

Inclusive theatre-making on the stage: The case of Rebekka Kricheldorf's *Homo Empathicus* (2014)

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Abstract & Keywords

English:

The play *Homo Empathicus* (2014) describes a hyperempathic community by bringing the ethic of political correctness to its extreme. This utopian society is dominated by language taboos: words such as ugly, suffering, and deficiency are banned. In this *brave new world*, where all conflicts are avoided, disability plays a major role. In fact, one of the protagonists is the deaf-mute Sam, who refuses the linguistic rules of his community. He complains about those who have befouled the park that he, as a gardener, is required to keep clean. He even avoids going to language therapy to cure his aversion to Jerusalem artichokes. In this play, disability, far from serving as a metaphor of virtue or lending itself to an ideological reading, represents Sam's path toward freedom. Our paper aims to provide a case study of inclusive theatre-making by analysing the production of *Homo Empathicus* by the company Teatro a Rotelle (Wheeled Theatre) at the University of Verona. This company is composed of non-professional actors, mostly students both disabled and non-disabled. Accessibility plays a crucial role in staging as Sam uses sign language, which has to go through an intersemiotic translation for both the actors and the audience. For example, the visual stimuli have to be transformed into acoustic signals for our blind actors. Another issue concerning accessibility are the dances described in the text, as some of the actors are wheelchair users. One of the dramaturgical challenges of this production is that the text of *Homo Empathicus* is focused on the diversity of Sam solely, while on the stage our actors manifest different disabilities. Building up on this case study, our paper aims at bringing together practical experience and theoretical knowledge on accessible theatre combining different research fields such as Dramatics (Johnston 2016), Translation, Accessibility and Disability Studies.

Keywords: inclusive theatre-making, homo empathicus, disability theatre

1. The Wheeled Theatre company as an example of inclusive theatre-making

Participation is a key element in the concept of inclusive theatre-making, as proposed by Elena Di Giovanni (2021). Inclusive participation of disabled individuals should be "present at any time, from the creation to the reception of a show"[1] (Di Giovanni 2021: 20) rather than being intended as something belatedly added to the representation. For instance, in the production of performances for a general audience, inclusivity is often limited to the consideration of audience accessibility. However, Di Giovanni argues that inclusive participation should be built up in advance, together with those who "create, act, play, listen and watch" the performance (Di Giovanni 2021: 20).

Such theoretical orientation emphasizes the practical and design implications of inclusivity by detailing the foundational elements of accessibility in theatre-making that the new interdisciplinary field of Accessibility Studies highlights. On the one hand, this approach considers the centrality of participation of individuals with their diversities as "there is no accessibility without participation" (Greco 2018: 213). On the other hand, it also gives prominence to the crucial "shift from reactive approaches to *proactive* approaches" (Greco 2018: 213). These approaches span from the removal of obstacles to an inclusive design that allows individuals to enjoy an artistic experience that "fully capitalizes on all of their physical and intellectual resources" (Pacinotti 2019: 180).

The concept of inclusive theatre-making has generally been interpreted in terms of audience accessibility, though the focus on the audience only would be limiting. This essay aims at broadening this application of inclusivity and presents an articulation of inclusive theatre-making within the performative experience and theoretical knowledge of the production of *Homo Empathicus* by the company Teatro a Rotelle (Wheeled Theatre, henceforth TaR)[2] based at the University of Verona. The TaR company is composed of non-professional actors, mostly students, both disabled and able-bodied. Founded in 2016 and directed by Nicoletta Vicentini and Jana Karšaiová, TaR is known for several productions, including videos and theatre for children.

Thanks to its particular attention to inclusivity in the writing and staging of their productions, the activity of TaR could be related to other similar experiences of disability theatre in Italy and beyond. Disability theatre consists of performative practices that ensure that "disabled people are at the center of the creative process" and allow "disability to influence that process" (Randaccio 2020: 154). Therefore, it combines self-conscious engagement and the aesthetic value of disability itself. In the last decades, disability theatre has had a wide diffusion and many artists have explored this practice. That has prompted "scholars to investigate how performance studies understands the disabled body and disability as an identity formation, how disability studies understands performance, and how the two fields might make common cause" (Sandahl and Auslander 2005: 5)[3].

