

INCAPACITY AND THEATRICALITY:
POLITICS AND AESTHETICS IN THEATRE
INVOLVING ACTORS WITH INTELLECTUAL
DISABILITIES

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between people with intellectual disabilities and theatrical performance. This type of performance has emerged from marginalized origins in community arts and therapeutic practices in the 1960s to a place at the forefront of commercial and alternative theatre in the first two decades of the twenty first century. This form of theatre provokes an interrogation of agency, presence, the construction and performance of the self, and the ethics of participation and spectatorship that locates it at the centre of debates current in performance studies and performance philosophy. It is a form of theatre that fundamentally challenges how to assess the aesthetic values and political efficacies of theatrical performance. It offers possibilities for thinking about and exploring theatrical performance in a conceptual and practical space between incapacity and theatricality that looks toward new and different ecologies of meaning and praxis.

The methodology of the thesis is a detailed analysis of the presence and participation of people with intellectual disabilities in specific performances that include a 1963 US film, a 1980 Australian documentary, the collaboration of Robert Wilson with autistic poet Christopher Knowles, and recent performances by Christoph Schlingensiefel, Back To Back Theatre and Jérôme Bel's collaboration with Theater HORA. I examine the working relationships and the aesthetic and political strategies of these performances in specific geographical and historical contexts in order to explore what kinds of efficacy and affective engagement this form of theatre can offer to people with and without intellectual disabilities.

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Contents

Introduction	1
 Chapter One:	
<i>A Child is Waiting: 'To throw a spotlight on the subject of retardation'</i>	35
 Chapter Two:	
Mirror Stages: Aldo Gennaro and Robert Wilson	96
<i>Stepping Out: 'the birth of a theatre of the mentally handicapped'</i>	96
Mirroring inverted: Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles	130
 Chapter Three:	
<i>FreakStars 3000, Back to Back, and Disabled Theater</i>	156
<i>FreakStars 3000</i>	166
Back to Back Theatre.....	190
<i>Small metal objects</i>	191
<i>Food Court</i>	206
<i>Ganesh versus the Third Reich</i>	228
<i>Disabled Theater</i>	262
 Conclusion.....	315
 Bibliography.....	328

Introduction

The first theatrical performance by people with intellectual disabilities that I attended was in 2004. It was a large cast version of *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* performed by residents of a community for people with intellectual disabilities. The audience was composed of other residents, staff, and friends and family. I was there as I had been asked to organize some drama workshops for people with intellectual disabilities in the community. The performance was different to anything in my previous experience of theatre. The director stood at the front of the audience, narrating and sometimes prompting or correcting the performers. The performers seemed distracted, unengaged and struggled to remember what it was they were supposed to do. Some of their bodies moved in the agitation of involuntary or compulsive movements.

My memories of that event are of being bored, and of being embarrassed for all present when performers delivered lines of dialogue intended for other characters to the director, to the ceiling, or to the floor, and yet there were performers on that stage that engaged and held my attention with their presence in ways that I had very rarely experienced in other theatres. In that room there was a strange mixture of incapacity and theatricality that both fascinated me and prompted me to try to do something better for these people. At that time I understood that 'something better' as something that was both better theatre and that could help people with intellectual disabilities live better lives: more engaged, more empowered and more included. That continuing fascination, and

the desire to discover what 'to do better' might mean, has led me to set up Different Light Theatre Company in Christchurch and to ask the questions that now form the basis of this thesis. What can theatre bring to the lives of people with intellectual disabilities? Does it offer the potential for greater equality, empowerment and emancipation? What can people with intellectual disabilities bring to theatre? Does their involvement question what is meant by theatre and what it means to be an actor? What potentially emerges in the encounter between the two? Does it cause a rethinking of what is meant by the capacity to be an actor both onstage and off, and do the perceived incapacities of people with intellectual disabilities provoke a rethinking of what is meant by theatrical performance and what its aesthetic and political efficacy might be?

In this thesis I intend to show how the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in theatre provokes a reconsideration of some of the aesthetic principles and political efficacies of theatre. This theatre might be said to be located between *incapacity* understood as an inability to achieve norms that is yet productive of innovation, and *theatricality* as a wavering between the symbolic systems of theatre and the free play of performance. I prefer not to settle upon any ontological definition of 'intellectual disability' as this is a term that will be contested throughout this thesis, whilst at the same time I will be seeking to acknowledge the lived experience of those people subjected to this diagnosis. I will be concentrating on what emerges in the relationship between people who are diagnosed as intellectually disabled and those who are not in the theatre: performers, directors (and other theatre creative) and audiences. I will be speaking from the perspective of someone who is not diagnosed as being

intellectually disabled, as this is the perspective from which I can speak with some experience.

I am using the term incapacity rather than disability because in the pragmatics of everyday usage this lexical choice is one that is more dependent on context. There is a difference between the statements 'She is disabled' and 'She is incapable': the latter usually requires accompaniment by the conjunction 'of' and a context. 'She is disabled,' rightly or wrongly, suggests something definitive: subject verb predicate: end of story. 'She is incapable' suggests at least the possibility for resistance to the judgment of incapacity: that the incapacity can change. Incapacity is egalitarian. Any body is capable of being incapable. This is particularly the case in the theatre: anybody is capable of making mistakes, breaking the illusion or the theatrical contract with the audience. I am interested in how this incapacity on stage changes the relationships between all bodies present and how those bodies react to this incapacity. This issue relates very much to the investigations in Nicholas Ridout's *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, a work on incapacity and theatricality that informs this thesis. I am also seeking to avoid further metaphorization of 'disability' in the face of the lived experience of people with disabilities.

I choose to use the term 'incapacity', however, primarily because of how it becomes an interesting term when it is connected to theatre. In this thesis I will explore what happens when incapacity is rendered as theatre. When the perceived incapacities of a person with intellectual disabilities is presented or displayed on stage does it become a kind of capacity in the aesthetic space, or do we become aware of and focus on that person's capabilities? Does this affect the

perception of what that person is capable of outside the theatre? When theatre is incapacitated, when something or someone goes wrong in theatrical performance what happens? Does this reveal the incapacities and contingencies on which the process of theatre is based, does theatre temporarily collapse to let in something 'real'? Can this going wrong itself be framed as performance and, if it is, does this empower or exploit the performers?

When incapacity is rendered as theatre and when theatre is incapacitated – often at one and the same time in the involvement in theatre of people with intellectual disabilities - the potential for something aesthetically and politically interesting emerges. Incapacity encompasses, moreover, issues of power and agency that cross the binary of able and disabled. These issues of power and agency are particularly at stake in the lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities – they are 'human but more so'¹ – but also connect to subject positions for able and disabled alike in contemporary economic and political formations. Incapacity is one way of reconfiguring the hierarchical binary of able and disabled. It encompasses the creative political potential inherent in powerlessness and in things not working. Incapacity in one area can enforce creativity in another.

To answer the question of what theatre brings to people with intellectual disabilities entails going back to more basic questions of motivation, methodology and efficacy, and the politics of visibility² and performance³. Why make theatre with people with intellectual disabilities? How should this theatre

¹ Berger cites Matthew Belmonte's "Human but More So: What the Autistic Brain tells us about the Process of Narrative" (166)

² I refer here to McHenry, "Beyond the Visible: Disability and Performing Bodies."

³ Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* could be read as, in part, a study in the politics of theatricalizing incapacity and the incapacities of perception of the visual field.

be made? What are the expectations of this form of theatre? How can people with intellectual disabilities be involved in theatrical performance? How can they be presented or represented? Most theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities within the United Kingdom, the United States of America, Europe and Australasia from the 1980s onwards has emerged from therapeutic and community arts environments. This practice follows a model in which non-disabled therapists, facilitators and directors help such people to express themselves creatively. This is seen as giving access to the arts for a disadvantaged sector of society and at the same time reintegrating those who are excluded back within the community, to heal a perceived rift in the social bond.

Until very recently performers with intellectual disabilities have only had their presence and representation negotiated for them by non-disabled directors and other facilitators. These practitioners then choose the terms by which the theatre production seeks to engage an audience that is generally assumed not to be intellectually disabled. Devised or scripted theatrical performance has been largely filtered through the perceptions, sensibilities and apprehensions of people who are not identified, or do not identify themselves, as 'intellectually disabled.' One problem faced by such practitioners, myself included, is how to make theatre from the subjective experience of others who may have a limited or impaired access to spoken and written language and other symbolic or semiotic systems. However sympathetic or empathetic the non-disabled director may be, how is it possible to make theatre or performance out of such peoples' experience without thematizing, appropriating or in some way exploiting them? This raises further questions. Is not all theatre, or indeed mediated representation, exploitative of those involved in some way? Any number of

people involved in theatre may be subjected to various forms of exploitation, financial or emotional, but is there a particular danger of exploitation for actors with intellectual disabilities? Is there a difference between the perceived exploitation of actors with intellectual disabilities and any other actor?

I will address some possible answers to these questions in this thesis by considering performances in different historical, geographical and cultural locations. I will not directly give an account of my own eleven years experience of making theatre with Different Light Theatre Company in Christchurch, New Zealand. I have made this decision in an effort to avoid adopting an authorial voice on work in which I have been intimately and substantially involved. A separate book is being produced in collaboration with Different Light members. My experience of our mutual collaborations and friendships inform every aspect of this investigation.

In pragmatic terms, theatre may occasionally bring a means of living, or, infrequently, a career, to actors with intellectual disabilities, but I will not be focusing primarily on commercial theatre in this investigation. I will, rather, limit discussion to performances that represent a highly selective genealogy of theatre practices in the period from 1963 to 2013 that have generated an interrogation of what theatre can be. These theatre practices developed from origins in institutions and community arts and I now wish to consider some of the assumptions on which such practices were based, as they still inform the methodologies of participation and the perceptions of efficacy of this form of theatre.

In “The Facilitation of Learning-Disabled Arts” in Sandahl and Auslander’s

Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance, Giles Perring outlines three paradigms of artistic and therapeutic methodologies in which people with intellectual disabilities participate in the arts. He uses 'learning-disabled', the preferred British term, and refers to a study he undertook in the United Kingdom in 1999 of general arts practice. The methodological distinctions he outlines are useful to give a context for the investigation of the practices of the artists and theatre companies working with people with intellectual disabilities discussed in this thesis, so I will cite them in full:

Normalizing: a methodological standpoint and aesthetic outlook that resonates with normalization theory and social role valorization. It focuses on bringing performers with learning disabilities into mainstream performance discourse, often through the application of mainstream production values and aesthetic criteria.

Post-therapeutic: a methodological approach informed by therapeutic standpoints. Although it may be applied in nontherapeutic (i.e., creative) settings, it deals with the personal, perhaps emotional "issues" presented by a person with learning disabilities. It affords an opportunity for these issues to be expressed and explored. This approach often sets itself at odds with external or organizational imperatives for work to be exhibited or performed.

Countercultural: An objective that challenges mainstream cultural and aesthetic precepts and views about disability. It often flows from a perception of the value of transgressive and nonnormative qualities in learning-disabled people's creation and a concern with addressing their marginalization/institutionalization. (185-6)

Perring himself recognizes that these distinctions are not discrete or mutually exclusive. Indeed, a number of the performances discussed in this thesis do not

fit easily into just one of these categories, as they involve approaches that exceed or cross between them. These three categories do, however, represent a useful starting point for a discussion of questions of the agency and capacity of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance.

What is immediately apparent is that the emphasis of Perring's survey is on the non-disabled facilitators: they are the ones assumed to be the agents of the three methodologies. Perrin recognizes that there is a difference between arts-and-disability projects in which non-intellectually disabled artists are involved that 'express disabled subjectivity' (187) and those involving people with intellectual disabilities and non-disabled facilitators where a division of subjectivities occurs:

Arts-and-disability projects, particularly if the work facilitated is by artists without learning disabilities, must address this dichotomy of subjectivities. (187)

His reference to the 'dichotomy of subjectivities' in 'learning-disabled arts' is significant. While this may capture certain problems of the question of the relationship between abled and disabled agency in this work, it reinforces this highly problematic binary and also presupposes what Lalita McHenry has termed 'the acceptance of a disabled ontology' ("Beyond the Visible" 53): that there is a distinct and unitary disabled or intellectually disabled subjectivity or 'self' that can be expressed in arts or performance. This assumption is problematic as it sets up a binary of 'self' and 'representation' that does not take into account the construction of the self in representation nor take into account how subjective experience is to some extent determined by its mediatization in a

language and symbolic systems. This issue is particularly crucial if a person's access to theatre as either participant or spectator is, in effect, impaired by a limited or 'special' access to education and a consequent social marginalization, as is the case with many people with intellectual disabilities.

Perrin's categorizations also limit or deny agency for people with intellectual disabilities. The methodological and aesthetic 'standpoints, outlooks and objectives' are positions of power that are assumed not to be occupied by people with intellectual disabilities, who are not ascribed agency in meaning-making, creative or aesthetic decision-making, or determining the aesthetic and/or political relationship of the work to an audience. The methodologies are not from their 'standpoint' or 'outlook.' They are the subject of these methodologies, in as much as they are subjected to them. They are either normalized, subjected to therapy or thematized as an anti-normative other. At the same time, these methodologies that deny them agency, seem to presuppose an intellectually disabled 'self' that may be expressed unproblematically through arts and performance. Perrin may have been giving an account of the state of learning-disabled arts in the UK in 1999 but it is possible to see in his model the kind of representational 'double bind' that continues to recur in the theatrical performances discussed in this thesis. People with intellectual disabilities are both ignored as meaningful agents *and* thematized as mere representatives of their disability. I will analyze how different practitioners of theatrical performance have attempted to negotiate this 'double bind' and to seek emancipation from it.

In theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities there is, in

addition, a kind of doubling of power relationships that disadvantage such people. Until very recently, they have only been cast in the role of actor or performer, a role with the appearance of agency but that is equally subjected to the demands of the director, the script and the obligations of performance before an audience. This subjected subject position is complicated further by the power relationship between people deemed 'abled' and 'intellectually disabled', as the director and other creative personnel, those responsible for the construction of the script or other performance texts, and the audience are all generally located in the domain of the abled. It must also be acknowledged that people with intellectual disabilities still in order to participate in theatre need support and, precisely, facilitation. The question that remains, however, is how the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance is to be facilitated - on whose terms?

'Facilitation' is a word that attempts to reconfigure a perceived inequality in a power relationship. In terms of my own theatrical practice with people with intellectual disabilities I would like to think that I have developed from being a director as a tyrant to a director as a facilitator. In terms of the power relationships of creating theatre, this is the desire to move from telling people what to do, to creating a frame in which they can do what they do, or explore what they can do. A facilitator's role is to empower others, but this function itself is highly problematic in the context of the arts with people with intellectual disabilities. How can power be given to those who have so long been deemed powerless? Often denied agency on the most basic levels - where to live, how to work, express desire and procreate, how can people with intellectual disabilities

be given power in a theatrical context?

Facilitation from its etymological roots means making something easier. In terms of the facilitation of the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatre, the question needs to be asked: for whom is this facilitation rendering the making of theatre 'easier?' Is it facilitating a theatre that is easier for the performers, the director, or the audience? There is no easy answer to this question of ethics and politics and I will seek to examine its implications in each of the performances under discussion.

All three of the methodologies Perrin describes are predicated on the remediation of a lack: they are all ways of dealing with incapacity. The normalizing methodology brings people with intellectual disabilities into the mainstream, remediates their exclusion by seeking to render their incapacities as the capacities of professional performers. The post-therapeutic methodology offers a kind of healing, an acceptance of, and coming to terms with, incapacity. The countercultural methodology situates the incapacities of the performers in the wider frame of institutional and social oppressions. Incapacity is reconfigured as the subversion of conforming to norms and is offered up as a critique of more encompassing forms of incapacitation. All three methodologies and the various theatre practices that they continue to inform have good intentions, the intention that theatre should bring something to people with intellectual disabilities. Perhaps, though, it is the intentionality implicit in this assumption that is itself part of the problem. The terms of the question need to be reassessed: the expectation that theatre should bring something to people with intellectual disabilities is based on an assumption of inequality. Behind this

expectation, however well intentioned, is the desire that *they* should be helped to be more like *us*. If there is an assumed inequality in the basic motivating principles of such theatre how can people with intellectual disabilities achieve any kind of political or aesthetic emancipation? Is it not possible to facilitate theatre democratically, based on an assumption of equality? These are questions in which the politics of performance intersect with the ethics of the relationship between people with and without disabilities in theatre.

The assumed ethical import of the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatre has led a number of critics to frame this encounter between abled and disabled in terms of Levinas's 'infinite responsibility' for the Other (*Entre Nous* 74). There are problems with this framing as it is in danger of eliding people with intellectual disabilities and denying them the possibility to be the subjects of ethics, reducing them to a thematized or essentialized Other. These problems of politics and ethics will be investigated more fully in the third chapter of this thesis.

