Letting Bodies be Bodies: Exploring Relaxed Performance in the Canadian Performance Landscape

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ABSTRACT   *There is an increasing movement toward accessibility in arts spaces, including recent legislative changes and commitments at individual, organizational, and systemic levels to integrating access into the arts across Canada. In this article, we explore Relaxed Performance (RP) in the context of this movement. We present the results of a reflexive thematic analysis of interviews conducted with participants who completed RP training offered by the British Council to understand the training's effectiveness and impact. We explore the significance of the training, and of RP in general, and in relation to disability studies and cultural and political activism. We undertake this exploration against a backdrop of interrogating who RP is for and by. The themes we describe are: Committed to Access, Training is Critical, Inviting Bodies to be Bodies, and Imagining Audiences. These themes tell a story of how RP relates to broader access work, the importance of training grounded in and led by disability/difference, the need to consider the relationships between bodies and spaces, and the tensions inherent to billing RP as "for all." We conclude with an exploration of possible modifications, enhancements, or theoretical imaginings that could help RP to become more radically open to difference as it emerges, shifts, and changes.*

KEYWORDS   relaxed performance; theatre; access; accessibility; legislation

In 2015, the British Council Canada began to train interested members of the Canadian arts sector in Relaxed Performance (RP).[1] Drawing on and refining training developed in the United Kingdom, they have trained upwards of 200 people in Canada to date. In this article, we discuss findings from our pilot research into the effectiveness and impact of this training, as well as what the existence of the training means – or can mean – for the integration of disability-inclusive performance programming that aims to honour and lead with difference. We explore qualitative research results, thickening the findings presented in our report for the British Council Canada, and share reflections on the training's usefulness and the critical questions that its existence and expansion raises for disability and non-normative arts in Canada. Our exploration foregrounds central questions about who RP is for and who it is by and highlights the importance of taking a critical lens on the implementation of RP training, design, and delivery.

Actualizing Accessibility in the Canadian Arts Sector

Movement toward actualizing accessibility in the arts sector runs alongside interest expressed by many Canadian theatre companies, festivals, and other performing arts organizations. Recent years have seen the emergence of alternative theatre-going experiences, especially in urban centres. Disability arts organizations have also proliferated – for instance, Tangled Art + Disability, Creative Users Projects, and Deaf Spectrum in Ontario; the Deaf, Disability & Mad Arts Alliance of Canada, and the Collaborative Radically Integrated Performers Society in Alberta; Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture in British Columbia; and Quebec's SPiLL.PROpagation, among others.[2] There is growing recognition of the cultural contributions of disability, d/Deaf, Mad, aging, and fat activist-artists, and of the vital importance of improving access to the arts for all; this recognition has led to innovation and the advancement of social justice in the Canadian arts sector (Chandler et al., 2018; Rice et al., 2021; Rice & Mündel, 2019).

  Recognition of these contributions is critical, given the historical exclusion of disabled people from arts and culture, including theatre spaces. Historically, disabled people have been made spectacles in "freak shows" and otherwise put on display (Garland-Thomson, 1997). Disability has been *present* in theater, but often in the form of a particularized, pitied, heroic, or cured human, serving as a plot device within performative storytelling

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[1] We conducted this work in collaboration with the British Council Canada.
[2] Websites for these disability arts organizations may be accessed as follows: Tangled Art + Disability (tangledarts.org); Creative Users Projects (creativeusers.net); Deaf Spectrum (deafspectrum.com); Deaf, Disability & Mad Arts Alliance of Canada (ddmaac.weebly.com); Collaborative Radically Integrated Performers Society (www.cripsie.ca); Kickstart Disability Arts and Culture (www.kickstartdisability.ca); SPiLL.PROpagation (https://spill-propagation.com/).

(Lipkin & Fox, 2001). Attempts to transform theatre's framing of disability have included work that shifts away from reliance on "disability as a metaphor for non-disabled people's sense of outsiderness" (Sandahl, 2008, p. 226) and toward exploring "the always complex process of living life with a disability" (p. 240). However, even in the context of growing recognition of the need for diversity in theatre, disability remains marginalized (e.g., Gardner, 2016; Handler, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2018). Disabled audiences, too, have not always had access to theatre; requirements of embodying theatre spaces in particularized ways have limited the participation of disabled people (Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018).

The importance of creating access in the arts is not a frivolous or insubstantial issue – it is one rooted in a desire and demand for social justice. Art itself is political (Toni Morrison in Taylor-Guthrie, 1994); it carries possibilities for imagining what is and can be (Rancière, 2006). Access to the arts and to full participation in this process of imagining, then, is a substantial part of being involved in social life, or of imagining what is and what can be – differently (Rice et al., 2017; Rice et al., 2018b).

From Legislation to Action

With the advent of disability legislation at provincial and federal levels, for instance the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA) (*Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act,* SO 2005, c. 11), Nova Scotia's Accessibility Act (Bill 59 *Accessibility Act,* The Acts of 2017, NS, c. 2), the Accessibility for Manitobans Act (*The Accessibility for Manitobans Act,* C.C.S.M. c. A1.7) and Bill C-81: The Accessible Canada Act (Bill C-81, *An act to ensure a barrier-free Canada*, 1st session, 42nd Parliament, SC 2019, c. 10), arts organizations and venues, especially those that receive public funding, are now required to consider how their programming and spaces enable – or exclude – disabled patrons and creators. These legislative acts do not, in themselves, speak to access to and within the arts and culture sector; instead, they tend to speak to the "full participation in all aspects of society" for disabled persons. Clauses across legislative acts lay out, in general language, the sectors in which and the kinds of spaces, goods, and services to which access should be guaranteed.