In her investigations of "the meanings of the body and their negotiation in dance performance and disabled performers" (Kuppers 2001a: 3), Petra Kuppers has pointed out that disabled performers occupy a double position with regard to their presence on stage that is marked by "invisibility as an active member in the public sphere, and hypervisibility and instant categorization" (2001b: 25). Although self-conscious engagement plays a fundamental role in these performative practices, disability theatre, as noted by Johnston, cannot be limited to

a single pattern, model, site, disability experience, or means of theatre production. Rather, the term has emerged in connection to the disability arts and culture movement at a particular moment in the re-imagining of the term 'disability' in many different geographical, socio-economic, and otherwise diverse cultural contexts. Different artists have embraced and resisted both sides of the term. Some have sought to highlight specific disability experiences while others favor kinds of performance that lie outside the scope of theatre's more traditional framings. (Johnston 2016: 35).

In the case of TaR, the engagement is realized mostly in the creative work and the performative practice, as discussed later, rather than in the focus on the representation of disability culture and identity. TaR embraces theatrical performance in the footsteps of Fischer-Lichte, i.e. a practice that highlights the importance of material elements such as corporeality, spatiality, sounds, and lights on stage (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 76). For TaR, performance describes a genuine act of creation that involves all participants and manifests itself in its specific materiality. One of the most important elements of performativity is the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators which enables and constitutes the performance itself. This "bodily co-presence creates a relationship between co-subjects. Through their physical presence, perception, and response, the spectators become co-actors that generate the performance by participating in the 'play'" (2014: 32). For this reason, the term disability theatre, which intersects with the perspective of inclusive theatre, could partly be considered reductive (see, for example, Barton-Farcas 2018: XV).

The present study breaks down the concept of Inclusive theatre-making into the three levels on which inclusiveness operates: the contents of the chosen text (1); the production with its interactions between the text and the actors (2); and, finally, the representation in which the stage and the audience are connected (3). These three levels are constantly intertwined and allow inclusiveness to emerge as a versatile and enriching element in theatrical performances. In TaR, actors collaborate with their different abilities in the production and representation of the play. By doing that, they transform the original text into a multisensory experience and enrich it with new meanings.

2. Inclusiveness in the text of *Homo Empathicus*

The play *Homo Empathicus* (HE) was written by the German author Rebekka Kricheldorf for the Theatre of Göttingen in 2014. The sources that inform this play range from Rifkin's *The Empathic Civilization* to Orwell's *1984*, and Huxley's *Brave New World* (Salgaro, 2018). *Homo Empathicus* describes a utopic community by pushing to its limits the ethics of political correctness, that is, the linguistic practice through which discrimination based on class, gender, bodily characteristics, and more can be eliminated. To achieve this result, this utopian society is dominated by language taboos: for example, words such as *ugly*, *suffering*, and *deficiency* are banned.

In the first twenty-two scenes, the hyperempathic heroes of HE carefully avoid conflict of any kind whatsoever. For example, a young man who has been rejected by his girlfriend repeats the phrase "The difference of my anatomy and my needs does not mean we must separate" (HE: 54) as a mantra. Similarly, in rejecting Sascha's love, Momo says, "I am very sorry that I cannot reciprocate. In this momentary phase of my life I am not erotically interested in my own sex" (HE: 40). Given these social rules, no disagreement can emerge because the law of mutual

tolerance remains effective, as the following statement of a Homo Empathicus makes clear: "I do not share your opinion, but I respect it." (HE: 37) Not only individuals, but professionals too aim at creating this utopic and empathic community. The function of a language therapist like Dr. Osho, for example, is to remove negativity through speech. He is a spiritual master who preaches the power of naming possessed by language. His teachings are evident in the invitations he makes to the members of the community: "See the special beauty in every Neighbor-Person and name it. And you will see that your neighbor will also see and name the special beauty in you" (HE: 49)(4).

While the first twenty-two scenes move forward with no true plot, scene 23 culminates with a conflict between this utopian, perfect society and the two original humans, Adam and Eve. Notably, the couple is murdered following a sexual act, after which Professor Möhringer decrees: "They shall not reproduce." (HE: 73).

In the key scenes in chapter 23, the characters who previously had performed as individuals, now become a *social body* that acts and speaks in unison to express the general will. This totalitarian model is corroborated by the presence of the 'Führer', the commanding figures of Master Moo and Dr. Osho. At the end of the play, the social body discovers that Adam and Eve were played by two actors, Conny and Maxime, who were staging the play "The Savages" (HE: 74). The ending of HE —with its theatre within the theatre strategy that blurs distinctions between reality and fiction—is shocking for the social body as well as for the audience.

Within the community of *Homo Empathicus*, concrete measures have also been taken to eliminate all forms of discrimination based on biological sex, age, job category, or even species. The exploitation of nature and animals, for example, is replaced by an extreme animal-rights movement and a rigid vegan diet that includes sage tofu and quinoa quiche. The lack of discrimination is also linguistically emphasized by the choice of descriptive terms. In this society, the elderly become the Long-Lived, and the young are the Young-Lived. While the gravedigger is an Earth-Rester, and the manager of a public spa becomes a Hygiene Specialist. Sexual differences have been banned from this society and every form of sexual preference is tolerated.