There is another approach to facilitating theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities that I would characterize as a kind of 'negative capability' methodology. The eighteenth century poet Keats, who coined this phrase, defines it thus:

I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries doubts, without any reaching after fact and reason. (277)

The term is generally understood in literary criticism as the Romantic poet's attempt to abnegate all assumptions and theories of knowledge to let the

external world of nature and its objects pass through him. The poet contemplates the song of the nightingale or the Grecian urn in the state of receptiveness and enhanced sensibility that is 'negative capability.' In terms of creating theatre with people with intellectual disabilities I designate the 'negative capability' approach one in which the abled artist or facilitator tries not to impose any specific methodology for the creation or devising of performance, but rather desires to step back as much as possible, to get out of the way of what the person(s) with intellectual disabilities may express. I will argue that Robert Wilson attempts to take this approach with Christopher Knowles in *A Letter for Queen Victoria*, referred to in Chapter Two, and that it informs, to a certain extent, strategies employed by both Christoph Schlingensiefel in *FreakStars 3000* and Jérôme Bel in *Disabled Theater*, both referred to in Chapter Three. Each of these practitioners operate according to stated desires to learn from, imitate or simply to empower the 'what is there' of people with intellectual disabilities. In this approach the perceived incapacities of people with intellectual disabilities are met with a 'negative capability' of understanding and experience in the abled person. I will show how this approach is inflected with the Romanticism of its origins and the tropes of idiocy and of the *enfant sauvage* of the Romantic period. From another perspective this approach may be seen as an embodiment of what Avital Ronell in *Stupidity* has suggested as a kind of condition for an ethical relation:

If one were to state in ethical terms the only possible position . . . it would have to be this: I am stupid before the other. (60)

Is it, however, still possible to be stupid before the other, if the other is

designated as stupid? In this case again questions of intersubjectivity, the reflexive and dialectical relationship between Self and Other, are complicated by cultural and historical tropes and the metaphorization of intellectual disability, stupidity, incompetence and incapability.⁴

Another attempt to undo and reconfigure the binaries of disability and ability has emerged in recent developments in disability studies. Jasbir Puar in “The Cost of Getting Better: Suicide, Sensation and Switchpoints” reconfigures ability and disability as capacity and debility as a way of dealing with the complexity of the relationship between ability and disability in new economic and political landscapes of neoliberalism. For example, some forms of disability experience and some people with disabilities are what she terms ‘exceptional’ and what Mitchell and Snyder in their recently published *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism and Peripheral Embodiment* term ‘ablenationalism’: their presence and behaviour may be used to enhance neoliberal agendas. The right kind of disabled people can be folded into life, others are deemed not worthy of full access and inclusion. Puar also argues that even the debility of those excluded can be made profitable in the development of medications and institutions and mechanisms of surveillance by the medical industrial complex.

Mitchell and Snyder 2015 draw on Puar’s debility and capacity model to formulate a conception of the ‘capacity of incapacity’ as an aesthetic and political strategy of resistance to neoliberalism. Their use of ‘incapacity’ is already caught up in a dialectic of capacity and incapacity. This is the ‘crip art of failure’ (37)

⁴ The metaphorization of intellectual disability in the particular tropes of the eighteenth century, of Surrealism and Modernism is extensively analyzed in Berger, Chapter Two.

modeled on Halberstam's 'queer art of failure' whose definition they cite:

the queer art of failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods . . . (83)

This represents both an art of living and an art in the aesthetic sense as active resistance to the new normals of neoliberalism, in particular the assumption of normative cognition. In the fields of neuroscience and philosophy there is also a current questioning of existing concepts of normative cognition, the autonomy of self and the coherent integrity of the individual. In *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* and other works Catherine Malabou has proposed 'plasticity' to oppose models of thought and behaviour based on the formulations from the physical sciences such as resilience that neoliberalism favours. People with intellectual disabilities can be more meaningfully included and valued in such models that look more towards the flows and interrelationships of an ecology⁵ than the assumed cause and effect, profit and loss, and emphasis on the individual of a market-led model of an economy. This rethinking of models of thinking and behaving has potentially profound implications for people with intellectual disabilities in terms of reassessing prevailing assumptions of their agency, value and capacity for mutually beneficial relationships. I believe that these recent developments at the intersection of philosophy and neuroscience map out not only new ways of reconfiguring the capacities of people with intellectual disabilities but also a

⁵ Mitchell and Snyder 2015 cite Braidotti's 'Alternative ecologies of belonging' as 'alternative ways of being-in-the-world as disabled' (172)

reconfiguration of thinking about agency, autonomy and shared vulnerabilities of people with and without intellectual disabilities. This is an interesting potential efficacy of this theatre that may be the surprising thing that the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities can bring to theatre.

One final reconfiguration of the binary of able and disabled that underlies the investigation in this thesis of theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities is what might be termed the binary of the mirror. I mean by the binary of the mirror the assumption that the disabled body and disability is a poor and deficient reflection of the able body and ability. In 'Nude Venuses, Medusa's Body and Phantom Limbs' in Mitchell and Snyder's *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* Lennard Davis analyses:

the desire to split bodies into two immutable categories- whole and incomplete, abled and disabled, normal and abnormal, functional and dysfunctional. (53)

He traces this desire back to Lacan's theorization of how the infant experiences their body at the earliest stages of development as fragments, limbs, parts and surfaces or what Lacan terms *imagos of the fragmented body*. At what Lacan terms the mirror stage of development the child (mis)recognizes the unified image in the mirror as their 'self.' Davis then connects the encounter with disabled bodies as a return to seeing the fragmented body under the armour of the unified self of the whole body:

...the disabled body is a direct imago of the repressed fragmented body, a hallucination of the mirror stage gone wrong. (60)

he continues:

...the "real body," the normal body," the observer's body, is in fact always already a "fragmented body." (61)

From this Davis is able to recompose the binary of the abled and disabled body, a binary in which it is assumed that the body that takes priority, the a priori body is the abled body. This leads him to reconfigure the perception of the disabled body:

The disabled body, far from being the body of some small group of victims is an entity from the earliest of childhood instincts, a body that is common to all humans, as Lacan would have it. (61)

I wish to extrapolate from Davis's reconfiguration of the binary of the disabled and abled body a conceptualization that I will apply to theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities. This theatre is often perceived as, or constructed to appear as, a mirror version of 'normal' theatre. I understand that the formulation 'normal' theatre is highly problematic but I would like to use it, not just as a kind of straw man 'theatre' with which to oppose my own idea of theatre, but to represent the phantasm of a normal theatre that I would argue the spectator holds in their mind's eye in the process of viewing theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities. I would argue that this phantasm of theatre appears, a kind of mirror stage theatre, a narcissistic theatre, like the armour of normative illusion that the child dons in the mirror stage and then is disrupted by the encounter with the theatre of people with intellectual disabilities, a theatre that is a kind of imago, or 'hallucination of the mirror stage gone wrong.'

Thus far I have been referring to, and will be referring in the main body of the thesis to, *theatre* to encompass many different forms of performance from therapeutic and community arts projects to commercial mainstream theatrical performance to avant-garde postdramatic performance that seeks to blur the boundaries between theatre, performance art and intermedial performance. There are also many different concepts of theatre, such as Badiou's distinction in

Rhapsody for the Theatre between what he terms 'theatre' and Theatre.⁶ (21) In this thesis I will only be referring to performances involving people with intellectual disabilities that take place in theatres or theatrical spaces but I will argue that each offers a performative interrogation of the political and aesthetic underpinnings of theatre.

As Nicholas Ridout reveals in *Stage Fright: Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, incapacity on stage is highly theatrical: visible, perceptible, causing an affective grimace or shudder of embarrassment in an audience – or an intake of breath at the irruption of something that feels real into the aesthetic space. Incapacity, theatrically affective, has the potential to render theatre effective in unexpected ways. Incapacity suggests the contract of theatre between performer and audience temporarily breaks down to reveal the limits of theatre from within theatre. Usually, however, theatre hangs on in there in these moments. Once performers and audience are configured within theatrical space it is very difficult to break the theatrical contract terminally. The question then emerges: is there a theatricality of breaking the contract of theatre?

The meanings of 'theatre' and 'performance' and the intersections and distinctions between the two are highly contestable. The subject of Performance Studies, as delineated in, for example, Jon McKenzie's *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance* is extremely wide ranging, covering performance in theatres and other forms of what he calls 'cultural' performance. He also distinguishes 'organizational' performance, closely connected to Marcuse's performance principle and technological performance, a meaning encompassing

⁶ Badiou defines Theatre as pronouncing 'itself about itself and about the world, and such that the knot of this double examination summons the spectator at the impasse of a form of thought' (21) and 'theatre' as kind of mutual narcissistic self-assurance between performance and audience.

the 'performance' of substances, objects and machines. He connects performance to Goffman's presentation of the self in everyday life and Judith Butler's development of the concept of performativity. The meaning of performance also includes 'performance art' or live art. I will show how all of these meanings intersect in the investigation of the performance of people with intellectual disabilities in this thesis.

I will be employing a very specific meaning of 'theatricality,' locating the analytical methodology of this thesis in Performance Studies. In "Performance and Theatricality: The Subject Demystified" in Murray's *Mimesis, Masochism and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* Josette Féral traces the emergence of the 'performance' of performance art, referring to Michael Fried's much-cited critique of 'theatre' in 'Art and Objecthood.' She summarizes the two thrusts of his argument:

1. The success, even the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theatre.
2. Art degenerates as it approaches theatre. (294)

In attempting to understand this critique she connects it to Derrida's assertion that theatre cannot escape from representation and Peter Brook's assertion in *The Empty Space* 'In the theatre every form once born is mortal.' (295) She goes on to argue that performance, as understood in the relations to time, space, objects and the subject of performance art, however, is not a formalism. It rejects form, which justifies her trying to show 'how the two modes complement each other and stress what theatre can learn from performance.' One aspect of what she feels theatre can learn from performance is outlined in the following passage:

As long as performance rejects narrativity and representation . . . it also rejects the symbolic organization dominating theatre and exposes the conditions of theatricality as they are. Theatricality is made of this endless play and of these continuous displacements of the position of desire, in other words, of the position of the subject in process within an imaginary constructive space. (296)

'Theatricality' incapacitates the symbolic systems of theatre to allow the *play* of desire that is performance, although that performance still relies on the frame of theatre. In another passage she describes performance as indicating 'theatre's *margin*' but it is margin in Derrida's sense of *parergon* meaning that which is at the same time margin and centre, 'what in the subject is most important, most hidden, most repressed yet most active as well.' (297). Her specific meaning of 'theatricality' emerges as a play between 'theatre' and 'performance':

Theatricality can therefore be seen as composed of two different parts: one highlights performance and is made up of the *realities of the imaginary* and the other highlights the theatrical and is made up of *specific symbolic structures*. The former originates within the subject and allows his flows of desire to speak, the latter inscribes the subject in the law and in theatrical codes, which is to say in the symbolic. Theatricality arises from the play between these two realities. (297)

This recomposition of 'theatrical' as a *play* between 'theatre' and 'performance' is very productive for the types of theatrical performance by people with intellectual disabilities that are the subject of this thesis. Her formulation that theatricality is '*for the Other*' (297) is manifest in her descriptions of performance as 'an authorless, actorless, and directorless *infratheatricality*.' She refers to a kind of performance assemblage:

what takes place on stage comprises flows, accumulations and connections of signifiers . . . Performance can therefore be seen as a machine working with serial signifiers: pieces of bodies. (298)

that seems to connect directly to Davis' formulation of the perception of the disabled body as *imago* or hallucination of the mirror stage. She also refers to the absence of narrativity and qualifies whatever narrativity that may be present in performance in the following terms:

If the performer should unwittingly give in to the temptation of narrativity, he does so never continuously or consistently, but rather ironically with a certain remove, as if he were quoting or to reveal its inner workings. (298)

This fragmentation and disruption of forms and strategies of undermined narrativity are all embodied in the theatrical performances I will analyse in Chapter Three: in the work of Schlingensief, Back to Back and Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA, and, I argue, are anticipated and prefigured in the earlier performances discussed in Chapters One and Two. Féral summarizes the productive incapacitation of theatre by performance in 'theatricality' in the following terms:

Performance can thus be seen as an art-form whose primary aim is to undo "competencies" (which are primarily theatrical). Performance readjusts these competencies and redistributes them in a desystematized arrangement. We cannot avoid speaking of "deconstruction" here. (298)

It is my contention that the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities is a radical undoing or deconstruction of the "competencies" of theatre, a process in which theatre and performance operate dialectically, in Marvin Carlson's description in "The Resistance to Theatricality": 'each undoing the other and thus establishing a wavering field of reception in the tension between them.' (245)

Relatively little has been written so far on theatre and actors with intellectual disabilities within performance studies, although in the last few years this situation is beginning to change. A key work in the study of disability

performance that also considers performance involving people with intellectual disabilities is Petra Kuppers' *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* edited by Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander contains two contributions on performance and intellectual disability: Giles Perring's *The Facilitation of Learning-Disabled Arts: A Cultural Perspective* that I have referred to previously and 'Beyond Therapy:

'Performance Work with People Who Have Profound and Multiple Disabilities' by Melissa Nash which gives an account of work undertaken with the group Entelechy in the creation of an 'Ambient Jam' between people with and without disabilities. In *Unimaginable Bodies: Intellectual Disability, Performance and Becomings* Anna Hickey-Moody offers a Deleuzian reading of the devising, choreographing and performance processes of Restless Dance from Adelaide, a group with whom she was also a collaborator. In the same year Jen Harvie's contribution to the Palgrave Macmillan series *Theatre and the City* opens with an account of viewing Back to Back Theatre's *small metal objects*, a performance to which a section is devoted in Chapter Three of this thesis. The same production was analysed by Matt Hargrave in 'Pure Products Go Crazy' an article that is referred to in this thesis. This appeared in the journal *Research in Drama Education*, which devoted a special issue to learning disabled performance. I will also be referring to Tara Forrest's 'Productive Discord: Schlingensief, Adorno and Freakstars 3000' and to the collection it comes from *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders (2010)* edited by Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer, one of the first major studies in English to appear on the work of Schlingensief.

It is only in the last three years that there has been a relative increase in the amount of literature on the specific subject of theatre involving people with

intellectual disabilities. This occurred in the wake of the international success and debate surrounding the work of Back to Back Theatre and Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater*. This includes: 'We're People Who Do Shows': *Back to Back Theatre: Performance, Politics and Disability* edited by Helena Grehan and Peter Eckersall (2013), Theron Schmidt's 'Acting Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance' in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance* (2013), Bree Hadley's *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship: Unconscious Performers* (2014), *Disabled Theater* edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz (2015) and, very recently, *Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad or Just Plain Ugly* by Matt Hargrave (2015). All of this recent literature is discussed in the main body of this thesis.

There is comparatively more literature on disability performance that includes performers with physical disabilities that I have consulted but I have generally focused on the specific challenges that are presented in theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities, even though in many cases there is a crossover between the two types of disability. I am also approaching this thesis from the perspective of theatre and performance studies and how that intersects with disability studies and critical disability studies rather than vice versa even though my practice is grounded in disability performance. The field of Theatre and Performance Studies is huge so I have only included in the works cited those most relevant to the subject of this thesis in the areas of postdramatic theatre, the ethics of spectatorship, the 'social turn' in theatre and performance, relational aesthetics, theatres of immanence and posthumanism, all of which offer different configurations of what 'political

theatre' might mean in the second decade of the twenty first century. Specific works that inform the writing of this thesis include Nicholas Ridout's *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* is at the center of discussions that concern this thesis and his *Theatre and Ethics* is also important in the sections of the thesis that deal with this subject. I will be referring to Jacques Ranciere's writings on theatre, that include *The Emancipated Spectator* and *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime* and to his works on the reconfiguration of aesthetics and politics, specifically *The Politics of Aesthetics* and *Malaise dans l'Esthetique*.

The methodology of the thesis is an examination of specific case studies of theatrical performances that take place within specific historical and geographical contexts but this thesis is not intended as a history of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities. To embark upon such a project would entail going back into a shadowy history of freak shows and carnivals and might even include the involvement of what are now termed people with disabilities as jesters and performers at the royal courts of earlier historical periods. Fascinating and worthy of research as this may be, it would be beyond the scope of the present work. I have decided to construct a highly selective genealogy of such performance that chooses a comparatively recent starting point in 1963. I have done this because a consideration of this specific performance establishes a number of paradigms of motivation, approach and practice that inform the subsequent development of this form of theatre as it has emerged over the last fifty years from a marginal, institutional context to a central place in contemporary avant-garde and commercial performance.

This genealogical approach allows me to explore transversal connections between and across a range of forms: commercial film, documentary and live and

intermedial performance. Choosing such a range of forms of representation then allows me to explore the meanings of theatre or theatricality and intellectual disability or incapacity from a variety of different perspectives. It allows me to show how different meanings of theatricality and incapacity are constructed in mediatization and to explore the complex relationships between presence, presentation and representation at the heart of what is assumed to be a socially concerned form of theatre.

Another reason that I have chosen a genealogical rather than a historical approach is that there is a danger in establishing 'history' as a dominant narrative or master discourse with regard to the participation of a section of the population that are marginalized and excluded from histories that are always written about them and for them, but never by them. In addition, the construction of histories in this area can far too often take on the aspect of an account of a utopian transition to the 'present' enlightened and progressive treatment of people with intellectual disabilities contrasted with an unenlightened 'past.' This can be seen in the changes in terminology at various historical junctures within the chronological scope of this thesis: descriptors change from 'mentally retarded' to 'mentally handicapped' to 'intellectually disabled' or 'learning disabled' to the various designations of being 'challenged' that occur in the parlance of some in the second decade of the twenty first century. The terminology may change as markers in a supposed narrative of progress but the stigmatization is actually rather more persistent in the counter-narrative of the lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities. I wish to investigate how these works from different periods speak to each other: how they intersect with wider histories of theatre and with the history or mythology

of the aesthetic and political representation of people with intellectual disabilities as either a teleological narrative of progression toward utopian inclusion or a melancholy mourning of trauma, loss and lack.

The intention of the genealogical approach taken by this thesis is to show how a close reading of moments of theatrical performances, taking into account specific historical, geographical and cultural contexts, can interrogate how the ‘intellectual disability’ of that particular time was understood, framed, positioned and constructed from within these performances. This gives a highly particular focus to the thesis but it is hoped that this is a focus that can allow for various forms of contextualization. The thesis has a focus on actors with intellectual disabilities but these actors are obviously caught up and constructed in other intersectional subjectivities that include ethnicity, gender and gender preference. They operate in institutional and working environments within changing patterns of economic and labour relations over the period 1963 to 2013, a period that sees a transition from economies of care, of a welfare state and of social and curative therapies to those of *laissez faire* models of precarity and autonomy under neoliberalism.