How arts and culture organizations should take up the requirements laid out in these acts (and by regulated funders) is largely unspecified. It is our belief that the arts and culture sector, given its commitment to grappling with difficult truths and imagining better worlds, would want to aim for a higher standard than compliance. This sector offers exciting opportunities to explore how accessibility can become more than an exercise of "ticking boxes" in response to legislation by fully and artistically engaging with the idea of access.

The recent wave of legislation encoding accessibility in law and policy reflects the hard work of the disability rights movement in Canada (and beyond) to make public spaces more accessible to bodies and minds of difference (Rice et al., 2016; Rice & Chandler, 2020). The emergence and enforcement of legislation provides some assurance that spaces will become more open to at least some of the people who have been, and continue to be, excluded (e.g., through providing physical access or accessible documents). However, legislation in Western democracies is grounded in a philosophy of liberal individualism, as feminist and intersectionality scholars have long pointed out (Crenshaw, 1989; Fineman, 2008). Rights frameworks rooted in this philosophy falsely assume prior equality among people and generally can contend only with one axis of discrimination at a time (race or gender for instance); thus, a liberal rights framework can account neither for pre-existing systemic inequalities (Fineman, 2008, 2017; Crenshaw, 1989) nor for the imbricating ways that mind-body differences are "kept out of spaces through systemic racism, sexism, queer and transphobia" (Rice et al., 2016, pp. 69-70).

Ableism and Humanist Ideals

As critical disability studies scholars have noted, ableism itself is deeply entangled in our very definition of the human. Since the birth of humanist thought during the Enlightenment, "the human" has been imagined as a particular kind of bodily self – a species-typical, corporeal standard that has become a stand-in for the human (St. Pierre, 2015; Rice, 2020). Against this humanist ideal, disability "is cast as a diminished state of being human" (Kumari-Campbell, 2001, p. 44). Together, Enlightenment humanism and liberal individualism have come to define "the contours of the liberal humanist subject" – that rational, autonomous, self-restrained and self-contained being who reflects the normative human (Viscardis et al., 2019, p. 1288). The problem of equality (and access) is then situated in the body-minds of disabled people whose differences become logistical problems to be fixed, rather than in social spaces and relations built with the normative standard of the human in mind.

At this moment in history, the aforementioned legislative changes have meant that policymakers have begun to encode standards for accessibility. In the wake of this movement, it is important to remember that constructions of disability have fixated on the need for cure, rather than on the fulsome participation of disabled people in all spheres of life. After all, in government policy, "disability has been dealt with by governments as a welfare issue competing with other social issues for increasingly scarce public resources" (Pinto, 2011, p. 453). There is a need to consider the frameworks within which standards for access are developed, and to push at the boundaries of

these frameworks to work toward belonging and flourishing, not simply "fixing," cure, or overcoming.

Under the conditions of "fictitious equality" (Fineman, 2017, p. 3) around which legislation is built, policy shifts do little to (a) challenge dominant constructions of disabled creators and audiences, or (b) instruct arts organizations and venues on how to transform spaces and programming to enable not only access but belonging. There is an urgent need to explore and create modes of opening doors once closed to a significant portion of the Canadian population. We must interrogate access beyond making changes in spaces, policies, and procedures to meet legislative requirements. We might additionally consider how we can creatively reimagine the role of disability and of mind-body differences in enlivening public spaces. While legislation including the aforementioned acts has provisions for enforcement, the onus largely remains on the impacted person to lodge complaints (Gillespie et al., 2016). It is here that organizations interested or invested in supporting access and disability rights, and the much more expansive aims of disability justice, begin their work.[3]

Fineman (2008) argues that "bodily needs and the messy dependency they carry cannot be ignored in life, nor should they be absent in our theories about society, politics, and law" (p. 12). We agree with this statement, and are curious about the ways in which bodies, policies, and practices entwine to generate possibilities for the arts in particular. We enter our exploration of Relaxed Performance (RP) at the interstice of accessible policy and creative practice and begin to explore the tensions therein.

"Creating Access" in the Arts

The broad question of "creating access" in arts organizations and venues, and in particular theatre venues and festivals, is expansive and far-reaching. Different approaches are being piloted across the country as venues and organizations in and beyond the theatre sector attempt to meet (and hopefully exceed) accessibility standards. Approaches to enacting access include, but are not limited to, audio described performances (e.g., Naraine et al., 2018; Whitfield & Fels, 2015), live captioning, and RP (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018; Kempe, 2014, 2015; Simpson, 2018).

At its heart, inclusive or accessible theatre "requires the space to be thoughtfully designed to support all of the abilities of the people who work in and visit it" (Watkin, 2017, p. 103). This can include negotiating and designing spaces that allow for difference to be not an afterthought but a central – and artful – part of the equation; in enacting accessible theatre,

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[3] Disability justice is "a multi issue political understanding of disability and ableism, moving away from a rights based equality model and beyond just access, to a framework that centers justice and wholeness for all disabled people and communities" (Mia Mingus, cited in Taormina-Weiss, 2013, p. 279).

relationships between those delivering and those receiving theatre take centre stage (Watkin, 2017). Importantly, this is about more than simply altering the modes of access employed by disabled audiences or creators; too often, the remit of "inclusive theatre" becomes about "seek[ing] ways to integrate; to assist those 'afflicted' to be enabled to join 'us'" (Wooster, 2009, p. 81). In order to support truly accessible spaces for artists and audiences alike, there is a need for deep engagement with difference, such that the fabric of theatre settings is transformed to value and foreground different ways of being and creating (Wooster, 2009).