In HE, extreme emphasis is placed on definitions, ranging from gender identity (HE: 35) to professional titles that are reformulated within extremely politically correct parameters (HE: 35). Words expressing judgment or revealing interpersonal conflicts are monitored (HE: 48-50) and no words to define Sam's disability (who is deaf)(5) are ever used.

Based on the illusory condition of widespread empathy and complete acceptance of the others characterizing this community, the audience should expect the play to develop interpersonal dynamics of complete inclusiveness. However, that is not the case: the society in *Homo Empathicus* is a dystopian one in which empathy, now the only universal and pervasive norm, is perceived in an abstract and artificial manner. In a way, it would be possible to define it as a false empathy, or even a form of what Breithaupt (2019: 141) calls "filtered empathy". Indeed, it "does not 'accompany' the other but instead only attaches to them when they become a victim, trapping them into that role, perhaps permanently, thus denying them agency" (Breithaupt 2019: 141). In this positioning, there is an absence of a real identification with the other and, on the contrary, an identification with the figure "for whom the suffering other is only useful for as long as they suffer" (Breithaupt 2019: 141). While a real sharing of experiences is missing from this empathic society, only the cancellation of any potential conflicts, the removal of the other as a subject, and the resulting depersonalization of human beings are left. The characters' obsessive attempts, stressed at the linguistic level, to put themselves into someone else's shoes, anticipate their thoughts, or provide condescending and reassuring answers betray an illusory form of empathy. The characters often anticipate the thoughts of their interlocutors, which leads to a real automatization of the exchanges (Salgado 2018: 11). Their empathetic gestures ultimately betray the negation of personhood and disguise the eradication of individuality.

In this depersonalizing social context, even disability, apparently completely accepted and included within society, is subject to a paradoxical, but open form of exclusion. In the case of Sam, a "development expert, mute" (HE: 35), Kricheldorf does not thematically emphasize the disability. It is as if, in this hyper-empathic society, disability was not relevant and therefore not worth emphasizing with a dedicated verbal approach. All characters seem to understand sign language and, in this society, a sort of bilingualism is the norm. This normalization of the disability transcends the textual world and extends to the performative experience too. Kricheldorf significantly does not translate sign language to the audience, who can only infer the meaning based on the verbal reactions of Sam's interlocutors.

This apparent acceptance gives Sam a privileged position within his community. As the society is dominated by linguistic rules, he is deaf and consequently partially immune to social discourses in which he cannot participate. Sam's disability seemingly allows him uncommon freedom because he can express, using a different language — that is, sign language — those concepts which other members of his community do not seem authorized to. The readers (but importantly also the audience) perceive the disruptive impact of Sam's thoughts indirectly, through the reactions of other characters who admonish him for his inappropriate statements and behaviors. For example, Sam is less polite than others and complains about those who have befouled the park. He even avoids going to "language therapy" to cure his aversion to Jerusalem artichokes (HE: 73).

However, Sam's inclusion is ultimately fictitious. While he has a right to be part of the community, he is not accepted as an individual. The centrality of personhood, experience, and individual feeling, which are keys to the concept of inclusiveness, are here completely missing. It is not by chance that Sam does not have a voice. Sam is deprived of words and his verbal presence is substituted by a caption-refrain ("Sam says something in sign language", HE: 47, 51, 56, 57, 63, 66, 73) which appears several times in a serial manner and makes him look like an automaton. Moreover, although the characters seem to understand sign language, they address him (who is deaf) verbally and almost always reproach him. Characters frequently criticize his diet ("Perhaps you should go to Doctor Osho and let yourself speak away your aversion to sunchockes", HE: 57), as well as the way he expresses himself ("Sam! We consider this expression unsuitable", HE: 57); ("Sam! We consider such phrases unsuitable", HE: 66). At the thought that someone might have deliberately thrown trash to the ground, he is told: "Whichever person that might have been, they certainly did not do it intentionally" (HE: 51) as if to speak for him.

Only the theatrical framework is capable of intervening to unmask the illusory and disturbing nature of empathic harmony that his society has seemingly created. When the characters of Adam and Eve - who in reality are actors in a theatrical production - appear, this society can finally reveal its face. As the mask of abstract humanism falls, the audience witnesses a case of negative empathy, the disgust towards the other that cannot be accepted (see Donise 2020: 215), the scandalous Adam and Eve.