In a similar way the case studies of this thesis are of theatrical performances that take place at specific points in the wider context of developments in theatre and performance during this period. The development of theatre involving actors with intellectual disabilities is, of course, caught up in the development of theatre involving actors without disabilities. Over the last fifty years these developments include a movement away from the theatre-director as tyrant and spoken text-based model of theatrical performance to modes of ensemble practice, non-linear narrative and a deconstructing of the

centrality and privileging of the script or spoken text as primary site of meaning. These developments have been classed as a move away from a 'dramatic theatre,' that still operates to a great extent in accordance with the principles of Aristotelian dramatic aesthetics, to what Lehmann has termed 'postdramatic theatre.' In many ways theatre involving actors with intellectual disabilities might seem well suited to this stage in the development of theatrical performance with its de-prioritization of linear narrative and deconstruction of the certainties of characterization and other coherences of theatrical meaning making. A note of caution, however, needs to be sounded here. Both 'theatre' and 'intellectual disability' are not *givens* or ontological essences that might afford a conceptual model in which one, *theatre*, may be use to represent the other, *intellectual disability*. They are both terms that are highly contentious and both implicated in the problems of the politics of representation and this is one of the reasons why I choose to include the shifting meanings of these terms within a consideration of 'theatricality' and 'incapacity' terms that I believe are indicators of processes rather than of fixed categories or identities.

The second performance that I have selected in this genealogical approach, the performance documented in Chris Noonan's *Stepping Out* is included as it represents an example of a community theatre approach to the devising of performance based upon the premise that an introduction to ideas and practices of creativity to a disadvantaged section of the population leads to emancipation and empowerment. A close reading of *Stepping Out* reveals that this emancipation and empowerment is of a particular idea of 'self' and the methodology of the director, Aldo Gennaro in fact facilitates the emancipation of his own conception of 'self' as outsider and deviant and is inflected with his own

sense of self-discovery, self-disclosure and urge to self-annihilation in drag and camp. The amateur theatricality he imposes upon the lead performer in a process of rote mirroring and imitation is in tension with those moments of the presence of the body in desire, a repressed homosexual desire. Conventional theatrical representation and the assumed therapeutic and social efficacy of this form of theatre is subverted by both the 'crip art of failure' and the 'queer art of failure' and their intersection.

The second chapter also explores a comparison between Gennaro's methodology of imitation with that of Robert Wilson in his collaborations with Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles. Wilson seeks to imitate the assumed creativity of the young men with disabilities who stand as both muses and preceptors of his exploration of his sense of his own 'intellectual disability' and of performance. I argue that he invests Knowles with the attributes of the *enfant sauvage* and the *idiot savant*, tropes that continue to inform the subsequent involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in theatre. A consideration of Wilson's work is also important in that it is an early example of the positioning of people with intellectual disabilities within the avant-garde of theatrical performance rather than within commercial cinema or community theatre.

In chapter three I then show how all three of these discourses and practices of involving people with intellectual disabilities within different frames of theatrical performance are radically disrupted in Schlingensief's 2000 work *FreakStars 3000*. This is a mock documentary that leads to a risible but provocative public performance in a respected theatrical venue and at the same time Schlingensief offers a pranksterish take on the fashionable 'social turn' in

contemporary performance exemplified by the Reality Trend and other relational aesthetic practices. His project is intermedial: it generates a confusion or anxiety over who constitutes the public or audience of the project and over what constitutes the performance and in particular explores the ethics of the participation and agency of people with intellectual disabilities by presenting what appear to be highly unethical performance practices which are in fact provocative interrogations of the ethics of performance of people with intellectual disabilities. Through postmodern parody he renders explicit concerns over the mediatization of the presence of people with intellectual disabilities that are merely implied in close readings of *A Child is Waiting* and *Stepping Out*. Although *FreakStars 3000* is chronologically prior to the performances by Back to Back Theatre and Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA considered in this thesis it is in many ways more radical in its approach to the challenging of the aesthetics, the ethics and politics of this form than the later performances.

The three performances by Back to Back Theatre need to be included in this genealogy as they represent the work of possibly the world's leading theatre company involving people with intellectual disabilities. Their work has reached a global audience and, in response to audience feedback, they bring the debates on the agency of people with intellectual disability in theatrical performance on to the stage where arguments and counter-arguments are made by people with intellectual disabilities both textually, as spoken dialogue, and performatively by their presence. The final section of chapter three consists of a detailed consideration of critical and academic responses to Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater*. This is included as it illustrates how the debates about

the aesthetics and efficacy of theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities have entered the academy. Although Bel's project is the last to be considered in many ways it reiterates and revisits the concerns of the productions previously discussed in the thesis, in particular the work of Cassavetes and Wilson. His attempt to stand back and create a Duchampian social and aesthetic experiment is complicated by the fact that he undertakes this experiment with experienced performers from an established theatre company of actors with intellectual disabilities. Since Cassavetes discovered the children in the Pomona State Hospital, or Gennaro discovered the residents of the Sunshine Home or Wilson discovered Knowles the field has moved on: Bel's discovery is much more problematic. While the notion of history or tradition is problematic in this field of performance, part of the *raison d'être* of this thesis is that it is time to acknowledge the achievements of actors with intellectual disabilities over the past fifty years and to recognize their contribution not only to disability culture but also their resistant and subversive interventions in more dominant theatrical cultures and discourses.

The analytical methodology of this thesis is taken from performance studies and theatre studies. I employ a close reading of theatrical performance that focuses on the analysis of elements such as the dramaturgy, the movements of bodies in space and time, the use of theatrical technology and, where appropriate, the configuration of the performance to the audience and an investigation of the transmission of affect between performers and audience. I pay particular attention to how the presence and the representation of people with intellectual disabilities is negotiated within the dispositifs of theatre, documentary or performance art. While I refer to the archive around the

devising, rehearsal and reception of these theatrical performances, the focus of the thesis is on how politics and aesthetics play out within the theatrical performance.

Questions of what constitutes the presence and participation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance are asked throughout the thesis, but it is my intention to employ a methodology of sustained questioning as an acknowledgement that there is no one discourse of truth that can provide definitive judgments and answers. The politics and aesthetics of this type of theatre emerge from within a network of discourses, imperatives and responses that includes the stated or implicit intentions of a director or company, the negotiation of relationships in the devising and rehearsal process, the connections between performers and audience in the moments of performance and the archives of experience, critical and otherwise, that continue to exist after the performance event.

While the focus of the thesis is on particular methodologies taken from performance studies, the thesis has also been informed by disability studies and the growing body of analysis of the categorization and lived experience of people with intellectual disabilities and the development of movements for self-advocacy and of disability culture that has resulted in an increasing presence of the voices of those deemed to be cognitively different. My primary focus, however, is on the specific presentation and representation of people with intellectual disabilities within the aesthetic space and time of theatrical performance and how this intersects with the experience and perception of people with intellectual disabilities outside this aesthetic space and time. This intersection is also a confounding or overlapping of aesthetics and politics in

what Rancière terms ‘the distribution of the sensible.’ I mean by the politics of theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities not merely the issues of social exclusion and access to civil and human rights for such people, important though these are, but also the politics of performance and representation which is a politics that plays out at the level of the negotiations of power and practices of creating theatre that are deemed aesthetic.

The emphasis of the thesis is on performance studies approaches to the consideration of presence and representation. There are of course other methodologies, even within performance studies, that could be brought to bear to investigate the question of the agency of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance, including broadly ethnographic approaches: interviews with participants, performers, creative and audience members. I have chosen to concentrate on close observational analysis of the various forms of texts in operation in performance as I wish to explore the discussion of agency within the subjunctive mode of theatrical performance. The considerations that often coalesce around the notion of the ‘agency’ of people with intellectual disabilities in performance are complex, given that the ‘agency’ of the actor or even the deviser is only a part of a much bigger picture in the aesthetic and political efficacy of a piece of theatre. How much ‘agency’ does any non-disabled actor have within a much wider process of performance creation and reception? The situation of the actor with intellectual disabilities is, admittedly, one that is perceived to be fraught with greater possibilities of exploitation. This thesis is, however, centrally concerned with examining and, to some extent, challenging this perception: firstly because ‘agency’ is a problematic term with regard to theatrical performance where the ‘actor’ is somebody who both appears in

control but is also to a greater or lesser extent following the dictates of a script or process imposed by others, and secondly because 'agency' in terms of having power or autonomy is a concept that is being fundamentally and radically challenged in recent political and philosophical reconfigurations of the 'subject.' The performances discussed in the third chapter of the thesis specifically refer to this reflexive questioning of subjecthood and how questions of the agency of people with intellectual disabilities reflects back on the assumed agency of those people without those disabilities. Indeed, I will argue that the 'performance' of intellectual disability and the 'performance' of inclusion is at stake in all of the productions discussed in this thesis. By the performance of intellectual disability I mean how much is intellectual disability a performance that requires performative evidence of its presence or absence, that requires the complicity of an audience of the normal and that in fact confirms the normality of that audience. By the performance of inclusion I wish to refer to how often the exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities is reiterated in what are assumed to be increasingly progressive and enlightened attempts to include.

The focus of this thesis is primarily concerned with how the presence and participation of people with intellectual disabilities is mediatized in performance and the politics and aesthetics of this mediatization. I am not hoping to find authenticity or the authentic experience of people with intellectual disabilities. I wish to avoid too reductive a separation of performance and 'reality' and this is a methodological emphasis from performance studies. The object of study of performance studies may be difficult to define or, especially, to delimit, but I believe the methodology is particularly suited to the analysis of the complex intersection of the aesthetic and the everyday, the intersection of presentation

and representation, and the network of performances of not-self and self, and, after Richard Schechner, of *not not self* that are all at stake in theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities.

Chapter One

A Child is Waiting

‘To throw a spotlight... on the subject of retardation’

In this chapter I will be referring in detail to the 1963 film *A Child is Waiting* directed by John Cassavetes and produced by Stanley Kramer. The film is a fictionalized account of the treatment of a young autistic boy, Reuben Widdicombe, at the fictional Crawthorne State Training School for the Mentally Retarded. Cassavetes chose to cast twenty young people with intellectual disabilities from the Pomona State Hospital as residents of the institution. Kramer insisted on using a professional child actor for the role of Reuben and continued his relationship from previous films with established film actors Burt Lancaster and Judy Garland. A close analysis of a scene of a theatrical performance in the film will be used to introduce the investigation of a number of issues in the representation of people with intellectual disabilities at this period in the United States of America. This is a period that has been very influential on subsequent movements in disability activism that seek the political and artistic emancipation of people with disabilities as part of wider movements for human rights. I will argue, however, that an analysis of this performance and its context also reveals an ethical impasse or aporia within this movement to liberation.

I wish to present this scene as a paradigm of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities to reveal the epistemological bases of such performance, an epistemology that informs the subsequent development of the theatrical performances that will be considered in this thesis. By placing

this scene and the film in context I hope to show the particular aesthetic, ethical and political tensions at play in terms of incapacity and theatricality in this type of performance.

Towards the end of *A Child is Waiting*, there is a seven and a half minute scene of a theatrical performance, the narrative for which is based on the myth of the first Thanksgiving, enacted by a group of residents of an “institution for mentally retarded children.” Within this scene there is a short sequence of a ten-year-old African American girl in seventeenth century Puritan costume sitting at an onstage table. Her participation in the performance consists of replying to another performer, who says that he is hungry, by saying, “I’m hungry too.” She then says something unintelligible, and then, “I hope there’ll be lots to eat at our Thanksgiving feast.” She smiles throughout, regardless of what she is saying, with no modification of tone or facial expression. When she has finished speaking, the camera stays on her as she repeatedly and rapidly twitches her knees closer together and farther apart. It stays on her as she then stares, without smiling, to her right, and then straight ahead, and then to her left.

How her brief moments of performance, moments that are part incapacity and part theatricality, may be viewed and interpreted might stand as a paradigm of the issues at stake in the processes of production, performance and perception of contemporary theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities. Her construction as a subject is as an ‘actor’- a strange kind of subject, formed within a specific space, before the gaze or scrutiny of others. In the context of the film she is a ‘mentally retarded’ actor. She is also a ‘mentally retarded’ person (to use the terminology of the time and place of the film) a construction of her as a subject that also takes place within a specific

institutional space where she is subjected to scrutiny. She is of course significantly constituted within other discourses - as 'African American' and as 'female', for example. In addition any perception or interpretation of her performance includes not only the construction of her as subject but the construction of an 'I' as a viewing subject who some fifty years after the release of the film occupies the place of 'I' in the writing of these words to other subjects who will temporarily occupy the place of the addressed of this writing.

Any attempt I make to describe 'what is there' in the scene, as in the first paragraph, is inevitably caught up in the subjectivity of the 'I' who is viewing, interpreting and analyzing. There is no interpretative framework that is adequate to the phenomena of 'performance' or 'intellectual disability'. There is no certain object of study that is 'performance' - performance studies has been described by Simon Goldhill, a scholar outside the field, as aiming:

...to cover a huge range of social interaction (to the degree that, when performance becomes such an all-embracing term, it becomes difficult to maintain it as a useful and specific analytic category). (11)

'Intellectual disability' is a disputed and politicized term that determines as much as it describes a stigmatized identity. Both are highly contentious, shifting and indeterminate categories. Once the hope of an assurance and certainty in the ontology of both subjects is given up, the possibility emerges of responding to the haecceities of the contingent, the specific contexts in which instances of performance and intellectual disability are constituted. I argue that a consideration of 'incapacity' and 'theatricality' offers a way of thinking and acting beyond the binaries of 'ability' and 'disability' and 'aesthetic performance' and 'social performance' to reveal what is political, in the sense of what is potentially

emancipating, in theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities.

What I am attempting to do is to consider what Rancière has termed the 'distribution of the sensible' (*Dissensus* 57-60) with regard to such theatrical performance. This includes the political implications of the relationships and mechanisms of representation or meaning-making and the transmission of affect in and around such performance. This also includes the political dimension of what can be apprehended by the senses and turned into 'sense' or meaning. There are other meanings around the idea of 'the sensible' that are also in play – sensibility in its eighteenth century meaning as sensitivity, and sensible in the more everyday sense of the doxa of 'good sense', 'common sense' -the sensible as what is assumed to be reasonable or competent. The distribution of the sensible is already caught up with 'aesthetics,' one of the definitions of which is 'pertaining to the apprehension of the senses' and 'aesthetics' as it relates to notions of what constitutes the beautiful, the well ordered and the sense of taste and judgment that is of course largely socially and politically constructed and policed.

To return to my attempted description from the first paragraph, when the African American girl says something unintelligible, and, what is more, her unintelligible words or sounds, have been deliberately left in the film's final edit, is the film asking us to judge her or to sympathize with her - or to try not to do either, and instead to attend to her more, or differently? Her gestures with her legs could be interpreted within a diagnostic discourse as stereotypy, repetitive and ritual movements found in people with intellectual disabilities or might be read as symptoms of her unease within the theatrical performance of the film's

narrative or in front of the film cameras, or both. The gestures might be interpreted as symptomatic of the unease of an untrained and inexperienced performer who has been thrust into performance. They might be read as her resistance to performing or her refusal to perform as required. I will argue that her framing within the film causes the viewer to question her agency in the performance and it opens up other possibilities of spectatorial response to her aberrant or unusual movement.

The camera focuses on her face at the end of her spoken words, on her now unsmiling face looking to the right, out front, to the left. The camera seems to stay on her face longer than is 'necessary' according to Hollywood cinematic conventions - as in 'necessary' to show us the speaker for the duration of her playing of her part, of her recital of her lines of dialogue. This lingering gaze of the camera encourages the viewer to take another look or a longer look. It provokes a questioning in the viewer of what it is they are seeing. The lingering of the gaze is perhaps long enough that her actions - her mistakes and her misperformances - stop being 'cute' and become concerning, provoking anxiety or unease in the viewer.

In these brief moments of an encounter with her incapacity – or her perceived incapacity - the voice, the body and the face become sites of multiple interpretations, a confusion and profusion of readings and potential missed readings and over-readings. Her incapacity – or her perceived incapacity – provokes a surplus of interpretation that ultimately reveals a kind of incapacity underlying interpretation. When people with intellectual disabilities are involved in theatrical performance there is a desire in the assumed non-disabled observer to recuperate the lack that they represent, a desire to recuperate the

idea of cognitive disability with a kind of interpretative surplus in cognitive terms. This often results in cognitive dissonance. This dissonance is evident in the contradictory desire both to hold people with intellectual disabilities off as the Other while at the same time wanting to assimilate their Otherness. Such people or, more accurately, what such people represent, become equated with the Lacanian Real, which, as Žižek delineates it in *The Sublime Object of Ideology*:

is not a transcendent positive entity, persisting somewhere beyond the symbolic order like a hard kernel inaccessible to it, some kind of Kantian ‘Thing-in-itself’ – in itself it is nothing at all, just a void, an emptiness in a central structure marking some central impossibility . . . (173)

So if I am looking for the Real in, or the reality of, intellectual disability in the voice or the bodily gestures or the face I am chasing an impossibility. As Timothy Murray articulates in the Introduction to *Repossessions: Psychoanalysis and the Phantasms of Early Modern Culture*:

The Real signifies, in this context, an impossibility of the confident, cognitive recuperation of the Other on either the visual plane of the Imaginary or the linguistic register of the Symbolic. (xv)

What will become readable or visible in this impossible pursuit will be relational modalities, social relations in which I am also always already implicated.

If I posit myself as a sort of Cartesian viewer: I am the viewing subject and the African American girl and her performance are the object of study or scrutiny, then I will fail to see how her performance also scrutinizes or reads me. When I posit myself viewing the performance of the African American girl, I am implicated in an even earlier philosophical underpinning of this act of spectating. I am holding up some imagined, intended, Platonic ideal version of what she is saying and playing. Do I somehow measure and judge her performance against that idealized one? Is this aesthetic judgment implicated in a wider judgment of

her behavior? Given that I know this play is meant to be taking place in a training institution for the 'mentally retarded,' am I, the presumed able viewer, likewise aware of the phantasm of 'normal' behaviour and thus alert to any differences or arresting variations in her demeanour or actions? Am I waiting to recognize signs and indicators of 'mental retardation?' Is my spectatorial gaze already implicated with a diagnostic, voyeuristic or even teratological gaze?