Over the past decade or so, RP has come to the fore as one method of exploring what changes might be made to theatre spaces to better serve disabled artists and audiences (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018). These performances are designed to open theatregoing experiences to a wider swath of the population by "relaxing" the "rules" around audience conduct. As Simpson (2018) notes, RPs can challenge "the cult of the quiet audience" which "presents a sometimes insurmountable challenge to the neurodivergent spectator" (p. 227).

RPs change the ways that theatre is delivered by permitting more movement and sound amongst audiences, adjustments to sound, lighting, and other effects, introductions to the show and to actors, provision of space outside of the main house for audience members to go to if they wish to have a break ("chill space"), and information about the venue and the show, including accessibility considerations, provided to patrons before their visit (Chandler et al., 2020; Rice et al, 2019; Rice et al., 2021; Simpson, 2018). RPs began with a focus on providing accessible cinema and live theatre experiences for people with Autism (Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018; Simpson, 2018) and Tourette's syndrome (Thom, 2015).[4] The scope of those to whom RPs might cater has since expanded to include a wider group of people for whom the "traditional rules of theatregoing" may be unappealing or inaccessible, including children and families, people with chronic pain, and more (Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018). Increasingly, RP is being envisioned beyond being simply "for" disabled people, enacted as cultural practice *by* disabled people as part of disability/crip cultural creation.

This expansion in imagined audiences introduces a layer of complexity, with the critical question of whether it is possible – or desirable – to accommodate multiple sets of accessibility needs at once within a single space. Questions about the possible othering or infantilization of disabled audiences also arise when considering that much of RP literature explores the utility of the approach for those with Autism and/or children. Simpson (2018), reflecting on the limited availability of RPs in the UK, shared

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[4] We use the terminology "people with Autism" or "those with Autism" when describing the roots of RP because these are the terms that authors, activists, and participants have used. However, we recognize the historical and present violence associated with this term (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016), and use "neuro-diverse people" or "people who have attracted the label of Autism" (Douglas et al., 2019) when possible.

comments from theatre consultants who raised questions about what kinds of RPs might be mounted to challenge the dominant perception that only youth-oriented programming needs to be "relaxed." Other critical considerations for RP expansion include the extent to which disabled and non-normatively embodied folks are generally integrated into RP as only audiences, or also as actors, directors, producers, and others on the production side. Further, without a clear roadmap around how to plan and deliver RPs, there is a risk of the technique being adopted wholesale without thorough consideration of how to undertake not just any RP, but rather a thoughtful, well-prepared performance that meets the needs of multiple different stakeholders (from audiences to performers to producers and beyond).

Accessible Theatre and Relaxed Performance

The literature on RP has thus far primarily focused on the provision of RPs for audiences of people who have attracted the label of Austim and, occasionally, children's performances (e.g., Fletcher-Watson, 2015; Kempe, 2014). This literature reveals a desire for RPs amongst various audiences (Fletcher-Watson & May, 2018). There is also reflection in this literature on how RP adaptations primarily target the normative expectations of theatregoing audiences, rather than making alterations to performances themselves (Fletcher-Watson, 2015), or inviting disabled people to set the terms of engagement for more accessible theatre.

RP has been explored in relation to other accessible theatre practices; for instance, Koltsida and Lenakakis (2017) reflected on the value of increasing access to performances in Greece, including the promise of RP for more varied audiences than Greek venues currently welcome in. They highlighted the critical importance of state policies to support theatre access, without which "theatre companies have not yet methodically prepared and organised such performances" (p. 343). Others have explored RP as a modality, seeking to understand the value and importance of RP in relation to other theatre practices and for disabled and non-normatively embodied audiences. Fletcher-Watson (2015) and Fletcher-Watson and May (2018) consider the access needs of audiences including but not limited to Autistic individuals and acknowledging the benefits of RP's flexibility and limitations when it comes to balancing multiple accessibility needs. Recently, Simpson (2018) reflected on the value of RP in moving away from ingrained notions about silent, static audiences and toward a reclaiming of an "unruly" and co-presenced, embodied audience that engages with the work and with each other. This literature paints a picture of a field on the precipice of practical enactment and theorization; RP presents an opportunity to explore issues of voice, enactment, involvement, co-presencing, and tailoring in performance spaces.

Exploring disability and non-normative arts brings to light long-considered tensions around terminology, definitions, and practice – the plurivocality of disability and mind-body difference has led to ongoing and sometimes seemingly-repetitive debates (Conroy, 2009). People working in performance spaces vary in their familiarity with disability and non-normative arts, and even with the social model of disability – the idea that disability does not inhere within the person, but rather results from a disabling society (Oliver, 1996). This varied awareness surfaces in our analyses, and reflects, in part, the nature of doing work that is at once targeted toward policy change and radical transformation (Conroy, 2009; Wooster, 2009).

We situate ourselves more on the "radical" end of the spectrum, calling for a revisioning of disability and difference (Rice et al., 2009; Rice et al., 2015; Rice et al., forthcoming 2021). We wonder about the extent to which legislative reform can promote social justice for disabled people when such reforms are scaffolded in fundamentally individualizing approaches to "equality" (Fineman, 2008, 2017) that do not attend to the complex and intersecting ways in which exclusion operates even within categories of difference (Crenshaw, 1991). At the same time, we recognize that people come into this work with varied levels of familiarity with and different orientations to disability/non-normativity. We use the terms "disabled people" or "disabled folks" throughout, recognizing that some have been taught that "person-first" language is preferable (Sauder, 2017). In disability activism, many prefer *not* to use person-first language, arguing that it de-centres the wholeness of the person through framing the disability as something to be forgotten, brushed off, and ignored (e.g., Sequenzia, n.d.). Identity-first language (such as "disabled person" or "Autistic person") is then adopted; this is not universally preferred, and ultimately the choice of which language to use belongs to the person being discussed (Brown, 2011). We have chosen identity-first language, and participants have not always used this language in their quotes.