The homonyms of the mythical ancestors deeply disturb the *empathic* community and act as the return of the historical phase of humanity that had been repressed. Their presence provokes a temporary irruption in the community of two elements whose removal dystopian societies rely on: the past and conflict. Conflict, the essence of theatre as dramatic art, is symbolically realized in two moments that openly echo the tragic dimension and cause understandable horror in the bystanders. Eve, like Medea, has killed her children and Adam reads out loud from *Macbeth*, one of the darkest and most desperate Shakespearean monologues including the well-known sequence of tomorrow, and tomorrow and tomorrow. The disturbing power of their representation is defused by the actors' reassuring statement that it is purely fiction, which has an edifying goal. As Adam and Eve ask, "is it not the task of art to sow the seeds of doubt so that the spectator may reconsider what is good and whether it remains good so that they can live by it even more steadfastly?" (HE: 74). Only the Chorus, the result of the consolidation of the *empathetic* social body against the *tragic* characters, remains after the performance, singing and dancing in a circle in chapter 24.

The position assumed by Sam in chapter 23 is complex. Paradoxically, it seems that it is precisely the condemnation of otherness (the *radically* other represented by Adam and Eve) visually sanctioning the inclusion of Sam into the social body. As gleaned from the characters' responses to his gestural messages, he expresses himself in a particularly stern manner towards the two primitives. Even more so, "Sam... pronounces Adam and Eve's death sentence, calling them non-humans and proposing that they be locked up" (HE: 73). His condemnation seems to indicate his desire to assimilate into this community. However, Sam's assimilation, rather than entailing the inclusion of his disability as such, subsumes the cancellation of his diversity when compared with the more visible and disturbing one of Adam and Eve. In this perfectly empathic society, any form of real inclusion reveals to be impossible and is deceptively substituted by homologation.

Kricheldorf's play articulates even further the question of empathy(6), developing it in the relationship between the actors in the play within the play and in the characters that they interpret. For example, Adam and Eve, the wild ones, have opposite features with regard to the inhabitants of this society. Once Eve reveals being Maxime, an acting member of the society of the *Homo Empathicus*, she explains her interpretation of the role on the basis of her capacity for empathy. Eve states that "it was a matter of saying the strange phrases very seriously. Not of raising [myself] to something higher than *The Wild Ones*. But to feel what they feel" (HE: 75).

Maxime shows empathy in her performance and describes it as the ability to put herself into another person's shoes in order to understand their feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Even if the actors later dismiss their characters and consider them part of the representation, they temporarily identify themselves with those characters and feel their inner dispositions and feelings. While moving on the verge of paradox, Kricheldorf once more positions the only case of real empathy in the play in the relationship between actors and characters, a relationship that is neither hypocritical nor modified. However, it is only negative empathy, practiced to exorcise its object.

3. Inclusiveness between the text and the actors of TaR

When talking about theatre and accessibility, normally the first thought goes to theatergoers, to the audience with mobility and sensory disabilities, to their rights to participation which is the basis of the universal design theory (Di Giovanni 2021: 18). Attention is paid to the ways to make the performance enjoyable for this specific audience too. Less often, however, accessibility refers to the inclusion of people with disabilities in the production of the show itself, *in primis* as actors.

The majority of contemporary theatres are equipped with dedicated spaces and are characterized by the absence of architectural barriers when it comes to the audience. In *Inclusive design: A Universal Need*, Linda Nussbaumer “envisions an application of the principles of universal design to theatre [...] essentially in structural terms” (Di Giovanni 2021: 19). However, theatres are frequently not structured to allow actors with disabilities to effortlessly access the stage. Dramatic texts, classic and contemporary alike, are generally thought and written for able-bodied actors and thus present interpretative challenges for disabled actors. When disabled actors are on stage, a scenic convention may be enforced, and they pretend to be able-bodied. Alternatively, the text may be adapted in a sort of intralinguistic translation to meet the actors’ specific needs.

In the last decades, a new, specialized theatrical trend has developed around accessibility themes, producing numerous, different experiences in Italy and other countries. In virtue of this plurality and diversity, both in terms of the origins, objectives, and methodologies, it is difficult to discuss the phenomenon of disabled theatre cohesively. “The rich international field that exists today emerged from diverse and often disconnected points of origin” (Johnston 2016: 26). While the publications attempting to offer a general overview of disability theatre are scarce, studies or reports of individual dramatic experiences are abundant. The *Journal Research in Drama and Education* dedicated two different special issues in 2009 and 2017 (i.e., exploring the evolution and geographically distinct notions of disability), namely deafness and performance, in recent years[7].