To provide an immediate context, the girl's performance is framed not only within a naïve theatrical narrative, akin to that of a primary school nativity play, but also within what Goffman has termed an 'institutional theatrical' (*Asylums* 99-100), a ceremonial performance in the life of a 'total institution' designed to display the social efficacy and ethical probity of that institution. Because of these frameworks of 'school nativity play' and 'institutional theatrical' our expectations of the performance will presumably not question the representational verisimilitude of an African American female settler amongst the Pilgrim Fathers in seventeenth century New England, just as we will presumably accept the naivety of the stage setting, the costuming and the musical accompaniment of a poorly tuned piano.

What of the girl's 'performance' as 'acting'? If we consider her delivery of the spoken text in terms of the conventions of naturalistic acting, which is, after all, the representational currency of the rest of the film, then her performance is problematic. The tenets of naturalistic acting, of even a rudimentary kind, would prescribe that there should be some sort of qualitative difference between expressing hunger ("I'm hungry too") and expressing hope ("I hope there'll be lots of food . . .") which would need to be marked by some change in the voice, through a variation in tone or pitch, variations which are singularly absent in the

girl's performance. Likewise, the girl's smiling throughout all her lines would not be deemed to be appropriate to communicating either the assumed feelings or the 'objectives' of the character of the Early Settler. These factors, in combination with the words that the girl speaks that are lost to intelligibility, would seem to indicate the girl's 'bad acting' or her failure to act within the terms and conventions of the theatrical performance in which she is participating. Judged on these terms her performance is a failure, or manifests a lack of acting ability.

Her 'excess' gestures, movements and stares after she has finished speaking could be read as evidence of awkwardness in the gaze of the audience. These elements of her performance could also, however, be put together with her affectless tone, her inappropriate smiling and her unintelligibility as evidence of her 'mental retardation.' Is her performance then to be viewed as that of an inexperienced actor, a childish actor, a 'mentally retarded' actor, or some combination of all three?

To address one aspect of this question it is instructive to focus for a moment on the girl's stares. In *Staring: How We Look*, Rosemarie Garland Thomson discusses the 'blank stare' in relation to people with certain disabilities:

The visual comportment of people with significant disabilities – often those with cognitive, developmental, or perceptual impairments – catalog them as blank starers. The supposed dumb look, blind eye, and idiotic expression are highly stigmatized ways of appearing that draw interrogative stares from those who are properly focused. This type of purportedly empty stare demands no response, initiates no interchange, and produces no knowledge. Blank stares function, then, as visual impotence ... (23)

This would suggest a reading of the girl's stares as indicators of her alienation or lack of agency: the eyes as mirrors of the soul incapacitated. Garland-Thomson's analysis, however is abstracted from a range of possible encounters in the social sphere and may need to be modified to take account of the specific context of theatrical performance. Is a blank stare still 'visual impotence' if framed within a theatrical performance where an audience is more inclined to give some kind of response?

Given her position on the stage, in the *theatron* or place of looking, what else might be at stake in her movements and her stares? A more radical reading of how we see the young girl's performance, and how we respond to her stares in response to the audience gaze, is suggested in Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*:

one always locates one's own image in an image of the other *and*, one always locates the other in one's own image. (19)

We engage her with our gaze and we look to her for evidence of ourselves but are met with her unengaged gaze: we look in a mirror in which our own 'visual impotence' is reflected back at us.

How is the 'we' of an audience composed in looking at an actor in performance and how is the 'we' of supposedly 'able' viewers composed - or discomposed - in looking at a 'mentally retarded' person? At a number of points in the seven and a half minute sequence, the film encourages us to question what it is that we are seeing and feeling - and questions who 'we' are. To go back to the shots of the African American girl, the fact that the camera stays on her longer than is necessary to communicate her short, three line participation in the Thanksgiving Play suggests to the viewer that there is a certain 'presence' of this

young woman that is potentially more interesting than her participation in the Thanksgiving play.

Her presence is a kind of ‘punctum’ (Barthes’ *Camera Lucida*, (27)) as Matt Hargrave applies this term to disability performance as ‘tear marks in the fabric of performance’ in “Pure Products Go Crazy” (41) that go against the grain of the ‘studium’ of the various homogeneous Hollywood narratives of the film. These narratives of the film’s *studium* include: the reconciliation of the father and the child of the title, the healing of wounds in the social bond provoked by the social issue of ‘mental retardation’, the efficacy of training institutions for the ‘mentally retarded’ and the making visible of the ‘mentally retarded’ in ways that are deemed ethically sound and aesthetically tasteful in the judgments of the time. Other possibilities open up in this ‘punctum’ of excess and obtuse meaning. Are we attracted to her ‘presence’ because it speaks of a deeper absence in her? – or in us?

Underlying all of these questions, of course, is the question of who the ‘we’ is in all this. Are ‘we’ assumed to be in the discourse of Disability Studies an ‘abled’ or ‘normate’ (Garland Thomson *Freakery* 8) audience? Are ‘we’ imagined to be autonomous subjects or constructed subjectivities? This questioning in turn is part of a much wider context of what the relationship is between theatrical performance and audience. Does an audience *read* a performance (a semiotic reading), *feel* a performance (a broadly phenomenological reading), participate in the autopoietic feedback loop of performance (*pace* Fischer-Lichte in *The Transformative Power of Performance* (47)), or are all participants in a performance parts of an assemblage in which the transmission of affects takes place in a rhizomatic, Deleuzian model of performance and reception that is

explored in *Deleuze and Performance* and Laura Cull's *Theatres of Immanence*?

All of these questions are themselves implicated in an investigation of the aesthetic and political efficacy of theatrical performance.

From the outset, the Thanksgiving play is disrupted by the presence of 'the children'. The play opens, the curtain draws back and the audience is presented with a tableau of Early Settlers sat around a table, facing the audience: a moment of stasis, an invitation to the contemplative gaze, a stylization aspiring to the condition of a framed painting – but this moment is immediately disrupted by one of the boys taking off and playing with his hat, and by another joining in from the stage the audience applause that greets the intended tableau. Petra Kuppers in *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* refers to the challenging of the 'complacency of the frame' (3) that gives a sense of the disruption the presence of these young people with disabilities brings to a viewer's clear and unproblematic gaze at a theatrical narrative.

When the applause stops there is a silence as all wait for the performance to begin. There is a pause. It lasts longer than audience expectation. The next shot shows Jean Hansen, the music teacher, played by Judy Garland, at the side of the stage, script in hand. She forcefully whispers a prompt, "I'm hungry." The next shot returns to the boy who was playing with his hat, the intended recipient of the prompt. He looks straight ahead. We hear the prompt repeated. Another boy at first nudges him and then grabs him by the chin and turns his head to indicate he should speak. The prompt is repeated for a third time. The boy whose chin is being held eventually says, "Hungry."

The performance of the play is not working: this is incapacitated theatre. What possible responses emerge from this incapacity? It is possible to interpret

this 'not working' in a number of different ways. The failure indicated by the repeated prompting could be an indication of the inability of one of the performers to remember lines of text, the rules of cueing or turn-taking. It is also possible to interpret the failure as the inability of the teacher-director to give a task that is manageable to a particular actor, as clearly someone else on stage knows what is meant to be happening. It is possible to interpret it as the teacher-director's failure to engage the performer in the process, and, therefore, of the disablement of the performer by the process.

Within *A Child is Waiting* there are two levels, at least, of conventional, dramatic performance. The first is that of the residents of the fictional Crawthorne State Training School performing as Early Settlers, in which representational mode the boy's performance might be deemed a failure. Underlying that, though, is the performance of the residents of the Pacific State Hospital in Pomona as the residents of Crawthorne State Training School, in which quite a sophisticated and elaborate cinematic presentation of failed performance or mis-performance successfully takes place. Even if judged in terms of conventional, naturalistic acting skills, this mis-performance is itself still highly effectively and convincingly performed by a cast of actors with intellectual disabilities.

The film takes care to show us the audience responses to the performance at the time of the event. The audience, composed of staff, other residents and family, is shown to be highly supportive of the cast up on stage. The film shows us that the audience are indulgent of errors and, indeed, apt to enjoy such errors and to laugh along *with*, rather than *at*, the performers' mistakes. The audience's expectations of the performers' technical virtuosity is low but their

expectations of the performers' commitment to, and enjoyment of their participation is high. The audience appreciates that the residents of the institution are being gainfully occupied and that, for the duration of the performance at least, a kind of community in performance will be established which will include people normally excluded from the wider community.

After the sequence of the African American girl, the Thanksgiving Play continues with a shot opening out from a focus on her to reveal one of the boys standing at the table behind her, his eyes cast down, rocking back and forth on his feet. Another boy points at him to indicate it is his turn to speak. He says, "I'm pleased that . . ." A boy standing beside him, rocking from side to side, prompts him with the line, "...today." He continues, "today..." then "have..." and another hesitation. Another boy puts one hand under the chin of the speaker to lift his head, and, with his other hand, directs the speaker's eyes and what he is saying toward the audience. The boy whose turn it is to speak says "today" again. The shot switches to Jean Hansen, the music teacher. She mouths a word and then rapidly prompts him, loudly stage whispering the words "A little piece of turkey". The boy says "a piece of TURKEY!" - with a strong emphasis on the last word and at the conclusion of this line purses his lips firmly and looks out at the audience. He then lifts his hat off his head and slams it down on the table and looks toward the boy who had previously lifted up his chin, who also slams down his hat on the table and they confront each other. The audience in the institution laughs.

What the actors are doing in terms of conventional naturalistic theatre is 'dropping out of character.' What the film encourages the viewer to consider, though, is what emerges from this 'dropping out' : that the two boys are resisting

representational narrative and character and reintroducing 'play' into the performance of the Thanksgiving play. At this point the camera shows us the main body of the audience laughing, then focuses on an older female resident, the piano player (the film has previously informed us that she is twenty eight) who is smiling, and, behind her, two of the female staff of the institution who also laugh at the unscripted actions of the two boys. At one moment in the ensuing chaos a young male performer onstage turns to the audience and asks, as he smiles broadly and breaks into laughter himself: "What are you laughing at?" At this time, the visible or palpable strain of all concerned – the performers, the struggling, prompting music teacher, the audience - to try to keep the learnt and pre-planned performance 'together' breaks down.

The fictional audience in the institution and the viewers of the film are both disarmed and relieved by these moments of the breakdown of representational theatre, a breakdown that has the potential to release powerful, if unintended, affects and energies. In *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, Nicholas Ridout characterizes these moments as:

...the apparently marginal or unwanted events of the theatrical encounter, that will turn out, of course, to be somehow vital to it: stage fright; embarrassment; animals; the giggles; failure in general. (14)

What is interesting about these specific moments of breakdown of the naïve theatrical narrative is that it is difficult to ascribe *agency* as to how these breakdowns occur. Does the Thanksgiving play break down because the performers are *incapable* of following the agreed, scripted, of events in the play or are they, for whatever reason, *deliberately* resisting this sequence and going off-script, or is there somewhere else along the continuum between incapability

and conscious choice, in a complicity of performers and audience, that agency might be ascribed?

There is more general laughter subsequently at the premature arrival of a group of Red Indians onstage that sets in motion a panic backstage. The music teacher and another teacher try to get the production back on track. They hurriedly shepherd another older boy dressed as a Puritan Settler and a group of Indians through the onstage door, handing them their props before they make their entrances and urging them to 'remember their lines'. The older boy opens the onstage door, he introduces the Indian Chiefs by name as they come through the door.

The next shot switches to close-ups of the performers, who are dressed in headdresses and warpaint, carrying bows and arrows, making their way in Indian file behind the onstage windows to make their entrances. While one of the boys waits in line, his mouth opens and his arms jerk in spasmodic movements. The others look out at the audience, some warily, some searching for the faces of their family, some staring blankly. The gaudy warpaint and elaborate headdresses only seem to highlight the varying degrees of the children's non-engagement in, or alienation from, the conventional theatricality of characterization and costuming. Their incapacity to inhabit their costume or the conventional drama renders their behavior visually compelling and, possibly, disturbing.

After the entrance of the Indians the camera switches back to a wider perspective taking in the whole stage. The onstage narrative then appears to find some of its intended flow. Lines are spoken in sequence and on cue. A boy dressed as an Indian, seated on stage, his eyes shining, uplit from the footlights,

and his voice breathy and seemingly inspired, speaks of the gifts of the earth they are thankful for, and this alignment of visual and auditory indicators of his engagement makes it seem as if he really means what he is saying. During his speech there is an intercut to the music teacher, the director of the play, but this time she is smiling, her head nodding in approval as she urges on his intended progress from the side of the stage.

The staged performance then steps out of the historical Settler/Indian narrative framework. The older boy who introduced the chiefs invokes those on stage to: "Show them what you have made" The next sequence is filmed from just behind the shoulders of the performers onstage, from their point of view, looking into the audience as Indian and Settler alike each holds up the object they refer to: "I made a shoebox", "I made these beads", "I made this place mat", "I made this basket." Each individual display is greeted with applause by the audience as the Thanksgiving Play narrative is temporarily suspended to facilitate the display of goods or products the residents of the training institution have made in their occupational therapy classes. This allows the audience of the institution itself and families and friends to acknowledge and applaud this useful employment.

There is an interesting tension in this sequence between, on the one hand, the display of another type of performance by the residents, the performance of social and economic usefulness, performance as the 'performance principle' of Marcuse (35), and, on the other hand, the switch in the camera's perspective to the point of view of 'the children.' This switch in perspective could be inviting *sympathy* from the cinematic audience: put yourselves in the place of the 'mentally retarded' children, take a moment to see things from their point of

view, *they are like you*, the assumed able audience, they labour and make things and achieve things according to the performance principle. More radically, it could be inviting *empathy*: you the assumed able, non-institutionalized audience are already in the position of the ‘mentally retarded’ children, your alienated labour is of a kind with the basket weaving of the institutionalized children, *you are like them*, alienated labour is what you have in common.

At this point there is another shift in the narrative strategy of the film, back to the central family story, a variant on the Abraham/Isaac myth, a tale of the conflicts of the generation gap typical of that period of Hollywood cinema, but with an added twist of the spreading of the guilt of ‘mental retardation.’ At the back of the auditorium the camera shows the arrival of Ted Widdicombe, the father of Reuben, the largely non-verbal, ‘autistic’ boy who is the central child character of the film. Reuben, named after the eldest son of the patriarch Jacob, an eldest son denied his birthright (in favour of his younger brother, Joseph), Reuben from the Hebrew ‘*Reu*’ meaning look or see and ‘*ben*’ meaning son. Reuben’s arrival at the institution opens the film and in some ways he is the ‘child’ of the film’s title. Reuben’s father goes up to where Dr Clark, the director of the institution, played by Burt Lancaster, is sitting watching the play. With knowledge from the scene immediately prior to this one the viewer knows that the father’s intention is to withdraw Reuben from Crawthorne, with its emphasis on training and education and communal living, to place him in another more costly institution where he will receive more ‘support’ but be more isolated and dependent and where a lot less will be expected of him. The father asks Dr Clark where Reuben is and receives the reply: “He’s up there on stage. He’s one of the Indians.”

The play on stage has been continuing in the background while the two men have been talking and after Dr Clark answers the father's question we hear the sound of some chords on the out of tune piano and the camera then switches to a close-up of Reuben seated onstage in his Indian costume. This is followed by a matchshot of a close-up of Reuben's father who leans forward to get a really good look at him, and then back to a close-up of Reuben and then back to the father again. Reuben looks out straight ahead; does he see his father or is this another blank stare? Another Indian whispers in Reuben's ear that it is time for him to perform. Reuben gently and falteringly begins to recite a poem during which the camera intercuts to his father's face. He pauses. The boy behind him whispers in his ear to prompt him. Reuben continues to recite in a voice that sounds unused to forming words, but seems to be growing in confidence by the moment. We then see Jean Hansen, the teacher with whom, after initial difficulties, he has established a special rapport, mouthing along to the words he is reciting, words that she has put in his mouth and drilled him to recite. Her eyes are moist. He is on his own now and apart from one prompt from the music teacher he makes it through to the end. When he does we see one of the residents in the audience smiling and shouting, out of turn, "Yeah!" in the beat before the whole audience bursts into applause. This applause is intercut with a close-up of Jean Hansen smiling and on the verge of tears. It is then intercut with a shot of Reuben's father's amazed gaze as he subsides into his seat. This is the climactic moment of the foreground or central narrative of the film, the moment of reconciliation of father and son. This father, a kind of Abraham, wields the power of institutional life or death over the disabled son, but through the power of theatrical performance he can now see and acknowledge Reuben not as a

source of shame or somebody who is dead to him, but as more of an image of himself, somebody he might look upon as his son: *Reu ben*, albeit a son, like the Biblical one, denied his birthright.

The whole cast then join in a rendition of 'Snowflakes', a song that in a previous scene they had been trying and struggling to learn under the instruction of Jean Hansen, the music teacher. Their singing has not recognizably improved from the previous scene - it is still out of tune and harsh – but they get the words out more or less on time and they sing with great commitment. The affective charge of the music and the performers' efforts are reflected in the reaction shots of audience members with their smiles, moist eyes and sympathetic nodding and marking of the beat. We can hear, cutting through the cacophony, Judy Garland's trained but emotional voice trying to provide support, to guide pitching and to keep the group to tempo, but her efforts do not meet with much success.

The moment stands out because of the tension between the trained, experienced, emotionally expressive singing voice of Judy Garland and the flat, out of tune, affectless voices of 'the children.' It stands out because Jean Hansen's, or Judy Garland's, reactions as the teacher are so ambivalent. It is her face we keep seeing during and after the singing, her expressions suggesting a mixture of both compassion and frustration at the children's performance. We have previously seen Jean Hansen note bashing and teaching the song by means of demanding the children repeat what she sings. This is something that, understandably, they are singularly incapable of doing. The moment also stands out because it so emphatically goes against and disrupts the expected linear narrative progression of Hollywood cinematic representations of theatrical

performance: from the struggles of rehearsal to the success and joy of performance. This is one of the counter-narratives the resistant presence of 'the children' generates, counter to the central narrative, which is one of optimism and belief in the efficacy and progress of the treatment of 'the children'.