Methods

We focus on one aspect of a mixed methods study of RP and RP training in Canada. We draw on 24 interviews conducted with people who took the British Council Canada RP training. These participants occupied various roles in arts organizations primarily but not exclusively in the theatre sector. We received ethics approval for the project through the University of Guelph Research Ethics Board. Interviews averaged approximately 45 minutes, were conducted over the phone or Zoom, and were professionally transcribed. Interviews focused on understanding the value of RP, whether trainings equipped trainees to deliver RP, and how RP related to disability arts and accessible theatre in Canada. We used a reflexive thematic approach (Braun

& Clarke, 2006, 2019) to analyze the data at the semantic level using a constructivist frame and inductive coding (i.e., generating codes and themes "from the data up"). To expand theoretical and practical insights on RP, we revisited our analysis after publication of the primary report (LaMarre et al., 2019) in order to more fully integrate disability theory and explore participants' responses in relation to broader power structures. As a result, the themes explored in this article differ slightly from the thematic structure originally proposed in our report and offer more thoroughly theorized findings that contribute to academic and practical aspects of designing, training for, and delivering accessible theatre.

We employ a constructivist epistemology; as such, findings reflect not some existing reality of what RP is, does, and means, but rather a *constructed* reality that people constitute when they talk about and use the technique (Raskin, 2002). This has implications for what the results might mean for expanding RP even further to open to more inclusive ways of being in and with art together across difference. Underlying the thematic structure presented below are vital questions grounded in the Guiding Principles of the SSHRC-funded Partnership Project, Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life (Rice et al., 2018a), the grant that supported this research in collaboration with the British Council Canada (LaMarre et al., 2019).[5] These include whether it is possible or desirable to balance multiple accessibility needs with one intervention, where policy and creativity intersect to generate new possibilities for access, and how disability justice might be aspired to and realized in arts contexts. Such questions hold implications for how we understand, package, and market RP. Understanding that people in different bodies with different life experiences will encounter RP differently also has implications for training, as it is important to consider who is involved in planning training, the content of the training, and how those involved orient to non-normativity. While it would be appealing from a liberal humanist perspective to claim that "RP is for everyone," this neither reflects the impetus for or impacts of RP, and nor does it challenge normative notions of the human that underlie such an assertion; further, this stance does a disservice to the need for all involved in a production to thoughtfully consider and collaboratively design accessible theatre experiences as part of their creative process (e.g., see Watkin, 2017; Rice et al., 2021).

Results

The four themes we present here work to tell the story of what RP means for the "rules of the game" for theatre audiences, the role that individuals and

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[5] View Bodies in Translation's Guiding Principles here: https://vimeo.com/429459496; Document: https://bodiesintranslation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BIT-Principles-of-Governance-and-Engagement.pdf

organizations play in supporting the success of RP, the physical, ideological, and emotional conditions necessary for the rollout of RP, and critical considerations and problematics of RP in relation to tensions around disability art, as well as disabled creators, producers, and audiences. The first theme, *Committed to Access*, encapsulates how interviewees considered their work relative to the values of accessible theatre in general and RP in particular. *Training is Critical* highlights participants' perspectives on the value of and challenges for training designed to enhance the delivery of RP. The theme *Inviting Bodies to be Bodies,* focuses on relationships between bodies and spaces, and how RP can shift ways we might view and honour this relationship. This theme speaks to the specific challenge to RP – and to accessible theatre in general – of billing RP as "for all," and whether this is either possible or desirable. Finally, *Imagining Audiences* builds on the problematic of RP being "for all" to contend with the question of who RP is imagined to be for, and how this intersects with the way training is designed and RPs are delivered.

Committed to Access

The degree to which participants' organizational and personal commitments aligned with the form, content, and purpose of RP training mediated their overall experience of it. Many participants worked for organizations that either held existing commitments to accessibility or were committing to greater accessibility; some were employed specifically in a role of working toward access. Participating in training therefore meant living up to job-specific and organization-wide commitments. This impacted participants' engagement, fueling their desires to make personal and organizational values congruent with practice.

> When I was hired for the position, I knew that we were going to be doing access work, so, try to have ASL interpreters and audio describers. And when I heard there was sort of a third prong [to the organization's access strategy], my supervisor had told me about it [RP training]. It made sense that we would attach another element…to try to make access for the theatre. So, I would say we sort of had it in the works before I was hired for it, but as soon as I heard that the training was coming up, that's what made me want to do it. I knew it had to be done. (Participant 7)

This quote frames accessible theatre as *necessity* ("it had to be done") and reflects the *logic* of moving toward RP ("it made sense that we would attach another element"). Importantly, although participants often framed RP as a necessary next step, this does not mean that that they perceived it as a burden. Instead, they described how the training led them to adopt a greater sense of personal responsibility for accessibility in their work; participant P1 noted,

for example, after taking RP training, "working more in inclusive arts practices became a big priority for me, professionally and personally."

The training also capitalized on commitments that participants already held to increasing access, by asking them to make a specific RP-related commitment in the weeks and months following training, something participants reflected on as a helpful part of the process. Participant P4 shared:

> What I enjoyed the most is that at the end of the training the participants would leave with a number of commitments. So, 'I will commit to doing a visual story.' 'I will commit to talk to my board.' 'I will commit to talking to my director'… Because, very often, when we do trainings, people go back to their daily routine. And they feel they're not a hundred percent ready to do something.