There is also an intrinsic reason why a comprehensive theory of disability theatre has so far been lacking. In the editorial of the special issue “On Disability: Creative Tensions in Applied Theatre” of the *Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, Conroy states that “disability arts are intrinsically political, but also aesthetically challenging” (Conroy 2009: 11). At the time of this editorial, Conroy (2009: 11) believed there was “no recognizable field of disability in applied drama” because:

Disability is presented as a receding barrier to inclusion. Disability arts seem about to recede into the funding of disabled-led arts. The notion of inclusion, of opening the door to a room that exists already, to grant access to the excluded is one of the most misleading elements of disability discourse, and it has found a form in disability theatre in the model of partnership between disabled participants and established mainstream artists. Disability and theatre continue to thrive in this environment, but if we neglect the analysis of power and politicized participation then we will lose the cultural exploration of disability as it has developed over the last 30 years. (Conroy 2009: 11)

Even when focusing on Italian productions, the diversity of these experiences would make a survey and classification of the modalities in which theatre is becoming receptive to disability quite challenging. Certain notoriety was gained by Pippo Delbono. Starting with the show *Barboni* (1997), his productions have found a new expressive intensity precisely in the creative contribution of marginalized and disabled actors (see Rossi Ghiglione 1999, in particular, 122-130). However, “the experience of Pippo Delbono is only one of the numerous ones that proliferated in the 1990s” (Dall’Amico 2021: 115). More examples can be recalled in the company La Ribalta of Antonio Viganò, the Laboratorio Integrato Pietro Gabrielli, and the group Lenz Rifrazioni (later Lenz Fondazione), which were already active in the 1980s. Theatrical companies like Societas Raffaello Sanzio or a performer like Chiara Bersani who stage physical differences are also significant. The majority of these activities remain scarcely visible and far from the spotlight, even if they are increasing methodological awareness and refining the potential of inclusiveness.[8]

As illustrated in these past and current experiences, the attention that theatre pays to disability can focus in different directions. They range from a thematic interest, with the resulting choice of texts featuring disabled characters (but not necessarily interpreted by disabled actors), to a more directly performative interest, whose objective is to stage shows that are fully or, at least, partly interpreted by disabled actors. In many cases, the original dramatic text is created *ex novo*, tailored to a cast of actors with disabilities. However, the text is often calibrated on a specific typology of disability to better utilize appropriate staging strategies and, therefore, is not fully inclusive of the range of differences.

This is where the experiences of TaR stand out and expand the horizon of possibilities that inclusive theatre can offer. In TaR, able-bodied actors work along with actors with a range of disabilities: sensory, mobility, speech impediments, as well as attention and concentration disorders. There is not a single predominant disability, thus their productions require increased flexibility and adaptability from all the members of the group[9]. Their method is based on improvisational training and collective writing rather than a predetermined textual approach. It involves a real collective creation in which, as already highlighted, constant adaptation and participation constitute key elements (Di Giovanni 2021: 20). Once the dramatic or literary text to be staged is chosen, improvisation prompts are suggested. The artistic material is then gathered and reorganized into a new script, more attuned to the sensibilities and possibilities of the group. Consequently, characters are created *ad hoc*, tailored, and adapted to the needs of the interpreting actors. By reinventing the verbal and motor components, the dramatic text is truly made accessible to the actors. Simultaneously, they preserve the scenic convention in which actors with disabilities play the role of able-bodied characters and continue the implied agreement with the audience who accepts this fiction. With regards to adapting roles and abilities, Erin Ramsey, a fight choreographer, and stage manager in several productions of the Phamaly Theatre Company, states:

The rule is, ‘If an actor has a disability, their character has that same disability’. To fulfill this goal, the company has used a seeing-eye dog as Toto to guide a blind actor performing the role of Dorothy in *The Wiz*, developed innovative sound technology to facilitate the voice and singing roles of Deaf performers, and substituted clapping for tapping in the musical *Anything Goes*. (Johnston 2016: 26-7)

As previously mentioned, the production choices in inclusive theatre-making need to be proactive rather than prescriptive. There are situations or stage movements, for example, that affect the credibility of characters in relation to their disability. The script lines of an able-bodied character may result less credible when interpreted by a disabled actor. For this reason, it is necessary to find appropriate directing strategies and an effective adaptation of the dramatic text. A few successful examples are provided by *Three Sisters Rewired*, a show inspired by *Three Sisters* by Anton Čechov and produced by the Graeae Company, in which the three main characters are played by deaf actresses. Noteworthy is also *Personnages*, inspired by Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, produced by La Compagnie de l’Oiseau-Mouche and directed by Antonio Viganò[10].