In the immediate context of the film this particular scene of musical performance is highly ambivalent with regard to one of the fundamental premises of the central narrative of Reuben's story: that he is 'better off': more gainfully or usefully employed or occupied in Crawthorne State Training School than elsewhere, better off than at the other expensive 'warehouse' institution his father proposes where his physical needs will be taken care of, but where so much less will be expected of him. If this singing is a display of the efficacy of the institution in performance then what is to be made of the fact that the singing is so bad, so difficult to listen to that the viewer is flinching along with Jean Hansen/Judy Garland?

The group singing of Snowflakes that concludes the Thanksgiving Play despite, or perhaps because of, its lack of technical proficiency, does, however, carry a powerful affective charge. It achieves this affective power in terms of a 'theatre' that has been characterized by Ridout as one which:

... conceives itself as an apparatus for the production of affect by means of representation, in the expectation that the most powerful affects will be obtained at precisely those moments when the machinery appears to break down. (*Stage Fright* 168)

As a viewer or listener we hear the song, the melody of which is carried by Judy Garland's voice somewhere there in the mix. We appreciate the efforts of 'the children' to commit to the singing. There is a coming together of sorts, it is not fluent and harmonious, but rather precarious and fragile. In addition to this we

come to recognize that there are more ways of viewing this scene than as one of people singing and not hitting the right notes. The failure of one type of performance opens up possibilities of a questioning of what this performance is hoping to achieve. The children's incapacity to sing well stands out. How an audience might deal with such incapacity is a crucial question that will be explored in this thesis.

As the narrative proceeds, doubt or ambivalence as to the efficacy of the institution's arts practices implied in the film's presentation of the children's singing is swept away in the enthusiastic applause of the audience in the institution. This response will be familiar to anybody participating in community theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities. The audience show their appreciation for the work of all concerned, regardless of the skill or virtuosity of the outcome. The Thanksgiving Play takes place within a segregated community, and those in the audience who are not part of this segregated community are in all likelihood related to those who are. The 'mentally retarded' residents make theatre, after a fashion, and by doing so they make community, after a fashion. They tell a story that everybody already knows, a naïve Early Settler colonialist narrative, a myth of the origins of the USA, that supposedly connects them to the wider community outside the institution, to which they have, for all practical purposes, no connection. Community is perhaps always a myth, a myth of the loss of a previous 'golden age' of community or a myth of a community to come, but especially so here within a segregated simulacrum of community.

Along the way there have been times when the performance has departed from the intended scripted format or when the linear progress of the narrative has broken down in singular resistances, detours or laughter, but as Goffman, in

Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates,

noted of the 'institutional theatrical' in total institutions:

The very tolerance of this skittishness is a sign of the strength of the establishment state. (109)

The laughter at the incapacity of the theatrical performance in *A Child is Waiting* is clearly shown to be laughter sanctioned by the staff and the institution. The performance is a temporary disruption to the routine and the regime of the asylum. Each evening after the filming ended, 'the children' left the fictional Crawthorne State Training Institute and went back to the Pacific State Hospital.

They were one-off actors: this was their only film performance. They were, in all probability, one-off actors in other ways as well. At the Pacific State Hospital in Pomona and in other parts of California enforced sterilization of the 'mentally enfeebled' continued until the mid-1960s. In fact California had been a world leader in this field, and is on record as providing inspiration for the German National Socialist programme of large-scale eugenic sterilization.⁷

This history is referred to later in the film in a crucial scene when Dr Clark takes Jean Hansen into an actual locked ward for adults in the Pacific State Hospital. This is the adult asylum as 'snake pit'⁸ a scene that resembles Goya's *Madhouse*. He has taken her there after an argument in his office over who it is that knows how the children feel, a strand of the narrative that explores the conflict between the supposedly sentimental, loving, maternal attitude of Jean Hansen to Reuben, versus the detached, unemotional professionalism of Dr Clark. He makes the following speech as they walk through the adult locked ward:

⁷ See for example Kline and Braslow.

⁸ The 1948 film *The Snake Pit* presented a vision of the mental hospital as nightmare.

There are your Reuben Widdicombes twenty years from now, if we're not careful. People loved them too. Some of them were sheltered from everything till they came here. Others treated them with their emotions, they locked them up in closets. Some were sterilized by the State, they used to sterilize them the way they sterilize cattle. No one ever needed to succeed in any little way as much as they do. (*A Child is Waiting*)

He both accuses her of over-emotionalizing her response and affirms his and the institution's commitment to the performance principle, however minimal its efficacy: 'to succeed in any little way.' In a strange turn the debate over personal ethical behavior takes place within the framework of the central, nuclear family narrative of Reuben-Dr Clark-Jean Hansen relegating the issue of the eugenic sterilization of the 'mentally enfeebled' to the background and to the past in a scene filmed within an institution that was still participating in that practice.

At the conclusion of the Thanksgiving Play as we hear the applause for the group's singing of 'Snowflakes,' the camera shows the reactions of one of the boys: he screws his eyes up tight, smiles and grips his hands together, his fists clenched. He bows his head but it seems to be not so much in a return of the acknowledgement of the audience applause but rather suggestive of taking the feeling of validation or admiration into himself. The next shot shows a girl blowing a kiss towards the audience but then immediately covering her face as if trying to erase the gesture. We see another girl, seated on the stage, smiling and rocking backwards and forwards, her eyes not looking at the audience but up to the ceiling, her mouth open. There is an ambiguity to the framing of these shots of the reactions of 'the children' to the applause, their actions appear to be of a somewhat different order to theatrical conventions of the curtain call.

In *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems*, Nicholas Ridout discusses the curtain call as a kind of liminal part of the performance event where the 'machinery of representation' while appearing to be switched off, is in fact 'just winding down and still generating sparks of representation.' (162). His contention is that the audience, by applauding, are trying to recompose the economy of the market transaction, in which they have paid for performance, into a different economy, that of the gift. Perhaps it is the part of the performance where the audience expects to see performers 'as themselves' but what their applause is met with is 'a particular kind of appearance, certain kinds of performance, even.' He gives the following example of this kind of performance of the curtain call:

The actor . . . might play up her exhaustion, tropes of self-deprecation and modesty may be deployed, smiles of pleasure, with maybe even the hint of a blush, may be bestowed upon the audience. . . (164)

So at the time in the performance when the audience most expects to see the actor as herself, they are instead given another performance, the actor in repose after labour, supposedly taking off the mask of character, but in fact still performing. In *A Child is Waiting* at the end of the Thanksgiving Play we do in fact get 'tropes of self-deprecation, modesty, smiles and the hint of a blush' but it feels *different* to the professional actor's *playing up* of the performance of the curtain call. One obvious material difference is that the professional actor is being paid and will get to go home, whereas this is not the case for the actors from the Pacific State Hospital. This may be a contributory factor to a tendency to read the reactions of 'the children' to the applause as somehow more 'genuine' and 'authentic': they really appear to take the applause to heart and are very awkward in their acknowledgement of the audience's applause.

Another possible interpretation is that they are not authentically just 'being themselves' they are still performing: performing 'cute.' This might well be a coping strategy in the face of repeated infantilization. 'The children' in the 1963 film *A Child is Waiting* are clearly explicitly infantilized, their actual ages not taken into account so much as their mental age, based on the now discredited Stanford-Binet IQ test. This infantilization is caught up in a desire to perceive people perceived to have intellectual disabilities as 'cute.' In "Cuteness and Commodity Aesthetics," in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* ed Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Lori Merish in a comparison of the display of the child and the freak in early twentieth century America outlines processes of exclusion and inclusion inherent in the display:

Cuteness engenders an affectional dynamic through which the Other is domesticated and (re) contextualized within the human "family." (188)

She characterizes the figure of the cute child as:

The cute child, unlike the Victorian sacred child, is pure spectacle, pure display . . . (188)

and isolates what is crucially missing from or denied to the displayed figures of cuteness:

What is lost in this idealization of the cute is sexuality and the danger of its power: what is lost is the desire of the Other, absorbing that Otherness into the logic of the Same. (188)

People with intellectual disabilities are often required to conform to this trope of the cute child, irrespective of their chronological age. Infantilization is enacted in a range of discourses and practices of patronization through which such people become the objects of pity or sentimentalization, which as Jung characterized it in "Ulysses: A Monologue" is a displaced form of violence: 'Sentimentality is the superstructure erected upon brutality' (7255).

Another aspect of the infantilization of people perceived to have intellectual disabilities emerges in *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* in Catherine Malabou's discussion of the reversion to childhood of Alzheimer's patients: another, and currently increasingly prevalent, meaning of the shifting term 'intellectual disability':

Even if Alzheimer's patients seem to "fall back into childhood" it would still be possible to affirm that they return to *a childhood that is not their own*, to a childhood that is only a concept of childhood, that consists in a set of stereotypical gestures and postures that pertain to everyone's childhood and thus to no one's childhood. (61)

The person with intellectual disabilities subject to infantilization is treated as if they inhabit a kind of generic childhood, which is not a regression to their own childhood but an oppressive holding pattern from which, even if they have by now escaped sterilization, they may never be allowed to emerge into active sexuality.

At the end of the Thanksgiving Play, immediately after the curtain call, the performers are reunited with families and loved ones as actors and audience intermingle. Reuben's father also makes moves towards physical contact with his son. Even though it seems he cannot quite bring himself to do so, the repeated switching of the camera's perspective from father to son, underscored with a soundtrack of sentimental, swelling strings, leaves the viewer in little doubt that the performance that caused the father literally to sit up and take notice of his son has led to a guarded reconciliation.

This reconciliation is a fulfillment of the film's narrative arc that starts with Reuben's arrival at Crawthorne in the back of his father's car. During the course of the film we learn that Reuben's family's trauma is that of many

families. We see the tearful guilt of parents abandoning their children. We see the parents on family days giving extra money to staff to treat their child just a little better. We see their continuing and unabandoned hope to see some improvement, or a glimpse of a cure for the offspring they have abandoned to the institution. If the child could only attend Mass or somehow learn their catechism, things might improve. We see Dr Clark respond by dismissing such hopes and demands of the parents with the phrase 'Oh, the pageant, the pageant!' This is an interesting expression, etymologically of a theatrical provenance, but suggestive of 'theatricality' in its meaning of an empty show. The empty show Dr Clark refers to is, in effect, the performance of hope, the parents' hope against hope. This is a performance in which the staff of the institution are complicit. Even though they know it is without justification, they are unwilling to dismiss the parents' hope or to reveal the emptiness of this particular show. At the same time Dr Clark advocates to Jean Hansen that whatever can be done to educate the children must be done, regardless of what little effect this might have. He seems to veer between a commitment to the performance principle, a desire to change and educate, and a mournful acceptance of futility, powerlessness and his own incapacity as doctor and teacher.

This tension in Dr Clark, and the wider social and ethical malaise of which it is indicative, is strikingly exemplified in a scene in an art class in which Dr Clark inspects the therapeutic artwork of the children. He asks them questions about the three primary colours, how to combine them to make other colours, and then he comes across Mike. Mike is painting intently, applying the paintbrush to the paper with great purpose and deliberation, getting lost in the flow and rhythm of his actions. He seems totally absorbed in the action of putting

brush to paper, making brushstrokes of varying intensities, creating patterns. The camera then pulls back to reveal that there is no paint on either the brush or the paper. Mike paints on, lost in the action. There is a reaction shot of Dr Clark. He says gently, resignedly, "That's very good, Mike", pats him on the shoulder, and walks away.

This moment with Mike is significant in a number of ways. It is part of the ethical message of the film that says that what is important is that something is being done for these children, however small, however limited. This is encapsulated in the concluding line of Dr Clark's speech in the adult asylum: 'No one ever needed to succeed in any little way as much as they do.' At the same time there is a melancholia and sense of futility in the scene and in Dr Clark's reaction. Here is another of his 'spectacular failures': Mike is performing painting, but no paint ever touches paper: 'Oh the pageant, the pageant' indeed. This is the melancholia of the performance principle coming up against an image of its own ultimate futility.

The presence and intent of the actor and Pacific State Hospital resident playing Mike, the concentration and absorption with which he paints is compelling, it has a kind of aesthetic appeal that yet reveals a troubling of the politics of how to view him. It could be argued that while the Training Institution's teaching methods might have sold him short, in terms of finding ways to teach him how to paint, he has, in the course of this failed process, instead learnt how to develop his own practice of movement by coming at 'painting' on his own terms in which he creates movement of great purpose, absorption and grace. A reading of the scene as an example of the melancholy of the 'pageant' of succeeding in any little way – this form of participation in the art

class is the best that we can hope for from this ‘mentally retarded child’ – is in tension with the beauty of his participation on his own terms and the affective power of the image of somebody lost in the action of painting without paint. There is of course something very Romantic about this image, recalling Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: ‘Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/Are sweeter’ that possibly connects it with another trope of the Romantic imagination: the “Idiot Boy” of Wordsworth.

Mike’s distinctive participation is either evidence of his incapacity to be educated, a failure to measure up, or of the incapacity of an educational system that does not suit him to which his actions are resistance. Where does Mike go in this strange new space opened up by his actions, what space does Mike inhabit in his actions of painting without paint? It is not the space of conventional education: he is not learning anything in his actions in the classroom, it is not a space of gainful labour, his actions have no use or value in terms of exchange, is it therefore, the ‘useless’ space of art, of the aesthetic? The scene of Mike painting stands out in the film, stands outside the film and reveals the difficulties of assigning a place for Mike and the rest of ‘the children’ caught in a discursive and conceptual space that is an impasse.

To explore of what this impasse was constituted it is necessary to locate the film within its specific historical, social and cultural context. Kramer and screenwriter Abby Mann had adapted the film from their 1957 CBS television production. Kramer stated that his intention for both the television programme and the film was to:

throw a spotlight on a dark-ages type of social thinking which has tried to relegate the subject of retardation to a place under the rocks. (Fishgall 213)

His rhetoric is one of enlightenment, based on a narrative of historical progress: from the Dark Ages to the Enlightenment of modernity. To develop the logic of the metaphors he uses, the spotlight will fall on that which will emerge from under the rocks, but what might that be? Insects, creatures that hide from predators or visibility and who when they emerge scurry to a new place out of sight and out of the light? I think his mixture of metaphors is indicative of a difficulty of knowing what to do with 'the subject of retardation.' At the level of metaphor his desire to enlighten 'dark ages thinking' seems to be already inscribed with an implicit fear of the subject evading the light again. This is symptomatic of much of the effort of this period in aesthetic and political spheres to bring the subject of mental retardation into the light of mediatization or public gaze but in the process revealing merely reiterations of darkness, the repressed and repression of the Other.

Kramer's spotlight of enlightenment came up against the chiaroscuro of Cassavetes' 'fly on the wall' urge to documentary-like verité. In the television production of *A Child is Waiting* all of the children in the institution had been played by professional child actors and this had been Kramer's intention for the film, but when John Cassavetes was hired as director he insisted on using twenty 'children' (ten males and ten females) from the Pacific State Hospital in Pomona, later explaining this decision:

It was about retarded children. What did I want to use actors for to play retarded kids? They didn't know anything about it, and neither did I. I spent three and a half months doing research on the subject with the

writer, Abby Mann, visiting retarded children and their parents, talking to their teachers and learning about their lives. Getting to know those children was a moving and really beautiful experience. (120)

The only exception to this casting policy was, significantly, the role of Reuben, who was played by a professional child actor.

Cassavetes' approach to working with 'the children' from Pacific State Hospital was to proceed from an acknowledgement of his own ignorance of 'mental retardation.' In Ray Carney's *Cassavetes on Cassavetes* there is the following account of his encounter and engagement with 'the children':

Cassavetes himself spent hours with the children, talking to them and horsing around. Many scenes demonstrate his fondness for the children, who are not treated generically, but individualized and given almost as much on-camera time as the stars. Cassavetes told me that he found the experience of working with the children so interesting that for several years afterwards he flirted with the idea of becoming a documentary filmmaker. (119)

Producer Stanley Kramer is on record as, at first, supporting Cassavetes' decision to cast 'the children' from the Pacific State Hospital: '... it was exciting. They surprised us everyday in reaction and in what they did ...'(Fishgall 215) but as the filming progressed Kramer became increasingly concerned by Cassavetes' methodology of improvisation and by his emphasis on 'the children' at the expense of the narratives of the central characters, Reuben, his father, Jean Hansen and Dr Clark. This conflict eventually came to a head with Kramer firing Cassavetes and finishing the final edit of the film himself. According to Carney:

Cassavetes' edit had included much more footage of the children, to the point that they had become more important than the nominal 'stars' of the picture and Kramer's main objections to Cassavetes' edit were that the children were too prominent in the narrative and that they came off

as being 'silly' or 'comical.' When Cassavetes objected, Kramer told him that he had become too close to them emotionally and had lost perspective. (121)

Kramer's reported objections are interesting, particularly in the light of some of his other comments on the film:

My dream was to jump the barrier of ordinary objection to the subject matter into an area in which the treatment of it and the performance of it would be so exquisite that it would transcend all that. Somewhere we failed. (228)

Kramer's rhetoric reveals a concern with a certain aesthetic and ethical 'taste' that he feels Cassavetes does not achieve. He appears to want an aesthetic gloss over a subject matter that is, in the broadest sense, political: the treatment of the 'mentally retarded' in the context of the USA in 1963. At the same time Kramer wishes to expose what Dark Ages thinking has hidden under the rocks. A contemporary review of the film by Bosley Crowther in the New York Times, articulated this question of taste:

We must be thankful that what might have been harrowing and even distasteful beyond words to behold comes out as a forthright, moving documentation of most unfortunate but hopeful youngsters in a school. . . one should learn a great deal from this picture – all of which should be helpful and give hope. (Crowther 1963)

The implication here is that the presentation of 'mental retardation' is the ultimate in bad taste. He immediately seeks to leaven even the threat of this ultimate bad taste with references to the positive, to hope. It is as if the very idea of 'mental retardation' is too much of a challenge to the imaginary of the time, with its adherence to the performance principle and desire to repress anxiety, difference and what in mental retardation is uncanny - in Freud's sense of both

heimlich, these 'children' are ours, our relatives, and *unheimlich*,⁹ they provoke anxiety and need to be 'othered' and segregated in institutions.