Accessibility is ongoing, rather than something that takes place one time. By building this acknowledgment into RP training, trainers increased the likelihood that the lessons learned did not end once participants left the training space. Participants' reflections on the relationship between RP and their organization's commitments to accessibility underscore the importance of having strong grounding in accessibility prior to embarking on RP; organizational buy-in and commitment can help to spark interest and investment in doing things differently to enable access.

In order to continue delivering RPs, participants talked about the need to sustain communities built during the training. For example, participant P22 noted that talking to those who had "been there" was key in avoiding a feeling of being overwhelmed:

> I would say that if they're…feeling overwhelmed by it, about implementing it, is to talk to somebody who's done it first. Because just looking at kind of the paperwork and all the various steps can be a little overwhelming.

In line with this, some participants had already begun building RP communities following their training, which they noted would help them to carry out personal and professional commitments to RP in a way that is true to the modality – collaborative and creative, as opposed to prescribed and static.

Training is Critical

Overall, participants found the training they received to be helpful to them in their practice or prospective practice of RP. Their responses followed a pattern of being constructively critical, highlighting the value of relating to others, working through the practical aspects of designing and delivering an RP, and learning about the social model of disability, while also noting that there was room in the training to integrate a greater awareness of disability

justice, to enact access within the training context, and to build on experiential exercises to "learn by doing."

The relationship between RP and disability justice bears deeper exploration in its own right but warrants at least brief mention in the context of participants' responses. Disability justice calls for a centring of the voices of disabled folks, especially BIPOC disabled people, in everything related to accessibility (Mingus, 2013) and with this, an expansion of notions of accessibility to incorporate and address intersectional barriers to spatial inclusion (Hamraie, 2017; Rice et al., 2021). Some participants called for a more explicit disability justice framing for the trainings and for RP itself, and noted that steps were being taken toward this in the adaptation of training from the original UK model. However, training participants differed markedly in their awareness of concepts related to disability theory, accessible practice, and disability justice. Exploring their responses, patterns around orienting to disability varied depending on the self-positioning and level of political awareness of the participant. For some, the introduction of the social model was itself new and exciting:

> The main thing that really struck me was the very first day … was the definition of disability – [the] medical definition versus the social definition. And it just kind of rocked my world, to think that really, the only thing that's causing disability in our culture is the fact that we don't allow for it. It's our structures, our social construct, our buildings, those are the things that are disabling people. (Participant 11)

Recognizing that it takes time to understand disability differently, the fact that the training led to this insight is a decidedly positive move toward this understanding. Those who had greater experiential and political understandings of the various lenses through which disability might be viewed – including the limits of liberal humanist perspectives detailed above, as well as the possibilities of the social model and of disability justice – desired more from the training. Some suggested that it might be helpful to tailor training to different levels of understanding, to avoid either jumping into paradigm-challenging material without the appropriate scaffolding or being perceived as wasting time for those already living and practicing access:

> The training had to adapt itself to be very general… so I really did enjoy it, but the only thing I do remember is feeling, like oh, I know that. And so, I wanted to get more specific about… because I was about to put on a show and really wanted to ask all sorts of questions about, like the ins and outs of putting on this performance. (Participant 16)

Another pattern we noted in the data was a desire to move toward the training being led by disability or difference and some participants noted that they appreciated the moments when disabled folks were at least "in the room":

> It was very good effort to have some people in the room who have firsthand experience with people with disabilities or people with Autism or people with various barriers in their lives and I thought that was so important because I find some meetings you go to are about others that are not in the room. (Participant 17)

By participants' accounts, the RP training was a great first step toward working for a more thoroughly considered theatre praxis that attends to difference in a meaningful way. And indeed, the training got people thinking about how to start and plan from this awareness.

On a meta-level, the training itself could be made more accessible; moments when trainings failed to take access into account revealed assumptions about who is imagined to be delivering and who is understood as receiving the training, shoring up boundaries between cultural producers and consumers. Inaccessible "moments" included small type on printed handouts, lack of microphone use, not having an ASL interpreter available, inaccessible physical spaces, and non-described slides, among other things.

Inviting Bodies to be Bodies

A key area of consideration for RP and the future of RP training, design, delivery, and marketing, is the contention that "RP is for everyone" – or every *body*. On the one hand, participants noted the value of opening up theatre spaces to be less exclusionary. On the other, it is likely overly simplistic, as many participants reflected, to expect that one space will work *for everyone, at the same time.* Creative solutions and critical reflection might, therefore, encourage clarity around what RP can and cannot deliver, and straightforward communication about the possibilities and boundaries of RP praxis.

As participants reflected, RP can certainly make theatre feel like a less intimidating and more free space, for disabled folks and those who do not identify (or have been identified) as disabled. Bodily (and mind) difference is made welcome, no matter the label it has attracted.

> I think the broadness that we use it as, so even if you have no one with Autism in the audience… I like going to them [RPs] because I like the little pre-show speech, gives me a bit more information. I like knowing that I can go to the washroom whenever I want (laugh) even though, I don't have any reasoning behind that, other than I like knowing that I can [laugh]. (Participant 3)

This sense of openness led several participants to reconsider how they market RP, in part responding to a problematic of accessible theatre: that RPs may not appeal to non-disabled audiences. Participant 8 reflected on a previous descriptor on their website:

> It's from last year's website. It says: 'Relaxed Performances are designed to welcome audience members who might benefit from a more relaxed environment,

including those on the Autism Spectrum.' It's not even the right word. 'These performances have less intense sound and lighting events, low light in the audience, the ability to come and go and a visual story delivered in advance, to prepare for the show.' … I would just cut out the part about including those on the Autism Spectrum.