In the case of TaR and *Homo Empathicus*, as mentioned, Sam’s disability is not verbally identified by the other characters, as if the fact that he is deaf were not particularly relevant. This seems to suggest that all disabilities are fully accepted and incorporated into the society here represented. This apparent inclusiveness, however, could also be interpreted oppositely. Sam really is the other in his community precisely because communication in HE aims at erasing his disability and at making him only appear like the others. In this illusory equality, a form of ableism, that is discrimination in favor of able-bodied people, surfaces.

In the first part of the production of HE by TaR, the audience is presented with a utopian society in which disability is perfectly integrated. On the stage, not only do the characters become disabled like the interpreting actors, but directing choices to facilitate the actors’ performance are made while offering fertile possibilities for dramatic development. This staging strategy allows TaR to create a truly inclusive show. Disabled actors can show themselves as disabled and employ adaptive strategies that are observable by the audience too. In this way, TaR and its company simultaneously and successfully use challenges and resources. Consequently, the actors’ disability becomes an integral part of the production. Disability turns into a driving force that guides the theatre-making process without adapting (or distorting) the original text, but rather offers the possibility to create a new level of dramatic reading.

In this way, TaR overturns the ableism implied in the majority of productions involving disabled actors. The fiction of normalcy in which the disabled actor interprets an able-bodied character, is overturned. The staging of the text of HE allows the actors in TaR to bring their own disabilities to the stage by fully embracing the inclusiveness that the society described in HE apparently offers. In the text, inclusion involves gender and sexual orientation, but also extends to the ability of characters to the point of not distinguishing between able-bodied and disabled individuals. Indeed, in the production by TaR, a blind actor can play a blind character, an actress in a wheelchair can play her own role in the wheelchair, and so on. The text allows actors to remain disabled even in their dramatic roles without having to pretend not to be.

4. The staging of HE by TaR

Thanks to the opportunities offered by the text of HE, therefore, the group TaR can interpret the concept of inclusive theatre at a different level, especially in terms of production. Not only does it acknowledge that “all audiences have a right to be included in theatre-making” (Di Giovanni 2021: 29), but also that disabled actors can be extraordinary creators and protagonists of productions of great artistic value. In so doing, TaR follows the example of other companies, including the Birds of Paradise Theatre Company and the Freewheelers Theatre Company[11].

The staging of HE by TaR is developed around three central moments mirroring those in the dramatic text. Initially, the audience is presented with a utopian and inclusive society, especially in terms of disability (1). Then, the focus shifts to some light dissonant moments which interrupt the apparent harmony (2). In the epilogue, the total incapacity of the society in HE to handle and accept diversity is unveiled as the characters of Adam and Eve are characterized by psychiatric and psychosocial disabilities (3).

The parameters of inclusion elaborated in the production of HE by TaR are structured around two levels: on the one hand, the reality of the actors’ objective difficulties and, on the other, the scenic fiction of the society proposed in the text. Starting from this premise, the main critical issues are linked to words, gestures, and sound. The first typology of difficulty regards the acrobatic and dancing parts. The character

of Raja, for example, turns cartwheels in several moments of the play. The insertions of dancing sequences, which are meticulously described in the author's notes, create several challenges for disabled actors:

Pat stands up and hits the gong. Everyone stands up, forms a circle and celebrates the performance. They hum vocalizations in different pitches and make slow dance movements reminiscent of eurythmy. Then they hold hands and walk slowly in a circle. They laugh. Quietly at first, then louder and heavier until they are shaken with an ecstatic, collective laughing fit. They abruptly become silent, let go of their hands and take their places again. (HE: 14)

The challenge to find a common expressive language among actors with different disabilities has fostered new creative possibilities for TaR. The differences in movement and ability can be valued and celebrated, thus following the inclusive dance examples of the Cadoco Dance Company^[12]. The challenge of choral dances on stage, in which blind actors cannot comfortably move, and the obstacle, if not the danger, of the wheelchairs of actors with mobility disabilities, have easily been solved by dividing the actors into pairs. Through different forms of improvisations, each couple found their own personal tuning with their mobility abilities. For example, a couple of actresses with a significant mobility disability developed a slow dance using only the forehead as a contact point. The crescendo and the idea of the chorus in the text were, however, preserved by using the singing of a blind actress who, by increasing the rhythmic speed of the song, was marking the pace of the dances of all the pairs.^[13]