Crowther apprehends from the film the need for '*unemotional* discipline' for these children. This echoes another charge that Kramer leveled at Cassavetes: 'he had become too close to them emotionally and had lost all perspective.' (Carney 121) In Kramer's and Crowther's discourse a particular kind of Othering is taking place: 'mental retardation' needs to be treated with good taste and with a kind of Enlightenment 'reason' so that one does not commit the error of becoming emotionally involved, an error that would result in bad 'taste': bad aesthetic and ethical conduct. Kramer specifically accuses Cassavetes of having lost a sense of aesthetic distance or objective correlative, a lapse in taste that threatens the ethical probity or efficacy of his work.

In this context it is interesting to look at the great, and costly, lengths to which Kramer went to re-edit Cassavetes' footage and what they reveal of Kramer's own 'taste':

He used an optical printer to reprint some of Cassavetes' medium shots as close-ups and he freeze-framed and slowed down some of the reaction shots to lengthen their duration. Illustrations include the shots of Reuben's and Ted Widdicombe's faces in the scene in which Reuben is on stage. Kramer's final step was to lay in a lot of mood music. (Carney 123) Cassavetes later explained another technique Kramer used in his final edit and how he interpreted the effect on the viewer Kramer intended to achieve by doing so:

If you double-cut on close-ups you can make the thing seem a great deal more sentimental. In other words if I look at you and you look at me and

⁹ See Freud 123-176.

then I look back at you and you look back at me there's a feeling there of sentimentality. (123)

Cassavetes' subsequent disowning of the film reiterated the concerns he articulated over Kramer's editing: 'I didn't think his film – and that's what I consider it to be, his film – was so bad, just a lot more sentimental than mine.' (123)

Kramer's attempts to sentimentalize the film's narrative were centred around the father-son relationship and the star performers Burt Lancaster and Judy Garland. He found it more difficult to 'sentimentalize' Cassavetes' footage of 'the children.' Kramer accused Cassavetes of making 'the children' seem 'silly' or 'comical', an accusation that was later answered by Cassavetes:

I wanted to make the kids funny, to show that they were human and warm – not 'cases' but kids. (123)

Cassavetes summed up the difference between 'his' film and Kramer's film in the following terms:

The difference in the two versions is that Stanley's picture said that retarded children belong in institutions and the picture I shot said retarded children are better in their own way than supposedly healthy adults. The philosophy of his film was that retarded children are separate and alone and therefore should be in institutions with others of their kind. My film said that retarded children could be anywhere, any time, and the problem is that we're a bunch of dopes, that it's our problem more than the kids . . . (123)

It is clear from Cassavetes' statement that his approach was characterized by an ethical and perhaps political intent that was different to Kramer's sentimental othering of the children invoking the viewer to sympathize with their misfortune. For Cassavetes the children are 'better in their own way than supposedly healthy adults' and here 'better' conflates 'healthier', morally better

and 'better off' By assuming a position of 'stupidity before the other' his encounter with the children results in an exposure of the lack, the disability and the 'retardation' in assumptions of normativity. He has done so through what might be considered 'aesthetic' means: 'horsing around' as Kramer terms it, improvisation or play without 'useful' outcome, an encounter allowing the children to be 'silly' to be 'comical': to *play*.

From another but related perspective it could be argued that the encounter between Cassavetes and 'the children' is what Dwight Conquergood, drawing from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, called 'dialogic' - as opposed to the more 'monologic' approach to the process and the narrative of Kramer. For Conquergood in *Performing as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of the Ethnography of Performance* when performance is dialogic it 'aims to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another.' (9)

The awkwardness of the African American girl, the resistance to scripted performance of the boy who needs to be continually prompted to say his lines, the stepping out of the naïve theatrical narrative frame of the boys who fight with their Puritan hats, the laughter released by the premature arrival of the Indians, the potential ambivalence of response created by the group's singing and the uneasiness of the curtain call, all of these moments of tension or ambivalence are all evidence of an 'unconcluding dialogue', dialogic performance, a 'genuine conversation' in Conquergood's terms.

I believe there was another and deeper difference between the film that Cassavetes wanted to make and the film that Kramer wanted to make. *A Child is Waiting* is a film that Kramer wanted to *re-make*, a film he felt compelled to

repeat. Kramer's spotlight was an attempt to hide something darker: a return of the repressed. Kramer and Abby Mann had previously worked together, as director and screenwriter respectively, on both the television production and the subsequent 1961 film, *Judgment at Nuremberg*. In many ways Kramer with *A Child is Waiting* was trying to repeat the critical and commercial impact of this film, which had featured both Burt Lancaster and Judy Garland, the latter in what was seen as a come-back dramatic role in the wake of her well-publicized problems with prescription drugs and alcohol. That film which was nominated for eleven Oscars and won two was also, significantly, the first mainstream American film to feature footage from the liberation of the concentration camps at Buchenwald, Dachau and Belsen, five minutes of graphic footage and images which had been used at the Nuremberg war trials. My contention is that there may have been deeper reasons that compelled the desire to repeat *A Judgment at Nuremberg* in *A Child is Waiting*.

Both *A Child is Waiting* and *Judgment at Nuremberg* contain pivotal scenes that represent an encounter with a supposed 'real': the scene in the asylum in *A Child is Waiting* and the scene of the use of concentration camp footage in the trial of *Judgment at Nuremberg*. It is my contention that there is a complex connection between these two scenes that reveals much about the presentation and representation of people with intellectual disabilities in the cultural imaginary of the United States of this period.

These are scenes that are not acted, but rather scenes of documentary footage that are meant to stand for a confrontation with the 'real' - and yet both are mediatized. They are doubly mediatized, firstly by being contextualized within the fictional, dramatic narratives of the films in which they appear, and

then they are of course mediatized *as* film, particular camera settings with particular perspectives, shots edited and manipulated in the attempt to give a witness-eye view, whatever that might be. In 'Holocaust' in *Simulacra and Simulation* Baudrillard characterizes the mediatization of the Holocaust in the following terms:

One no longer makes the Jews pass through the crematorium or the gas chamber but through the sound track and the image track, through the universal screen and the microprocessor. (49)

What he is arguing is that the mediatization of the atrocity is itself an atrocity. He is referring specifically to the 1978 television mini-series, *Holocaust* an attempt 'to rekindle this cold event through a cold medium, television' (50) but what he says could also apply to the initial mediatization of the atrocity in the newsreel footage of the liberation of the camps.

That footage was taken by the US Army Signal Corps, a unit that during the course of the war employed Hollywood directors such as John Huston, Frank Capra and Billy Wilder to document the involvement and victories of American troops for the newsreels. When the concentration camps were liberated, photographers and cameramen were sent inside the camps before the army medical units. Thus the most famous footage of 'the camps' is not footage of the camps in operation nor indeed in liberation but in an interim state, at the time of the first arrival of the cameras. The filming of the liberation was not the liberation, it was an event stage managed or mediatized from the outset. As cameramen the Signal Corps were operating under strict pre-established guidelines:

A letter from the judge advocate of the European Theater of Operations dated April 27, 1945, specifies a set of standard practices for the US Signal

Corps to shoot and process “still and motion pictures . . . taken of liberated prisoners and Concentration Camps” . . . the document calls for a range of coverage, including wide shots (“general conditions”) and medium shots and close-ups (“individual cases of atrocities”). (Lee 66)

The direction of the overall shooting of evidence was the responsibility of a war crimes officer who also reviewed it before and after editing and then signed an affidavit as to “the accuracy of the scene depicted”, the circularity and unfalsifiability of this procedure thus elided the subjectivity of that war crimes officer at every stage of the process. The mediatization of the event is also the truth of the event, an impossible contradiction. The promise is of both an accurate depiction, or representation, *and* the sworn truth, in short, an aporia. My contention is that this aporia of truth and representation is related to, and in some ways productive of, a similar aporia in the representation of the liberation of the institutions of ‘mental retardation.’

This aporia of truth and representation was reiterated in the subsequent usage of the Signal Corps footage:

During World War II, the Roosevelt Administrations War Production Board limited each newsreel to a length of 750 feet, or approximately eight minutes . . . On the eve of a public screening of official U.S. Signal Corps footage of concentration camps, *New York Times* film critic Bosley Crowther railed against these restrictions, claiming they inhibited the “social obligation” for theaters to present “such evidence graphically” of “horrors coming hot out of Germany.” (Lee 58)

The description of the footage by Crowther as coming ‘hot out of Germany’ is a particularly distasteful figuration, contrasting with Baudrillard’s later trope of coldness, but suggestive of a perceived need to consume the representation of the horror, and to consume it fast before it goes cold, or perhaps before America’s anger went cold. When the footage did reach cinemas, which was as

early as May 1945, it was played to what *Film Daily* described as ‘record-breaking audiences’ in cinemas across the United States. Signs outside cinemas and captions introducing the footage trumpeted the message of America’s just war in melodramatic or even pornographic terms: ‘Here America Is The Shocking Truth . . .’, ‘An Aroused America Has Awaited These Films’ ‘See S.S. Guards Executed!’¹⁰

The subject did go cold relatively quickly in terms of visibility within mainstream cinema, as, after the initial showing of the newsreel footage, the films disappeared from view for a number of years, perhaps, as Baudrillard intimates, because of the Cold War, as part of the desire to encourage West Germany to look economically and culturally to the future with the United States, rather than to the East. This cooling of the desire for the shocking truth so aroused in the immediate aftermath of the war may also have been influenced by the knowledge coming out that in August 1942 the US State Department had been informed in a telegram from the British Foreign Office of the Final Solution, the Nazi intention to eliminate European Jewry, and had chosen to take no action. What can also be inferred from Baudrillard’s ‘Holocaust’ is that the footage, once it became a televised subject, then circulates as just another spectacle in the Society of the Spectacle or hyperreality. It becomes just another item on network television as instanced by the absurdity of the last minute editing of the 1959 television production of *Judgment at Nuremberg* in which all

¹⁰ From *Imaginary Witness: Hollywood and the Holocaust*.

references to 'gas chambers' were overdubbed with silence at the behest of the program's main sponsors, the American Gas Association.¹¹

Within weeks of the war ending General Eisenhower invited sixteen Hollywood producers and studio heads to view the sites of the atrocities, and, after a day at Dachau, Jack Warner of Warner Brothers wrote:

No one connected with motion pictures who has seen these things can allow themselves to assume responsibility for a screen which portrays only a make-believe world. (*Imaginary Witness*.)

Here Warner cites the reality or truth of 'these things' in opposition to the 'make-believe' of Hollywood, but both Crowther and Warner come up against the aporia of the camps: an unrealizable real in terms of representation and an unrepresentability threatening any form of poesis. Both Warner and Crowther attempt to adapt to their own commercial agenda Adorno's oft-cited: 'To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.' (34). In *Remnants of Auschwitz: the Witness and the Archive* Agamben characterizes this aporia in the following terms:

Facts so real that by comparison, nothing is truer; a reality that necessarily exceeds its factual elements – such is the aporia of Auschwitz. (12)

It is interesting to compare Crowther's demand that the 'shocking truth' be shown of the 'horrors coming hot out of Germany' with his comments on *A Child Is Waiting*, his unrealized but palpable fear that the subject matter of the film, mental retardation, threatened the revelation of the 'harrowing' and 'the distasteful beyond words to behold.'

My contention is that his apparent confusion over what can be shown and what should not be shown is related to the compulsion to repeat certain

¹¹ Priemel and Stiller 235

elements of *A Judgment at Nuremberg* in *A Child Is Waiting*. This compulsion to revisit the 'real' of the camps with the 'real' of the 'subject of retardation' is symptomatic of the ethical and political framework within which people perceived to have intellectual disabilities were both viewed and treated at that time and which has left traces on how they have been subsequently perceived and treated. In Rancièrian terms the distribution of the sensible of that particular historical and geographical context: what can be seen and what cannot, said and not said, thought and not thought about people with intellectual disabilities is apparent in the way in which the two mainstream Hollywood 'social issue' films reiterate the relationship to the Other. The Other is embodied in the victims of the concentration camps and that particular Othering is then transposed onto people perceived to have intellectual disabilities. The compulsion to repeat, however, like all repetitions, results in repetition and difference.

In *Judgment at Nuremberg* the moment of truth and the confrontation with the 'real' is the showing of a five minute extract from the Signal Corps footage in the trial of the judges; in *A Child is Waiting* it is the scene where Dr Clark takes Jean Hansen into the actual locked adult ward of the Pacific State Hospital. The former scene is a confrontation with the past but a past that was, and still is, in so many ways, present; the latter scene is a confrontation with the present, but a present for some that is also the potential future for others, and that continues to be so. In the *jetztzeit* of their presentation both hinge around the possibility of being saved or being condemned.

In *Judgment at Nuremberg* the Signal Corps footage and still images are shown in a five-minute sequence during the trial of German judges and

prosecutors charged with crimes against humanity. The projector is set up in the courtroom its curtains drawn to focus all attention on the grainy images that seem to become the only source of light. The footage and images are accompanied by a sonorous, accusatory and almost exasperated running commentary by Richard Widmark as a US military prosecuting attorney. The footage and images show prisoners shuffling in striped prison gear, ovens, charred skeletons, piles of brushes, shoes, spectacles, gold from teeth, objects made from human skin, tattooed children, piles of corpses in box cars, the showers, Zyklon B canisters, more and more piles of emaciated corpses, the bulldozers at Belsen pushing piles of emaciated corpses into mass graves. As if the footage and images are not enough, they are intercut with reaction shots: the presiding American judge, played by Spencer Tracy, looking down or looking away, or at times palpably forcing himself to look, the German judges on trial, including Burt Lancaster as senior judge Ernst Jannings, looking uncomfortable or looking on in disbelief or struggling to maintain composure, the young German defence attorney, played by Maximilian Schell, flinching and grimacing, and, after the footage of the bulldozers at Belsen, the hardened US Military Policemen looking on in tears.

The function of the footage is to cast a spotlight not merely on the atrocities but on the viewing of the atrocities in which everyone seems to be at once guilty and victim. It is the USA that must judge these crimes against humanity, but who judges the judges? In response to the showing of the film in the darkened courtroom the defence attorney, Maximilian Schell, in his summing up seeks to spread the guilt to include not just Nazi Germany and its judiciary, but the guilt of the Soviet Union who facilitated Hitler's programme of

extermination by the non-aggression pact of 1939, the guilt of the Vatican for the Reichskonkordat of 1933 that gave Hitler a kind of moral legitimacy, and the guilt of the 'American industrialists who helped Hitler to rebuild his armaments and profited by that rebuilding.' (*Judgment at Nuremberg*.)

In *A Child is Waiting* the sequence in which Dr Clark leads Jean Hansen into an actual adult male ward for mentally retarded patients lasts three minutes and a deep description reveals much about how this scene might represent a desire to reiterate or revisit the 'real' of the Signal Corps footage in *Judgment at Nuremberg*. This real might appear to be what is defined by Lacan¹² in the following, cited by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs From Auschwitz*:

the revelation of the real in what is least penetrable, of the real without any possible mediation, of the last real, of the essential object that is no longer an object but rather something before which all words stop and all categories fail, the object of anxiety par excellence. (80)

What this analysis reveals is how each film aspires to present these moments of truth, where documentary footage interrupts fictional narrative, but is caught up in how such a Real is *presented* or represented through cinematic techniques.

What is revealed is that cinema, and spectatorship more generally, both desires the Real and cannot bear, or bear witness to, the Real.

The sequence opens with a close up of the head of a patient on a ward for intellectually disabled adult male patients. The camera shoots him from below, his head dominates the screen, his look into the camera might be said to embody Garland-Thomson's description of the 'blank stare.' The soundtrack accompanying these images is of high pitched laughter and a hubbub of

¹² Lacan 209.

indistinguishable speech. He suddenly looks to his left and there is a match cut to another patient, also shot from below, also looking to his left. Both patients are disheveled and give the impression of being alienated from their surroundings. The direction of their looks draws the eyes of the viewer to the next shot, a one-perspective mid-range shot which shows the arrival of Dr Clark and Jean Hansen through the door and into the ward. The next shot shows from above two older adult male patients sitting on the floor, one with his arm around the other. The soundtrack is a repeated loop of the high-pitched laugh and the indistinguishable hubbub. The next shot is from the side and shows a patient sitting in front of a window swaying from side to side with increasing force. The camera moves in a similar way, eventually moving away as if it is in fear of being hit, to reveal another patient who is holding a teddy bear. This shot is followed by a close up of another patient, filmed from below. He is smiling and performing some gestures with the fingers of both hands that might be described as stereotypy. The camera then pans down from his hands to reveal, on the seat next to him, a toy fire truck. There is an intercut of Jean Hansen looking incredulously around the ward. The camera follows the direction of her gaze to another shot of the patient sitting by the toy fire truck who is now holding a ball, a miniature basketball which looks small in his large hands. He throws the ball casually in front of him with his right hand. The next shot we see is of the same ball hitting another patient in the face. This patient barely reacts and he is then handed the ball which at first he takes in his hands but then proceeds to put in his mouth and tries to eat it.

Dr Clark and Jean Hansen walk through this ward down a corridor between locked doors and windows covered in metal grilles. Some of the

patients they pass have Down Syndrome, some sit in poses suggestive of being locked in on themselves. They play desultorily with children's toys, seemingly laughing at nothing, making noise rather than conversation. The two named characters talk but around them all is repetitive movement, repetitive noise, whoops and howls, a cacophony. There is the suggestion of the underlying myths of Orpheus in the underworld and Lot's wife as they walk through the madhouse. This is a vision of a potentially hellish future for boys like Reuben, the madhouse as human zoo with the chimpanzee-like laughter and the infantilized adult males with their children's toys. A man staggers unsteadily towards the camera, he stares, he laughs. Dr Clark tells Jean Hansen how: "Some were sterilized by the State, they used to sterilize them the way they sterilize cattle" and the man makes an animal-like noise seemingly on cue. These are the retarded children grown old, no longer redeemed by cuteness, living 'bare lives'¹³, like animals.