Of course, RP *is* for people who have attracted the label of Autism, but it is not exclusively for this group. However, the way that participants described access and RP reflects some social tensions around who is "in" and "outside of" the category of disability that are worth considering in greater depth in light of the contention that "RP is for everyone":

> I think it's the most radically inclusive form of accessibility that we have now. When we talk about accessibility, we often think about physical barriers and including not having vision and including, being d/Deaf and not understanding the language on the stage. But there's so many more. I guess people are often concerned about the visible barriers, that people can identify easily, and what I love about RP is that it addresses such a wide variety of people and with so many different potential reasons. (Participant P2)

When exploring which bodies are made welcome in the theatre space, it is necessary to understand how multiple access needs do not necessarily mesh together to create a space that *invites all bodies to be bodies, at the same time*. In fact, "one person's idea of a relaxed space may be another's accessibility nightmare" (Watkin, personal communication). Most participants did not endorse the idea that it was possible or even desirable to have RP meeting all access needs at once. The vitality of communication came into relief against this reality; in other words, the recommendation that it is important to be clear about what you can and cannot deliver, both amongst staff and for audiences. Alongside the importance of communication, some gestured toward the idea that RP may not, in fact, be *for all bodies at once* or appropriate for every show, as participant P12 articulated:

> One of the big pieces for me is to have a conversation about the kinds of RP experiences that you think are going to be a good match in terms of the work that you do at your particular venue, and what might be a good match… I think we kind of get ahead of ourselves a little bit, where we start talking about RPs and 'We'll do this for everybody and we'll do it for everything.' And I just don't think that's a reality.

In the same way that RPs cannot make audience spaces accessible to all bodies simultaneously, it may not be possible for the stage, and the creative process, to be accessible to all non-normative (or normative) artists simultaneously, either. In fact, no artwork can include every difference and speak to everyone; accessibility in the arts, when practiced in an iterative and creative way embodies "trust, safety, gentleness and tenderness; of enacting

and maintaining an accessible physical and emotional space as part of disability art practice" (Mitchell et al., 2018, p. 572) and aims at adaptive specificity, rather than a homogenizing approach to access.

Some participants noted a tendency they observed amongst those exposed to RP to immediately want to make everything "relaxed"; this was tempered by those who had carried out RPs and knew that delivering a quality RP requires advanced planning, forethought, and communication. Participants noted that, in addition to being "a good match," as participant P12 noted, above, there is a need to not deliver a sub-par RP. If RP was to be delivered, it would need to be done well in order to be worth it for both creators and audiences.

Imagining Audiences

Most research participants did not disclose whether they identified as disabled or as non-normatively embodied/enminded. As previously noted, they had varied familiarity with models of disability, experience working with disability, and different orientations to the category. The way that they spoke about RP, who RP might appeal to, and who could deliver RP, raises questions about "next steps" for RP and RP training.

One interesting way that participants conjured up their imagined audience for RP occurred when they spoke about marketing RPs, and who might be interested in attending an RP. As participant P1 noted:

> I would say a challenge is the perception [of what RP means, from neurotypical audience members] who don't want to book that show, because they're like 'Oh well, it's not for my students.' … And I think that's too bad, because we like to think it's an opportunity for audiences, on the spectrum or who are neurotypical to come together. So I think there's a lot of missed opportunity there. We're trying to find a way, we just reworded what we have described RPs to be as inclusive as possible.

This quote surfaces tensions around how accessible theatre may, likely inadvertently, shore up divisions between disabled and non-disabled audiences. Vanessa Brooks has commented on this tendency in her critique of RPs, noting that they may segregate disabled audiences (Romer, 2017). Another tension that surfaces here is around the stigma that disability may still carry in the "normate" mindset and the struggle to reach out to audience members who may not feel welcome in RP, something that several participants commented on as something they'd like to see addressed in trainings.

> Some people here were really gung-ho to start doing RPs for every production that we do… And just to find an audience for each of those particular plays, that would be going to RP, the numbers would be so very minuscule, that you kind of

> have to go, 'Okay, maybe it's more worthwhile that we kind of focus on one a season, as opposed to four a season.' … and you know, that's me, looking at it from a marketing point of view. (Participant 12)

Here again, we see the issue raised about who RP is for and who it appeals to, with this participant reflecting on how RPs might be "hard to market." The perception that RP audiences are "difficult to recruit" represents a double-edge: on the one hand, we do not wish to suggest that theatres are "off the hook" in terms of opening up their spaces to difference. On the other, we recognize the need for further exploration around the best ways to challenge disability stigma among non-disabled theatre goers and create performances that welcome in different audience members, and how to build meaningful, ongoing relationships between theatres and audiences that may never had been considered in marketing before. This necessarily means "changing the game" of theatre, such as by balancing multiple accessibility needs, providing shows in different formats, and not generating exclusion through shoring up boundaries and segregating out audience types.

Here is where we might build case for co-design with those with various disabilities;[6] consultations, as advocated by Watkin (2017), may be one approach to integrating co-design. Other suggestions for deepening the critical conversations about audiences, creators, and design of spaces emerges from participants' ideas about exploring RP advisory boards and foregrounding disability-led training. This last item was identified as an important consideration when planning future trainings, as participant P5 noted:

> We thought that it was important that the training be ideally, led by disability educators, but right now, that's not happening. But at least we could try to make the content sort of come from the knowledge and legacy of disability justice.

Some participants discussed how they sometimes struggled to work with artists and audience members to endorse modifications that align with RP; for instance, participant P8 reflected on resistance they had received, and the need to educate artists and audiences when technologies are made available to enhance access:

> Some [artists] are just really resistant. And others are really open. Some artists are like, 'you can't have screens in the space at all.' Like, that's completely unacceptable. And yet, for some people, the screen is part of how they are able to engage – it might be how they hear; it might be how they receive the information of the show…. it requires a different kind of focus for performers, this does not apply across the board, but performers who are used to working in that secret dark space on the stage, where they can't see the audience.