Moreover, in HE there is a communicative complexity given by the use of sign language. The challenges of interaction arising from the lack of acoustic reference points in the scenes along with the presence of actors using sign language and sighted interpreters were resolved in TaR's production by drawing inspiration from the good practices already described in the play HE. More specifically, a new role was added to the play, that of the "facilitator". This facilitator has the task to whisper the lines in the ear of blind actors. This intensifies the sensation of the exclusion of the audience who cannot understand the meaning of that prompt. In the staging of HE proposed by TaR, the textual parts that the audience cannot understand are expanded. In this way, what originally was possibly a device of *dramatic economy* (which actually left some doubts about Sam's *lines*) now presents itself as a real, deliberate exclusion of the audience from these moments. The intent is to prompt, through an effective, albeit limited, exclusion from understanding what the characters are communicating, an increased sensibility in the audience for diversity in their own society, especially when it is the target of non-inclusion. All these choices and adaptations show how for this company the question of inclusion arises primarily as a performative issue. Through these dramaturgical strategies, not only does the audience reflect on inclusion, but also has an embodied experience of it. That is, they live an experience of exclusion directly. The audience's physical participation is set in motion through synesthetic perception, shaped by sight and sound along with physical sensations of the entire body (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 36). Actors and spectators equally participate in the play through their physical presence and the meaning that emerges from the piece is the result of their interaction. "The rules that govern the performance correspond to the rules of a game, negotiated by all participants – actors and spectators alike; they are followed and broken by all in equal measure" (Fischer-Lichte 2014: 32).

The role of the facilitator can also be used to push the wheelchairs of actors with mobility disabilities, an act that is completed with the simplicity of a daily gesture, like holding the hand of children to help them cross the street, without stressing or implying a deficiency.

Finally, when the actress in a wheelchair, who is not autonomous in moving, would need to enter or leave the stage as per the script, the objective challenge of her scenic action was reworked as a dramatic function. This need for adaptation is illustrated in the following passage:

Eve comes in. Silence. Eve wears a red mini-dress and torn stockings. Her eyeliner is smudged by tears, her long, blonde hair is haggard and unwashed. One of her high heels is broken. She limps by slowly. Everyone stands up, mobs together to form a Social Body, and looks at her, surprised. Sam speaks the following choral sentences along with the Social Body in sign language. (HE: 27)

In TaR's production, the actress who interprets Eve moves on stage with great effort trying to autonomously use the wheelchair with enormous difficulty ("She limps by slowly", HE: 27). Meaningfully, nobody helps her, not even the facilitator, precisely to stress her separation from the group ("Everyone stands up, mobs together to form a Social Body and looks at her, surprised", HE: 27).

To implement the poetics of Inclusive Theatre-Making more effectively, TaR also adopted meaningful stage solutions. Choral lines in the text (for example, "Sam speaks the following choral sentences along with the Social Body in sign language", HE: 27) are used to feature actors with cognitive challenges (memory and concentration) by focusing the scene on them while benefiting from the support of the chorus. The latter, in fact, can cue the beginning of a line or act as a prompter for actors who suffer from mnemonic difficulties. Also in the scenography, choices were made to make this production more inclusive. For example, to represent a park, a green-carpeted lane was included to provide a tactile reference point for blind actors. Moreover, another inclusive scenographic choice is the use of a backstage rope at 1-meter height in between two sets to allow actors to move unassisted. The use of bilingualism in the society of HE, already present in the original text, is certainly an element of inclusion to be considered.

The character of Sam is interpreted by a hearing-abled actor, who has learned their lines in sign language. The translation into sign language was coached throughout the production process by an expert who trained the hearing-abled actor. This was also supported by video resources, as illustrated by the work done on the translation of the dramatic line below.

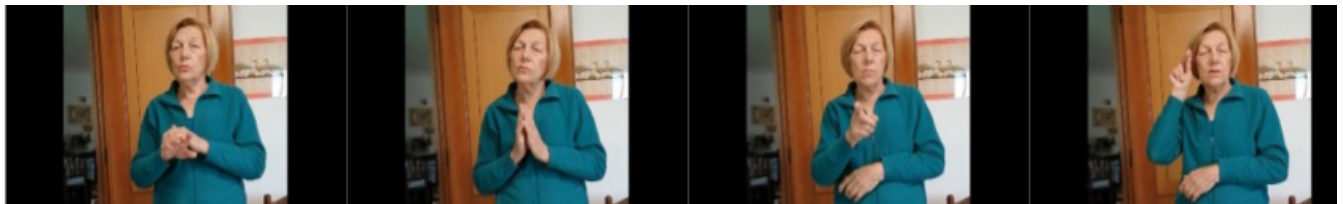


Fig.1: "Please, hide your femininity" (HE: 27).