A closer look at the sequence reveals the carefulness of the editing to present the vision of the asylum as hell and reveals other aspects of the mediatization of this glimpse of the Real. The timing of the patient's animal-like wail after Dr Clark's reference to the patients' being sterilized like cattle does seem to be on cue and a more careful investigation of the soundtrack strongly suggests that this has been looped in post-production. This mediatizing or 'staging' of the supposed real of the asylum is also revealed or exposed in the brief moments when the patient has a ball thrown at his face. At first we see a small basketball, he takes the ball in his hands, the same small basketball, but

¹³ Agamben's concept of 'bare life' *zoe* as opposed to *bios* is outlined in *Homo Sacer*. The 'homo sacer' the exceptional life that is both sacred and sacrilegious connects to cultural tropes of the intellectually disabled figure at once 'touched by God' as a Holy Fool and banned from the temple (Leviticus 21: 16-23)

the ball he puts in his mouth in the next shot, a sharp edit from a closer angle, is a completely different ball with a horizontal striped pattern on it. A presentation of the hopelessness and animal-like existence of the adult patients in the ward serves the central narrative better. This is not to say that the conditions in the Pacific State Hospital were not appalling, but the film seems to wish both to present a *ne plus ultra* of the real while at the same time editing and shaping perceptions to suit a certain narrative in a way that is similar to the capture, mediatization and usage of the Signal Corps footage. There is of course no ideal, objective way to present deeply traumatic experience and events. Blanchot's comment in *L'Écriture du désastre* seems apposite here:

There is a limit at which the exercise of an art, whatever it be, becomes an insult to misfortune. (qtd Didi-Huberman 27)

What else might audiences then and now be seeing when called to witness these 'real' scenes or moments of truth couched within the dramatic narrative of A Hollywood social issues film? In *Remnants Of Auschwitz: The Witness And The Archive*, in his analysis of ethical and political meanings of the extermination, Giorgio Agamben calls into question at a deep level notions of 'witnessing' and 'testimony' and in fact connects this questioning with what he terms the desubjectifying of the 'subject.' Crucial in this analysis is what Agamben terms Primo Levi's paradox from *If This is a Man*: 'the Muselmann is the complete witness.' (Agamben *Remnants* 158) The Muselmann was a name given in Auschwitz to those figures dying of starvation who had given up all hope, motivation and humanity, walking corpses, in a limit state somewhere between human and non-human. Agamben locates testimony as a process which involves at least two subjects: the survivor, who can speak but has nothing interesting to

say and the Muselmann, who has much to say and cannot speak: both figures, in different ways, of extreme incapacity.

In *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a film that in some ways offers to bear witness to the exterminations, as General Eisenhower demanded of the Hollywood producers in the war's immediate aftermath, there are many elisions to facilitate the construction of a narrative for the consumption of a cinema audience in the USA in 1963. The most striking elision is that there are no Jewish characters in the entire *dramatis personae* of the film, just those nameless bodies we see in the Signal Corps footage. There is also another elision around the issue of 'mental enfeeblement' or intellectual disability. This centres in the character of Rudolph Peterson, played by Montgomery Clift, who won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor for his performance. This is not just another example of a professional actor achieving the ultimate Hollywood plaudit for the portrayal of a person with intellectual disabilities: something much more complex is being elided.

Clift plays Rudolf Petersen, a baker's assistant from a large German family, the son of a Communist, who was subjected to enforced sterilization as a 'mentally unfit and therefore "asocial" member of the *Volksgemeinschaft*.' (Fraser 9) He is cross-examined by the Defence Attorney, Hans Rolfe (Maximilian Schell) acting for the judge Ernst Jannings (Burt Lancaster). Rolfe seeks to justify the sterilization on the grounds that it was 'the task of the Hereditary Health Court (in Stuttgart) to sterilize the mentally incompetent.' After casting aspersions on his large family and limited education, in a class of 'backward children', he refers to Petersen's mother having 'mental abnormalities' and 'hereditary feeble-mindedness' and then asks Petersen to complete the standard 'simple' test of mental competence used by the Hereditary Health Court – to form a sentence out

of the three words 'hare', 'hunter' and 'field.' Rolfe repeats the terms of the simple test. Petersen starts by saying 'hare' and 'hunter' but then over the next two minutes completely avoids any attempt to complete the test, explaining heatedly that the Health Court was intent on giving him the operation from the start, graphically describing his helplessness in the procedure, then talking about his mother, vehemently denying the accusation of her feeble-mindedness, and eventually, when his words run out, producing a faded photograph of his mother and appealing to the court and the judge:

I would like you to judge. I want that you tell me. Was she feeble minded? My mother? Was she? Was she?

The affective force of his appeals is far more eloquent than the words he fails and manages to find, and it is with a look verging on the piteous that Rolfe, the prosecutor, having given him time to pass the test, passes judgment:

'I feel it is my duty to point out to the Tribunal that the witness is not in control of his mental processes.'

To which Petersen replies:

I know I'm not. Since that day. I've been half I've ever been.

The Oscar winning performance is presumably in the gap between what the character says, which is not much and inadequate, and what the actor makes the spectator feel, but Cliff's Petersen is a kind of Hollywood attempt at a realization of Agamben's witness who cannot speak, or the 'subject in desubjectification.' This witnessing or desubjectification, however, can never be spoken through language alone, through 'constative judgments, illocutive acts or enunciations.' The three sentences that Petersen speaks seek to give testimony to his knowledge of himself as a sterilized not-man not-person ('I know I'm not'

which is also, of course, his acknowledgement of his own mental incompetence), his knowledge and shame:

In shame the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification: it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject. This double movement, which is both subjectification and desubjectification, is shame. (Agamben *Remnants* 105-6)

His blaming of his mental incompetence on his sterilization ('that day') and the powerful if logically impossible articulation 'I've been half I've ever been.' is at once an expression of shame in the sense which Agamben, citing Levinas, describes as being 'grounded in our being's incapacity to move away and break from itself' and of subjectification/desubjectification.

The archive around the making of the film suggests that Kramer exploited Clift's actual mental and physical fragility to obtain this scene and these lines. The actor was still physically scarred after a near fatal car crash in 1956 and visibly in the throes of alcoholism on set, incapable of remembering lines:

Finally I said to him, "Just forget the damn lines, Monty. Let's say you're on the witness stand. The prosecutor says something to you, then the defense attorney bitterly attacks you, and you have to reach for a word in the script. That's all right. Go ahead and reach for it. Whatever the word may be, it doesn't really matter. Just turn to Spencer Tracy on the bench whenever you feel the need, and ad lib something. It will be all right because it will convey the confusion in your character's mind." He seemed to calm down after this. He wasn't always close to the script, but whatever he said fitted in perfectly, and he came through with as good a performance as I had hoped. (Kramer 193)

Clift's own incapacity is, however, of a different order to his character's supposed mental incompetence. How could Petersen possibly testify or bear witness to his own mental incompetence? The narrative seeks to both present Petersen as

'mentally incompetent' and to provoke sympathy for this and his enforced sterilization through an impossible ability to articulate his own knowledge of his own mental incompetence and his ability to articulate the aporia of his own subjectification/desubjectification. This impossibility underlies many of the attempts to give voice to the voiceless, or to speak for the unspeakable population. It underlies attempts to mediatize or to theatricalize incapacity that remain unresolved and crucial contradictions in the development of theatrical performance involving people perceived to have intellectual disabilities in the last five decades. There is an impossible desire and demand for such performance to give testimony and bear witness to the lived experience of intellectual disability.

In "Judging Judgment at Nuremberg: Law, Justice and Memory in Hollywood" David Fraser points to another elision in the Petersen scene that centres around the conflict between law as justice and law as law, and the ability of law to judge itself, when he refers to Abby Mann's stated intentions for the scene:

Mann himself stated that the point of the Peterson episode was to establish not just the general nature and unacceptability of Nazi eugenics, but to make the broader, liberal and humanist point that even if we accept Petersen's "feeble-mindedness", that cannot ever serve as a justification for the use of compulsory sterilization. (10)

This intention is undermined by a scene that occurs in an earlier part of the trial, but which, as Fraser points out, is then never referred to again. In this scene prosecutor Rolfe cross examining Dr Vick, a former teacher of Ernst Jannings refutes Vick's comments about Nazi Germany's 'novel legislation' on the

sterilization of the mentally incompetent, by citing the following earlier judgment cited in the film as from a country 'other than Germany':

We have seen more than once that the public welfare may call upon the best citizens for their lives. It would be strange, indeed, if it could not call upon those who already sap the strength of the State, for these lesser sacrifices, in order to prevent our being swamped with incompetence. It is better for all the world, if, instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime or to let them starve for their imbecility, society can prevent their propagation by medical means in the first place. Three generations of imbeciles are enough.¹⁴

These are of course the words of the American jurist Oliver Wendell Holmes, who in the landmark case, *Buck vs Bell*, 1927, upheld the enforced sterilization of Carrie Buck, who it was claimed was a mental defective, as constitutional. This was an endorsement at the level of the United States Supreme Court of the eugenic sterilization programmes of California and some twenty seven other states. In fact at the actual Nuremberg trials Nazi doctors explicitly cited Holmes' opinion in defence of their actions. In the context of the trial in the film this reference is used by Rolfe, the Defense Attorney to render problematic pretensions to the occupation of the moral high ground by the American court and makes the word 'Judgment' in the title resonate much closer to home for an American audience.

Indeed in the period immediately prior to the Second World War there was a sharing of information on eugenic theories and practices between Germany and the United States. The 1936 propaganda film, *Erbkrank* (the

¹⁴ U.S. Supreme Court *Buck v. Bell*.

‘Hereditary Defective’), produced by the Rassenpolitisches Amt or Office of Racial Policy of the Nazi regime, was distributed in 1937 in the United States by the Pioneer Fund. It showed specimens of ‘useless eaters,’ accompanied by captions detailing how much it cost the State per year to keep them alive. People with a range of intellectual and physical disabilities were paraded in the camera’s gaze, displayed, scrutinized and selected as candidates for enforced sterilization or ‘euthanasia’.

Films such as *Erbkrank* and the 1937 *Opfer der Vergangenheit* (Victims of the Past), filmed in German lunatic asylums, afford the viewer the sense of power of at once the voyeuristic, the diagnostic and the teratological gaze. They provoke a response in the viewer that is characterized by a dialectic of fascination and repulsion. Bosley Crowther writes of the fear of the ‘harrowing and distasteful beyond words’ that could be unleashed in the presentation of mental retardation in *A Child is Waiting*. Is this fear at its deepest level a fear of confrontation with human bodies perceived to be in a limit state between human and animal? This fear elides *both* an acknowledgement that these bodies are subjected to such treatment so that other bodies, that is ‘our’ bodies, might be deemed normal *and* that when we treat or view other bodies as ‘mere animals’ we expose our own being as ‘animal’. In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben cites Walter Benjamin on what may be at the root of the dialectic in this fear:

For Benjamin the predominant feeling in disgust is the fear of being recognized by what repulses us “The horror that stirs deep in man is an obscure awareness that in him something lives so akin to the animal that it might be recognized.” (106-7)

The ‘useless eater’ is deemed as less than animal, a human who is deemed not to meet the requirements, or fulfill the obligation, of being human and therefore

whose life is not worth living, *Lebensunwertes leben*. In *Die Freigabe der Vernichtung Lebensunwerten Lebens* (Allowing the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life) (1920) Binding and Hoche, part of the Eugenics movement, first proposed that such people, the mentally enfeebled and retarded or mentally ill be eliminated as burdens to the State. This proposal was first implemented in *Aktion T4* on people deemed to be brain damaged, mentally retarded, mentally ill or too physically disabled to survive, until the category of *Lebensunwertes leben* was extended to the 'racially impure' or 'racially inferior' and the Final Solution of the Jewish Question.

The brief vision of the adult locked ward in *A Child is Waiting* with its Goyaesque figures lost in themselves, locked away, 'under the rocks,' outside the social order, is a vision of the potential dark future of the mentally retarded children, but it is also a vision of the recent past and symptomatic of the repression of that past. This is a past that was becoming more visible but only in the sense of being reduced to mere mediatized images, a past that as it becomes more important to remember becomes more distant, more in danger of being forgotten and exterminated in the memory. Perhaps the compulsion to repeat certain elements of *A Judgment at Nuremberg* in *A Child is Waiting* is symptomatic of what was repressed in the liberation of the concentration camps. This would include the guilt of the US State Department having done nothing when informed in August 1942 of the nature and scale of the Final Solution, the guilt that the pursuit of the American Dream could harbour and promote eugenic sterilization, and the much wider guilt of being complicit that Agamben refers to as 'the common tendency to assume a generic collective guilt whenever an

ethical problem cannot be mastered' when faced with the moral and ethical aporia of the extermination.

A Child Is Waiting is an early part of a movement in the United States in the 1960s to make visible those people categorized as mentally retarded or mentally ill, people who were housed or accommodated or warehoused in overcrowded, decrepit and often abusive institutions. The scenes of liberation of the concentration camps could be revisited, repeated or re-enacted in the liberation of these institutions, but so too could the inherent ethical aporia in terms of the politics of visibility of these scenes, an aporia that often continues to be reiterated in the presentation and representation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance since that period.

Goffman's study of *Asylums* (1961), his analysis of 'total institutions' that was so influential in the anti-psychiatry movement, makes frequent references and comparisons to behaviour witnessed in the concentration camps and cites accounts such as David P. Boder's *I Did Not Interview The Dead* (1949), Eugene Kogon's *Theory and Practice of Hell* (1950) and Elie A. Cohen's *Human Behavior in the Concentration Camp* (1953). In *Remnants of Auschwitz* Agamben refers to the explicit connections Bruno Bettelheim (who was in Dachau and Belsen in 1938 and 1939) makes between the behaviour of prisoners in concentration camps and that of the autistic children he studied:

For him the *Muselman* became the paradigm through which he conceived his study of childhood schizophrenia . . . The Orthogenic School, which he founded in Chicago to treat autistic children, thus had the form of a kind of counter-camp in which he undertook to teach *Muselmänner* to become men again. . . There is not one character trait in Bettelheim's detailed phenomenology of childhood autism described in *The Empty Fortress* that

does not have its dark precursor and interpretative paradigm in the behavior of the *Muselmann* . . . (46)

As Agamben points out, Bettelheim's motivation is both interpretative and curative and, in a way, compensatory, in the sense that he was hoping to make of the alienated behavior of autistic children a sense that he had not been able to make of the behaviour of the *Muselmänner*, those shuffling, tottering figures, appearing to bow in a grotesque, etiolated version of Moslem prayer, lost to the world, lost to themselves, lost to *self*, in a limit state blurring life and death, human and non-human: humanity at a limit-state of incapacity. Agamben intimates that Bettelheim's motivation extended to the messianic: both curing the autistic child in the present and somehow reclaiming the *Muselmänner* from the past for redemption and inclusion as human:

In the semi-cross-eyed gaze, hesitant walk, and stubborn repetitiveness and silence of Joey, Marcie, Laurie, and the other children of the school, Bettelheim sought a possible solution to the enigma that the *Muselmann* had confronted him with at Dachau. (46-7)

Bettelheim himself in the introduction to *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* describes how the connection he made between the concentration camps and autistic children was inspired by an encounter with Anna, an 'autistic' young girl who although she was not 'a child of the German concentration camps, her life history was such as to bring them sharply to mind':

Through her the phenomenon of the camps, which had long occupied much of my personal and theoretical interest, became somehow linked with my daily work, the treatment of severely disturbed children. (7)

But the actual point of connection or overlap between the observed behavior of those in the concentration camps and the observed behavior of the 'autistic'

children is the observer: Bruno Bettelheim, he who had been in the concentration camps both observer and observed, as he makes clear in the following, in which the emphases are mine:

Could there be any connection, I wondered, between the impact of the two kinds of inhumanity *I had known* – one inflicted for political reasons on victims of a social system, the other perhaps a self-chosen state of dehumanization (if one may speak of choice in an infant's responses?) For myself it was the German concentration camps that led me to introspect in the most personal, immediate ways on what kinds of experience can dehumanize. *I had experienced* being at the mercy of forces that seemed beyond one's ability to influence, and with no knowledge of whether or when the experience would end. It was an experience of living isolated from family and friends, of being severely restricted in the sending and receiving of information. At the same time *I felt subject* to near total manipulation by an environment that seemed focused on destroying my independent existence, if not my life. (7)

Bettelheim equates his personal experiences of the camps with his perceptions of the behaviors of 'autistic' children, or rather he equates his experience of what he calls the concept of 'extreme situation', of the concentration camp, to his perception and understanding of the behaviors of autistic children.

From this position of subjectivity and unfalsifiability he can then read *across* time and history the behaviors of both concentration camp prisoners and 'autistic' children:

Others have remarked on the averted gaze of autistic children, their looking vaguely in the distance without seeming to see, and their concentration on things close at hand where there is nothing to see but their own twiddling fingers. . . This is essentially the same phenomenon as the prisoner's averted gaze. Prisoners were inattentive to true causality in their lives and replaced it by delusional fantasy. Their nearly continuous daydreaming was a close parallel to the self-stimulation of autistic

children, as in their repetitive twiddling. The purpose in each case was to blot out recognition of an immediate, threatening reality. (67)

This means that his relationship with regard to the Other of the 'autistic' children is one characterized by appropriation. He reads his own experiences onto the children and by doing so seeks a 'cure' that would cure him. At the same time he claims that whatever suffering or trauma he perceives in the children is in some way his own. This reading of his own trauma onto the otherwise unreadable autistic children leads to the double negation of the Other in self and other and is a pattern of ethical behavior which besets the relationship between those who are the so-called able, usually in positions of power: teachers, therapists, theatre directors, and emerges out of an ethical impasse: the impossibility of reacting to or processing the moral and political dimension of the concentration camps.

Bettelheim views autistic children, as Goffman views the inmates of asylums, through the paradigm of the concentration camps. The autistic children and the asylum inmates were object bodies, about which it was felt something could still be done, unlike the ghostly images of the bodies in the concentration camps. These bodies, at least, still had the potential to be saved, or, at least, to be seen to be saved.

