him. The moments to rebuild trust had me in tears. Father ended up spooned over a balled-up son and gently helped him change his shirt. Of course, I was jazzed that a disability-related play made it to mainstream Broadway theater scene. I think they did a great job adapting the book. I am curious to learn how families and people with autism felt about the play's realism. Having seen things on low vision and blindness over the years with varying reactions to their accuracy... Then again, everyone sees and deals with things in different ways. Relaxed performance...I just learned about the whole thing a couple years back when I went to see a performance by a woman with Tourette's... I also understand some movie theaters are offering relaxed showings with the lights a little up and the volume slightly lower since there are so many

more families with autistic children who wish to see a show. Frankly, it's something I'd benefit from as well. Unless the performance or movie offers audio description (via headphones), I am known to nudge my compatriot and ask what just happened... or my friend will tell me about something important knowing I should know about it in order to understand what's happening. We have been shushed before which is embarrassing and humiliating... I am fascinated by accessible technology these days with apps like Seeing AI which will read labels and describe basic things. However, there is no tech at the moment that can fully describe a work of art, a dance piece and such. And when people describe, it's through their own ways of seeing. I can go to a show three times with three different people and have three different experiences. I love installation work, have done some over the years but not lately. Would love to do installations with Pomeroy theater - kind of did it during last summer, having people do scenes throughout the main hall - cooking scene at kitchen, winter scene at fireplace, even a scene outside the doors by the gym. It was great getting everyone up and moving. No chance to lull off. The vibes were fabulous and I'd like to see us do a show that way sometime. Let's also throw into the mix the idea that mobile performance installations take the average theatergoer out of the comfort zone of sitting passively in a dark space for a couple hours. Also thinking of Erika Chong Shuck's City council performance and her performances for one. It feels like some of these performance-making techniques could be conducive to a relaxed environment - but I don't know..."

-Maia S., San Francisco, Ca.

"My first connection with the theatre was being shown the movie *The Wiz* when I was in elementary school by a man named Danny Duncan who was an artist in residence from SFUSD through the San Francisco Arts Education Project (SFartsED). I was given a scholarship to the aforementioned company, entered SOTA's theatre department while simultaneously being a company member of the Young People's Teen Musical Theatre Company (YPTMTC). I caught this bug young and I caught it hard. A little fairy in love with showtunes wrapped up in a little (not so little) bubble. I experienced lots of incredible theatre, in high school and in the sf/bay area community, as an adolescent but I honestly can say I never truly appreciated it until college. Since Carnegie Mellon University, living in NYC, and gracing a Broadway stage for a minute, the most vivid live theatre

settings were the ones that kept changing. Being on tour for 2+ years was unlike any other. The constant inconsistency became consistent. It in a way spoiled me to performing in beautiful theatres. And most of all meeting so many different kinds of Americans (and a couple Canadians). I recall out of the fifty-ish cities were visited about a fourth of them had signers alongside of us performing the show. It was incredible and I wish it happened more. I think BATCO [Bay Area Theatre Company] could absolutely experiment with using the relaxed performance program. "Adopting" the program would be an interesting commitment."

-Rodney J., San Francisco, Ca.

By looking at how mainstream theatre companies have been adopting inclusive audience practices—from ‘relaxed’ to audio descriptors—I have gathered ideas about how theatre companies can improve in the Bay Area. Jess Thom’s advocacy and influence offered insight into what best practices are for creating more inclusive audience opportunities. The “demystifying” guide gave very practical information with detailed how-to’s on accessibility that will be influential in the creation of an action plan to encourage Bay Area companies to create more inclusive audience performances in their traditional season. Community experience and reaction provided a look into the readiness a community is for more inclusive opportunities.

San Francisco based Inclusive Theatre Company Vision and Inclusive Audience Expansion Plan

In the previous chapters you have read about the successes of disabled theatre companies in the United Kingdom and the United States, and about the growing interest and need for accessible audience opportunities. These lessons will be reflected in the vision and mission for a San Francisco based company below. Graeae Theatre's influence is found in the focus on finding creative ways to incorporate sign language and captioning into a signature performance style. Hijinx Theatre promotes the inclusive practice of disabled and non-disabled actors acting together on stage. Stephanie Barton-Farcas' manual for inclusion in theatre gave practical tips on how to hold auditions and what to look for in a space. Jess Thom's activist work for accessible audiences encourages better understanding of the need to expand these programs. The *Demystifying Access Guide* gave many logistical ideas and solutions on how to create better theatre-viewing experiences for disabled audiences. These ideas will be revisited and reflected in the vision for a San Francisco-based disabled theatre company serving the greater Bay Area. By mapping out a mission statement, season ideas, educational training, and outreach, I will exhibit the new and creative opportunities that can emerge in the San Francisco theatre community. While finding funding is a major part of creating a theatre company, it is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will give the San Francisco based company a name only to help my own process in forming the vision and narrative of what

an inclusive theatre company should look like. I envision an inclusive future society that promotes acceptance of all abilities and takes into consideration the needs of marginalized groups. Part of achieving this goal is to approach existing theatre companies with ideas and actions to better their own audience accessibility. This seems appropriate for an inclusive theatre company emerging in 2018.

Name:

Parnassus Theatre is the working name for this theatre company. It was chosen in homage to Mount Parnassus, a mountain in Greece held sacred to Dionysus, god of theatre. Parnassus is also a street in San Francisco which gives it some local familiarity.