It is also important to note that there is no prevailing disability among the TaR actors, unlike other companies. While the Graeae Theater Company is open to all forms of disability, they are more receptive to the needs of non-hearing actors.^[14]

Since each actor can display their own disability in TaR's productions, the customary accessibility obstacles that are generally encountered in theatrical texts are significantly simplified. On the one hand, the staging choices described above support an increased artistic autonomy of the actors. On the other hand, these choices are deliberately emphasized in the production as modes of social interactions among able-bodied individuals and differently-abled ones in the society represented in HE.

The staging of HE has offered the opportunity to create a show capable of representing a *normal disability*, whether verbal or motor, in acting. It has provided the grounds for a real inclusive theatre since the disabled actors are not forced to play able-bodied roles but rather, they can authentically express their own disabilities. Paradoxically, the identification of disabled characters with the roles they play forces the audience, accustomed to a theatre characterized by ableism, to question themselves on the real inclusiveness of their own society. The productions of TaR, therefore, do not aim at confirming the values of the current society, like the theatre company described in HE, but rather TaR aims at confronting the audience with a mirror in which these values are playfully remixed.

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Notes

- [1] To ensure the readability of the text in English, all the quotations from Italian sources were translated by the authors.
- [2] For further information see <https://dh.dlss.univr.it/it/accessibilita/teatro-a-rotelle/> (accessed 15 April 2022). Wheeled Theatre is our own translation of the name of the company.
- [3] Since the beginning of XXI century, scholars have been engaged in an articulated debate around disability theatre with publications in leading journals, including: the special issues of *Contemporary Theatre Review* edited by Petra Kuppers in 2001; *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance's* (2008, 2017); and *Text and Performance Quarterly* edited by Henderson and Ostrander (2008) as well as on anthologies (see Fahy and King 2002; Sandahl and Auslander 2005). The discussion on the aesthetic value of disability has produced a growing internationalization of scholarship as well as of artistic practices (Schmidt and Swetz 2017: 302).
- [4] For the English translation of HE we used the one by Brenna Nicely. As it is still unpublished, we refer to the pages of the Italian translation (2018, Cue Press).
- [5] The concept of deafhood has become a buzzword in academic and lay communities alike (Ladd 2003). According to Ladd, deaf people have experienced high levels of internalized oppression as victims of a colonization process through the policy of pure oralism. Deafhood is a broad concept which empowers a counternarrative in response to hegemonic oralist and colonizing discourses that seek to victimize them. Consequently, deaf people are offended by the word mute, and rarely consider themselves disabled.
- [6] *On the empathic reactions of the theatre audience see Cook (2011).*
- [7] The goal of the International Perspectives on Performance, Disability and Deafness issue was to highlight voices of emerging scholars who had not been previously featured in English language publications, as well as different geographical realities. More specifically, the contributions of this issue cover 15 countries: Australia, Brazil, Canada, England, Finland, Greece, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, South Africa, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey, and the USA (Schmidt and Swetz 2017: 301).
- [8] To get an idea of some of these initiatives, see Arte e Cultura – Informazione Disabile, available at <http://www.comune.torino.it/pass/artecultura/teatro-attivita-organizzazioni-ed-eventi-in-italia/> (accessed 15 April 2022).
- [9] In the presentation of TaR (dh.dlss.univr.it/it/accessibilita/teatro-a-rotelle/), instead, the different abilities/disabilities of the company actors are celebrated.
- [10] <https://www.oiseau-mouche.org/> (accessed 15 April 2022); <https://www.teatrolaribalta.it/spettacoli/personaggi/> (accessed 15 April 2022).
- [11] <https://www.boptheatre.co.uk/> (accessed 15 April 2022); <https://freewheelers theatre.co.uk/disability-arts/> (accessed 15 April 2022).
- [12] <https://candoco.co.uk/> (accessed 15 April 2022).
- [13] These dances in couples remind the audience of the "Dances on wheelchairs" performed by the Indian Ability Unlimited Foundation and described by Akhila Vimal. In those, performers incessantly compare themselves to able-bodied performers and thus reaffirm the prevalent stigma: "Ability Unlimited portrays the notions of beauty and perfectness through performances and in doing so it creates an alternative binary, of perfection and imperfection, instead of critiquing the whole idea of binarism. Women performers of AU are deaf, a disability which is not visible. Male performers in wheelchairs do all the rigorous movements; they enjoy the agency of controlling the performance while the female dancers personify the age-old idea of beauty and contribute only as the beautifying elements in the performance" (Vimal 2017: 328).
- [14] <https://graeae.org/our-work/three-sisters-rewired/> (accessed 15 April 2022).

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