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[6] Co-design involves working with various stakeholders to build workable solutions. This can be and has been undertaken through an inclusive design lens, with a specific aim to build solutions that work for different people with different access needs (e.g., Treviranus, 2011).

This participant explained that there is a need to educate performers and audiences alike about the new "rules of the game," and the way that disability might surface – or, as Conroy (2009) put it, "the way disability does us" (p.1) – in the performance space. This is not something audiences and artists are used to. However, from a disability justice vantage, it is critical that the specific conditions are put into place to make access possible; namely, training, funding, resources, and education.

Discussion

The themes we explored in this article might be thought of as a loop around RP; they circulate across ideological and practical elements necessary to train for and enact RP and relate to broader discourses of disability and artistic praxis. By and large, participants' organizations supported access, at least to the level of desiring to meet (and sometimes exceed) legal accessibility standards. This afforded participants the opportunity to get involved in RP training, which gave them the baseline level of knowledge and skills necessary to carry out RP, and in providing answers, also raised many questions. These include queries about whether RP can truly, at once, let all bodies be bodies and balance multiple accessibility needs. Questions such as these feed into debates about how to enhance accessibility without segregating disabled audiences; to centre disabled artists and producers in the work of designing and delivering RP; and finally, to find sufficient resources to enable RP to thrive.

Moving Beyond a Checklist Approach to Access

Our results surface more tensions than resolutions. They raise the necessity of deeply considering who is imagined to be an RP consumer, and how to move beyond creating a static accessibility checklist as we aim to deliver thoughtful disability-led theatre. The findings also reflect the need for ongoing support for RP, and thoughtful support at that. In the Australian context, Hadley (2017) reflects on the "theatre ecosystem" where theatre producers, creators, and consumers are interrelated in a non-linear way; theatre infrastructure is interwoven with layers of funding, resources, policies, advocacy, markets, audiences, performances, media, and more. Shifts in layers of the ecology destabilize other elements and tend to be "driven by downstream distribution preferences in Australian media, culture, and society" (p. 309). Movement, then, is slow and perhaps more likely to happen on the margins, for instance in community theatre (Hadley, 2017). Importantly, when thinking about ongoing funding to support disability arts, the question of who accessible theatre is for and who it is by takes on new significance:

> The impact of a government discourse reading us only as inspirations and/or charity cases, and a funding agenda reading us only as clients, has the potential to work against as much as towards the increasingly disability-led models of arts practice disabled people and their allies have been spent decades fighting for (Hadley, 2017, p. 321)

The shared performer-venue-audience responsibility for access has also been demonstrated in the UK, for instance in a 2019 report on the *State of Theatre Access* (Cock et al., 2019). This shared responsibility to expect the unexpected recognizes that dynamic, ongoing community support is a key component of what makes RPs "work." The critical importance of involving disabled people in the design of training, delivery, and funding for RP thus becomes even more urgent. Harkening back to the long legacy of "nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998), participants' reflections on training might be overlaid against a backdrop of the imperative to move forward not *on behalf of* but by and with disabled audiences, producers, and creators. Future work on RP might explore the linkages between disabled audiences and creators, and scaffold open conversations and a fluid, dynamic perspective on disability that further destabilizes the "rules of the game" in theatre.

Co-Designing Access and Policy

It is vitally important to include disabled people in the design and delivery of RP training and RPs themselves, and this inclusion must be meaningful and centre difference. Hamraie (2017) makes the case for *critical access*, arguing that we must imagine disability to be *already present* as we design. To actualize critical access, there is a need to engage with and across difference, recognizing the heterogeneity of access needs and the fact that "disability is not monolithic" but rather entwined with other aspects of being (Mingus, 2012).

Inspiration for disability-led training might be taken from Re•Vision, a project that works to re-imagine disability from the perspectives of those with embodied difference. In this project, leadership is taken from people living at various intersections, allowing art-making workshops to embody their aims of "advance[ing] new understandings of disabled people as agentive, creative, and effective leaders" (Rice et al., 2016, p. 57). By explicitly discussing what is required in creative spaces to facilitate generative disruption to status quo ways of being often required in "workshop" settings, Re•Vision's workshops enable transgressive and radical ways of being together that may not yet be surfacing in RP trainings. The kind of centering of difference present in Re•Vision workshops should not be a major leap for a kind of RP that truly desires a revisioning of disability as welcome. Re-orienting to disability as

welcome presents the possibility of "think[ing] about the generative work of disabilities and people with disabilities" (Garland-Thompson, 2017, p. 54).

The question of which bodies are invited into RP spaces might also be taken up in relation to the "participatory politics of the theatre medium" (Simpson, 2018, p. 231). While it is important to recognize the likely impossibility of accommodating multiple accessibility needs simultaneously, participants in our study reflected on how audience communities are built during RPs; as Simpson (2018) reflects, there is opportunity for the creation of communities in spaces where audiences are not expected to remain self-contained, static and silent. Each RP audience brings into contact people who may not otherwise spend time together; their unique constellation of embodied intricacies impacts each others' experiences as well as their own. Here is a true invitation not just for "bodies to be bodies," but indeed for co-presencing (Simpson, 2018). The collaborative nature of RP does not end at the audience, as our participants made clear in reflecting on the training. Indeed, participants were hungry for more training opportunities, for more insights on enacting strong RPs, and for collaborative communities of practice for RP. Moving forward, we hope that the findings presented here will help to scaffold such communities and guidelines in a way that does not fix difference, but rather opens to fluidity and collaboration.