Draft Mission Statement:

Parnassus Theatre aims to *create* inclusive theatre to *enrich* the talents of disabled theatre artists in our community. By *producing* theatre that celebrates our differences without polarizing audiences, Parnassus Theatre will *highlight* new and original work by disabled playwrights, and use traditional scripts to *create understanding* that disabled actors can play traditional roles. Our plays will *incorporate* captioning, sign language, and audio descriptions in a creative manner, enhancing the art itself. Our physical theatre space will be built with state of the art accessibility measures in order to *reach* new audiences who have been previously excluded.

Leadership:

Parnassus Theatre should most importantly be led by disabled theatre artists to ensure adequate and accurate representation of the company. This is also to create professional artistic opportunities for disabled theatre practitioners. The company should consist of disabled and non-disabled artists alike to increase inclusive theatre practices, but will be primarily focused on creating opportunities for disabled actors and those who wish to learn from them. The mentors, advisory boards, and community supporters should be held to a high standard, in alignment with the mission and vision of the company. It would be an honor and hope to have Jenny Sealey of Graeae Theatre, Stephanie Barton-Farcas of Nicu's Spoon Theatre, disability theatre advocate and scholar Petra Koppers, and Jess Thom of Tourette's Hero, all serve as advisors and or sit on the company's board.

Proposed First Season:

Parnassus Theatre first season should include at least three plays. The first play will be a new piece by an emerging disabled playwright. The second will be a classical or traditionally recognizable play, giving the company a chance to exhibit that disabled actors can perform traditional scripts with complete competence. The third play will be a play or devised work by the company about the disability experience in efforts to create empathic perspective, without eliciting a pitying response.

Notes about Space:

Parnassus Theatre should be dedicated to finding, using, and creating a comfortable space with access as the number one priority, not an afterthought. The company will find or build an audition, rehearsal, and performance space favoring access for wheelchairs and differing physical abilities. The stage, backstage, and audience space will be wheelchair accessible with access for multiple wheelchairs at one time. Restroom facilities will be equally accessible.

Outreach and Auditions:

Parnassus Theatre should make a point to do a local, regional, and if necessary, national talent search to ensure the highest quality of disabled actors, disabled theatre technicians, and educators are included in our company. Auditions will be detailed and planned, no open calls to ensure easy access to the facilities and to better accommodate any sensory sensitive needs. There will be interpreters on site, and braille and audio descriptor scripts available.

Marketing:

Parnassus Theatre should use accessible marketing practices to further reach disabled audiences. The company will have an accessible online presence with effective contrasting colors and formatting, font sizing options, and audio descriptions available to

accommodate visual impairments. All marketing videos will include captioning for those with hearing impairments.

Education:

Parnassus Theatre, in continued efforts to give back and change the norm of future generations, should form a theatre education and training program benefiting disabled actors. The lack of theatre training available to disabled student actors at universities and drama schools, gives us no choice but to create these training programs. We will also foster training of educators to further our accessibility message. San Francisco State University may be an excellent candidate for these types of accessible programs.

Inclusive Audience Practice:

Parnassus Theatre should be committed to creating opportunities for disabled audience members. Gone are the days of theatre being an exclusive activity. Parnassus Theatre will offer relaxed performances to fit those with sensory sensitivities. Sign language interpreting, audio descriptions, and captioning will be offered if not worked into the creative content. Touch tours will be offered before performances to those who wish to touch props and set pieces to better understand what will happen on stage.

The following page is a sample, letter formatted, proposal that could be potentially sent to theatre companies letting them know about accessible audience options that would benefit the community and expand their viewership.

Dear (*enter name of theatre company you are approaching*),

I am writing to peak your interest in increasing your viewership and profits by adopting accessible audience practices. Efforts to better serve disabled patrons of your theatre company can be done in a variety of ways.

Relaxed performances, captioning, interpreting, audio descriptions and touch tours are among the options. Relaxed performances or programs, create dedicated performances for people with differing sensory needs (think autism and Tourette's). Inclusive performances enable new audiences to attend the theatre and enjoy a performance free of guilt or judgement if they make involuntary sounds or have physical outbursts. Video captioning and/or sign language interpreters can be effective in giving Deaf audiences a chance to attend your productions. Audio description/captioning can narrate the physical action of a show via an app and earbuds, so that people with visual impairments can attend your theatre. Organizing touch tours of the set and props offers a tactile experience for those with limited vision. These tours can be done so in convenient fashion, before scheduled performances. Additionally, accessible marketing practices, like including captioning on all video media, can expand ticket sales and viewership.

The examples above are only the tip of the iceberg of this exciting time for more accessible art and inclusive measure. These options are being used in theatres all over the world, most notably in the United Kingdom. The National Theatre of Great Britain has taken the opportunity and adopted many of these practices, setting a great example for other large professional theatre companies. The Bay Area has long been a place of creativity, innovation and acceptance, and your theatre company has an opportunity to be a change maker and trendsetter of accessible audience practices in the theatre.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to furthering our discussion about increasing your theatre's accessibility for disabled audiences.

Thank you,

Your name, accessible audience advocate.

Concluding Statement

Disability theatre is an important and growing part of the theatre industry. One in five people are disabled, according to the 2010 United States Census Bureau, and deserve representation on stage, and acceptance in the audience. Theatre is meant to create empathy by sharing stories of the human experience and disability needs to be an active part of the storytelling theatre-goers witness. The exploration in this thesis was meant to reflect, challenge, and inspire more inclusive theatre work. The exceptional examples explored by disabled theatre companies, practitioners, and individuals have set a standard for what is expected of emerging theatre practices.

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