Centring Difference

We identified the need for funding and policy change to scaffold access to the arts in our introduction, and participants lucidly reflected on the idea that RP requires thoughtful consideration, time, and resources. We have also gestured at how despite major forward movements in disability legislation, policy change itself may not centre difference in a way that promotes the flourishing of various ways of being and creating. In the absence of over-arching changes in governance, policy to promote compliance to disability legislation can only go so far to support a radical politics that centres mind-body difference. Fineman (2017) describes the importance of a responsive state to move beyond putting in place "fictitious equality" (p. 3) where power differences remain firmly in place. Because disability is emergent and not able to be completely anticipated (Rice et al., 2015), putting in place legislation can never fully let bodies be bodies in ways that work for *every* body. An approach like RP might allow for a creative re-imagining of responsiveness to disability legislation *if it avoids inscribing new norms of being* and does not simply section out disabled people as audiences for specific types of performances.

"Getting" the multiple needs of people involved in the entire process of RP from training to delivery to witnessing has the potential to activate what Mia Mingus (2011, 2017) describes as "access intimacy." Engaging with access intimacy involves "not running from disability – but moving towards it. It

asserts that there is value in disabled people's lived experiences" (Mingus, 2017). Mingus suggests that it is challenging, but not impossible, for disabled and non-disabled people to build access intimacy together. Actualizing access intimacy in the RP context involves capitalizing on the desire for community and commitment to access articulated by those involved in RPs. In order to do this in a way that centres disability, we might engage with critiques of RP such as those leveraged by the Deaf, Disability, and Mad Arts Alliance of Canada (DDMSTCA), which invite us to consider what kinds of access are being enabled, and to what kinds of worlds. Rather than using RP, the Alliance specifies that "the point of DDMSTCA culture is to give YOU access to OUR worlds, not vice versa" (DDMAAC, n.d.). In so doing, they re-orient the question of access, moving away from ways in which spaces might be altered such that non-normatively embodied and enminded people may access "normative arts" and toward normative (and non-normative) audiences being introduced to the "aesthetics of access."

An aesthetics of access has been explored in theatrical and other artistic contexts involving disabled people as creators, not only passive or disinterested subjects (e.g., Lipkin & Fox, 2001). It invites exploration of "the complexity of life with a disability and disability culture" (Lipkin & Fox, 2001, p. 135). An "aesthetics of disability," has been used to explain how and why legislative change may not translate into behavioural or attitudinal change around disability, which may continue to be experienced as confronting (e.g., Harris, 2019); "disability aesthetics" has alternately sought "to emphasize the presence of different bodies and minds in the tradition of aesthetic representation [… that] refuses to recognize the representation of the healthy body and this body's definition of harmony, integrity, and beauty as the sole determination of the aesthetic" (Siebers, 2005, pp. 542-543). Engaging with an "aesthetics of access" throughout the process of planning and delivering RP and RP trainings presents an opportunity to, once again, privilege, rather than sideline, disability and difference.

While participants did, at times, gesture at the importance of disability-led training and performance, there was still a tacit articulation of an audience/performer divide wherein the performers – and performances – themselves remained largely unchanged. The fact that the performances were not "diminished" itself might be read as a reassurance that disability does not "disturb" a presumed norm or professionalism in the art. Shifting to a co-designed and disability-led approach to RP offers up the opportunity to shift these norms and re-invent arts spaces.

Despite critiques of RP and an acknowledgment of the ways in which RP might stretch into a more disability-led form, we might consider how at least some RPs *already* transgress norms. In at least one instance, the RP participants involved in this study staged a performance that centred disability, and some participants clearly acknowledged the need for a deeper interrogation of imagined norms around audiences and performers. Similarly, Jess Thom's work, at the forefront of the RP movement, offers a disability-

centring read on previously normatively articulated work (Simpson, 2017). Thom and others centre disability in performing Samuel Beckett's *Not I* in a way that "reclaims the stage itself as an accessible space" (Simpson, 2017, para 4). For Thom, the stage space was an important space for experiencing theatre, as existing normative spaces did not allow for the "disruption" of disability; Thom thus speaks to the importance of disability welcoming spaces at both stage and audience levels. When RPs are planned and implemented by and for disabled people, they welcome audiences into experiences of non-normative embodiment, and to the "aesthetics of access." Disability-led RPs materialize spaces of disabled performance and belonging for actors, consumers, and audiences alike – aligning with a prefigurative politics.

Implications and Moving Forward

RP represents an exciting intervention into the normative politics of theatre-going. It may provide theatre venues with a concrete method for opening up their offerings to a broader audience and for helping them meet accessibility legislation. Participant responses indicate that training in RP has helped them not only to develop skills in accessible practice, but also to envision disability differently. At the same time, the existence and uptake of RP raises critical questions about whether access can be manualized, and whether "all bodies" are truly welcome in not merely the consumption but more transformationally, the delivery of RP. Participants were clear about the challenges in enacting RP; equally, they were enthusiastic about its potential.

Moving forward, we suggest that those invested in RP training and RPs themselves explore disability justice and disability-led frameworks as a way of bringing the critical questions raised in RP into conversation with the important work of feminist, disability, and legal scholars who interrogate the frameworks that undergird responses to questions of "access." Taking a playful, improvisational, and flexible approach to RP and RP training may not be a "simple" response to the question of "how to make theatre more accessible," but it will help to avoid an approach to RP that reifies boundaries between arts producers and consumers, fixes difference, or promises more than it can deliver in terms of meeting multiple accessibility needs at once. The promise of RP relies on its uptake as a well-thought-out and adaptive modality that is supported by adequate resources and led by those who it aims to serve.

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