They were also closer to home, in a number of ways. In an interview filmed in 1982 screenwriter Abby Mann recalled how *A Child is Waiting* was shown in a special screening in the Whitehouse to President John F. Kennedy who became tearful at the accompanying speeches that described the plight of mentally retarded children as 'he had a sister who was retarded who meant a lot to him.'¹⁵ The reference is to Rose Marie Kennedy, a member of the high

¹⁵ Mann "Archive Interview."

achieving Irish-American family who failed to measure up educationally, as she was deemed to have an IQ between 60 and 70 on the Stanford-Binet test obligatory in schools in Massachusetts at that time. She was subsequently lobotomized at the age of 23 in 1941 and institutionalized from 1949 until her death in 2005. In 1965 the President's brother, Senator Robert Kennedy made an unannounced visit to New York State's Willowbrook School on Staten Island, the largest State-run institution for people with intellectual disabilities in the USA, where 6,000 people were lodged in a space designed for 4,000. At a press conference Kennedy stated:

I think particularly at Willowbrook we have a situation that borders on a snake pit. The children live in filth and many of our fellow citizens are suffering tremendously.

The reference to 'snake pit' nicely conflates the actual with the mediatized as it recalls the 1948 Olivia de Havilland film *The Snake Pit* a melodrama set in a nightmarish, bureaucratic, brutal mental hospital. This kind of revisiting of the scene of the liberation of the camps, of exposing conditions in the camps, was one that would be reiterated many times at this period by campaigning politicians or journalists seeking to expose dehumanizing conditions. Seven years after Robert Kennedy's visit, television journalist Geraldo Rivera was back at Willowbrook presenting an exposé of 'The Last Great Disgrace' secretly filming inside the institution, having gained access with a stolen key. In the aftermath of Robert Kennedy's visit to Willowbrook and Rome State, Blatt and Kaplan published their photojournalistic exposé *Christmas in Purgatory: A Photographic Essay on Mental Retardation*. Its opening statement announced:

There is hell on earth and in America there is a special inferno. We were visitors there during Christmas 1965. (1)

The book is filled with graphic, grainy black and white images of incarceration, neglect and abuse. Naked and ill-nourished inmates wander aimlessly in dilapidated wards and dayrooms, some regard the cameras, others appear to be squatting or rocking back and forth, lost in their own worlds, beyond hope, for all the world like so many Muselmänner. This work, Kennedy's well-publicized visits, and exposés like Geraldo Rivera's are often cited as being instrumental in the changing of laws and the treatment of those marginalized in institutions for the 'mentally retarded' and the mentally ill (groups often housed together in institutions at this period) because of the visibility, meaning mediatized visibility, they afforded people perceived to have intellectual disabilities. They may be seen as symptomatic of much wider movements of emancipation: the de-institutionalization and anti-psychiatry movement of texts as diverse as R.D. Laing's *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (1960) Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization*, which appeared in various forms 1961-1964 and Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962).

Few would argue against the exposure of abuse and subsequent closure of institutions like Willowbrook in the United States and institutions elsewhere in the Global North, but it could be argued that although institutions of a certain type were exposed and shut down, the abuse of this vulnerable sector of the population was not. It was merely reiterated, often with a similar level of cruelty, within the more liberal 'de-institutionalized institutions', halfway houses and residential units that came to replace them. It was reiterated in the neglect, abuse and bullying that is often the lot of those left in community care homes or left in the 'care of the community', a laissez faire strategy of neoliberalism that

presupposes that there is a 'community' and that that community 'cares'.

Foucault showed in *Madness and Civilization* how removing the chains from the insane in asylums was not the hoped-for moment of emancipation but merely led to alternative forms of observation, self-observation and control. Those societies of discipline Foucault analysed have now been replaced by societies of control. Just as systems of power reiterate themselves, any resistances to them need to be likewise reiterative.

My contention is that because the movement to deinstitutionalization was in some ways symbolically seen as a re-enactment of the liberation of the concentration camps this has had a profound and long-lasting effect on how people perceived to have intellectual disabilities are both viewed and treated. The ethics of the relationship between people with and without intellectual disabilities are formed on the basis of both victimization and a generic and impersonal othering. Even if this ethical relationship is pursued in the name of equality and emancipation, the victimization and othering will merely be reinstated unless there is a re-distribution of the sensible. In the discourse of Disability Studies 'inclusion', itself a highly problematic term, is a journey and perhaps the reason it needs to be a journey is that, as Hardt and Negri have shown in *Empire* the power systems of 'Empire' adapt fluidly to encompass and incorporate movements which seek to resist and disrupt them, hence the need to keep changing the terms on which these resistances are made.

The filmed performance contained within *A Child is Waiting* marks an early moment in the genealogy of the involvement of people perceived to have intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance. It is early in the sense that the groups, theatre and dance companies associated with this form have only

emerged in the last five decades, some years after this film was made.¹⁶ An analysis of this film, therefore, allows a consideration of some of the determining factors that have influenced the subsequent development of these socially minded, emancipatory theatre practices. What I also hope to show is that the issues and paradoxes raised in this early paradigm are reiterated in subsequent attempts to initiate and establish different models of theatrical performance involving people perceived to have intellectual disabilities. The subsequent history of this performance form is not a telos of development, progression and achievement: there is a recurrent process of reinvention of what this theatre might be and this is what reaffirms its 'political' potential. What I believe is at stake in this potential is, to adapt Foucault in the introduction to Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, who was himself adapting St Francis de Sales, the possibility for 'an *Introduction to the Non-Fascist life*' (xv) by means of the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in a dialectical reconfiguration of incapacity and theatricality.

The theatrical performance in *A Child is Waiting* is caught between the spotlight of the Hollywood social issues drama and Cassavetes' quasi-documentary urge. The next theatrical performance I will consider is framed within the format of a documentary, but the presence of the people with intellectual disabilities is still both mediated and occluded in a search for an impossible Real through the particular phantasms of creativity of a non-disabled director.

¹⁶ The National Theatre Workshop for the Handicapped in New York was started in 1977, Compagnie de l'Oiseau Mouche (France) in 1978 Graeae Theatre Company in the UK in 1980, Theatre Terrific in Canada in 1985, Back to Back Theatre Company in Australia in 1987, Mind The Gap (UK) in 1988, Theater Maatwerk (Netherlands) 1989 Theater Rambazamba (Germany) 1990, Theater Hora (Switzerland) 1993 and Touch Compass (New Zealand) 1997.

Chapter Two

Mirror Stages: Aldo Gennaro and Robert Wilson

Stepping Out: 'the birth of a theatre of the mentally handicapped.'

The next theatrical performance that I would like to consider in this highly selective genealogy of theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities is the subject of a documentary film made in Australia in 1980, the first International Year of Disabled Persons as designated by the United Nations. *Stepping Out*, directed by Chris Noonan, documents the rehearsal process of a group of residents of the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home in Sydney. They are rehearsing for a performance at the Sydney Opera House under the direction of the Chilean arts therapist and theatre director Aldo Gennaro, a former Augustinian priest, who had been employed as a dramatherapist at the Home since 1977.

Stepping Out is an important documentary record that has been highly influential in the development of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities in Australasia. The film is also an early document of an attempt to give voice to people with intellectual disabilities. A close analysis reveals some of the contradictions and tensions in the underlying ideas and assumptions of 'creativity' as a methodology towards the empowerment or emancipation of those people excluded as Other.

Just as *A Child is Waiting* is interested as much in the process leading to performance as it is in the performance event itself, *Stepping Out* spends the majority of its fifty-four minutes on the processes leading to the performance event in the Sydney Opera House. This type of performance seems to generate expectations of a particular relationship between the 'real' and the theatricalized

in performance. It is a document at an early stage in the continuing fascination with whether this type of performance is presentation or representation: is it 'real' or performance, are these people truly present as actors or merely present, just 'being themselves' or 'being disabled?' Underlying this is the fundamental question of how incapacity, perceived as cognitive or communicative disability, can be negotiated in the making of theatre.

Whereas *A Child is Waiting* presented a performance within an institution, *Stepping Out* presents a theatrical performance by people with intellectual disabilities emerging from the confines of a segregated, residential institution into the space of public performance in the Sydney Opera House. The documentary's subtitle 'the birth of a theatre of the mentally handicapped' connects to another prominent motif of both the theatrical production and the film: the transformation of the chrysalis into the butterfly, another kind of birth in which something bound up, hidden, aesthetically dysmorphic and unappealing is transmuted into something beautiful, liberated and emancipated in flight.

Various different meanings of 'stepping out' emerge throughout the documentary. This includes stepping out of the shadows into light, a stepping out into visibility, reflecting Stanley Kramer's intention to 'throw a spotlight' on the subject of mental retardation. The residents of the home are stepping out into the theatre, into the limelight, into the public gaze or scrutiny or into normalcy or normalization. They are also stepping out of the Home, stepping out of the shadows of the institution. Can they ever, however, step out of institutionalization? The documentary leaves this question open.

If *Stepping Out* documents 'the birth of a theatre of the mentally handicapped' what kind of birth was it? The performance in the Opera House

was a reiteration of the performance in *A Child is Waiting* in that it was, as far as the performers were concerned, another one-off performance. It was also, however, a birth later to be reenacted in repeated rebirths. One characteristic of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities over the last fifty years is that in various places, at various times, groups still seem to feel the need to reinvent the wheel of this type of theatre. This is a theatre that seems to exist outside of tradition and of historiography. I would argue, though, that this need to reinvent itself is one of the strengths of this theatre. It is constantly re-emerging as potential rather than as an established practice and tradition. It is, therefore, constantly questioning what theatre is and what it might be, and in this alone it is political theatre.

‘Stepping out’ also means taking the stage. The residents of the Sunshine Home step out onto the stage of the Sydney Opera House but it is important to consider how they are stepping out and into what kind of ‘theatre.’ This involves examining on what terms and, crucially, on *whose* terms they are taking the stage: with what kind of support and what kind of expectations. These performers ‘step out’ but, as the documentary sensitively suggests, they are still perceived as *out of step* with the world around them. What are the implications for performers with intellectual disabilities in both stepping out and being out of step in an aesthetic and social context? Petra Kuppers in the introduction to her influential work *Bodies on Edge* relates this ‘out of step stepping out’ of disability artists and disability culture to the stepping out of the turtle walker, one of the flâneurs Walter Benjamin refers to in his work on Baudelaire:

Around 1840 it was briefly fashionable to take turtles for a walk in the arcades. The flâneurs liked to have the turtles set the pace for them. (1)

The turtle walker makes an appearance in the arcade that causes a commotion and is remarkable: 'Difference leaves its allocated spaces and mixes in the street.'

(1) At the outset of the documentary the people with intellectual disabilities arrive at the Sydney Opera House, already in costume and stepping out of vans marked Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home. They are doubly 'marked': both as performers – although perhaps 'amateur' performers of the kind who are to be seen displaying their costumes offstage – and as residents of a special, segregated institution.

There is a deliberate uncertainty of context and ambiguity of perspective in the opening moments of the documentary. Chris Dobbin, one of the residents, a young man with Down's Syndrome and principal actor in the final performance, steps out onto the wooden floor of the Hall. This is a part of the institution used for large gatherings that has now become the rehearsal space for the Drama Group: a space temporarily set apart from the rest of the institution. What is this space that he is stepping out into? He gracefully undulates his arms as he moves across the floor through the late afternoon sunlight of the Hall, his barefoot steps are carefully chosen, he drops on one knee as his arms continue to undulate. These images are accompanied by silence and then ambient diegetic sounds: his bare feet on the wooden floor, the voices of others in the background and finally the first limpid chords of the piano soundtrack by Keith Jarrett, that accompanies his movements. The documentary shows that he now inhabits a space set apart for performance, but what remains uncertain is whether this is the performance of an arts practice or of the arts as therapy: an aesthetic or

spiritual exercise. There is an ambivalence as to whether this is the first steps of the realization of an as yet undiscovered potential, or a 'special needs' version of performance, a failed seriousness associated with amateur dramatics and camp. This is not to gainsay the intensity of his engagement in what he is doing, but ultimately the questions arise of how his performance is framed.

After the shots of the arrival of the Home's buses in front of the steps of the Opera House and the smiles and hugs and the flashes of cameras as residents are helped off the buses, the next shots are of the residents being made up as performers. Support staff of the theatre project apply exaggerated stage makeup: white faces and heavy lines and bright, exaggerated colours around the eyes on the lips and cheeks as the performers sit in rows in front of mirrors. The last person we see having white makeup applied to his face is Chris Dobbins just as the first voiceover is heard, the voice of Romaine Grace, one of the residents:

Everyone is very tense. We are feeling quite erm . . . a lot nervous

(Stepping Out)

We then see a shot from below of the side entrance of the Opera House and we see another group of people arriving, dressed up for a night out in their evening clothes: the audience are stepping out to come to the theatre. The camera shows a poster showing Chris Dobbins in makeup and costume and the title of the performance: 'Life Images and Reflections'. The camera focuses in on Chris's face looking out from the poster and then switches back to a match cut to Chris's face being made up in the dressing room. We see other faces being made up and hear Romaine's voice:

It's quite unusual for people . . . of us to do something like this and I think the audience are going to get a kick out of it (she laughs).

We then see a wall marked 'The Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home' and the documentary's narrative takes us back in time into the Home and the rehearsal process that will lead to the performance at the Opera House.

From this opening sequence we can see a vision of Chris stepping out into a liminal space within the institution, we see him and others from the institution transformed, made up and dressed up to appear before others who are dressed up, reflected and lit by mirrors and lights. The residents of the Home, with the collusion of the dressed up audience, are stepping out into the glamour and spectacle of a version of 'theatre' as Alain Badiou categorizes it in *Rhapsody for the Theatre*:

The ritual insipidness of a celebration of self, some laughs, culture, recognizable figures, feeling always one foot ahead, answers that 'hit the nail on the head', sublime décor, communion during intermission. (23)

'Theatre' is the 'good night out' of entertainment, in good taste. Is this 'good night out' in any way affected by the fact that people with intellectual disabilities are involved? This remains a question under investigation.

The flowing multi-coloured floral fabrics of the costumes that the residents of the Home are wearing on arrival, the heightened 'operatic' makeup that is applied to their faces and Chris's 'butterfly' movement sequence in rehearsal all indicate that the 'aesthetic' of this theatrical performance is perhaps suggestive of the 'camp' glamour of amateur dramatics. This impression is supported by what is implied in the careful observation and editing (from fifteen hours of footage) of the rest of the documentary. In *Pure Products Go Crazy*, Matt Hargrave suggests the use of 'camp' in considering theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities as a way of escaping certain binaries of judgment:

Camp asks that we celebrate the intensity of what is there. Camp offers us a way out of acting as a hierarchy, or at least offers a joyful fresh perspective on it. (49)

He cites Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'":

Camp taste turns its back on the good/bad axis of ordinary aesthetic judgement. Camp doesn't reverse things. It doesn't argue that the good is bad, or the bad is good. What it does is to offer for art (and life) a different - a supplementary - set of standards. (61)

He goes on to argue that camp 'offers a parallel performance universe' that seems to suit the performer with intellectual disability who is otherwise doomed to be 'always playing catch up' to achieve the skill and virtuoso of the techniques the trained non-disabled actor.

Susan Sontag specifies the particular incapacity underlying camp:

In naïve, or pure, Camp, the essential element is seriousness, a seriousness that fails. (63)

It is a kind of incapacitated art, just as 'amateur dramatics' implies 'theatricality' as a theatre of which the fakery and pretence is displayed and celebrated and which establishes its own community, the world of amateur dramatics.

If the performers in *Stepping Out* are presented as stepping out into a world of camp and amateur dramatics then the begged question is: *whose* camp is the camp of the performance? Who has chosen this strategy and for whose benefit: who is 'in on' the camp? It could be argued that the sensibility of the performance comes largely from the director/dramatherapist, Aldo Gennaro, but it is unlikely that he is actively trying to achieve 'camp.' His methodology and aesthetic is inspired by a spiritual philosophy of encouraging or bringing out 'creativity', building confidence to facilitate self-expression – but whose 'self' is being expressed? The answer to this question is in the mirror.

The documentary is sufficiently subtle and sensitive to present various kinds of mirroring either as confirmations and reassurance of normality or as the distorted reflections that question the very structure and construction of normality. The documentary in its editing suggests a mirroring of the segregated and set apart spaces of the two institutions- the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home and the Sydney Opera House: a mirroring of the corridors and shut doors of both, as well as the attendants or supporters who make the performers up in the special time of performance in the dressing room but also provide a different kind of care and attention in the time of the daily routine of the institution. After the sequence of the arrival of the two groups - the 'mentally handicapped' performers and the audience - the documentary takes the viewer back to the institution out of which the theatrical performance emerges. We see in long shot residents standing outside various buildings in the Home and then in interior shots the camera brings the viewer close up to two naked young boys in a communal bathroom being scrubbed down with flannels by female staff members. The documentary suggests that this institutional care of 'feeding, washing and toileting' mirrors the care taken to apply makeup and costume the performers.

Romayne Grace, one of the residents and participants in the theatrical performance supplies the main narrative voice of the documentary. The documentary thus eschews an omniscient or neutral narrative voice. The documentary also reveals through Romayne's voiceover the mechanisms of control that are so much in operation in the lived experience of the residents of the Home that they have been internalized at the level of their discourse. What Romayne and the other residents desire is rarely fully or clearly articulated and

needs to be intimated or interpreted from what they say. Interpretation involves deconstructing the clash of their desires and the other voices in their heads that censor or police what can be said or thought.

When we hear Romaine Grace's voice say: "Most of the people will be here for the rest of their lives," accompanied by shots of residents smiling and playing a ball game it is interesting to note that she says 'most of the people' and not 'all of the people.' We learn later in the film that she and her boyfriend Chris Dobbins have dreams of stepping out of the institution and living together. Perhaps the use of 'most of the people' is evidence of a desire on her part to exclude Chris and her from this group, in the hope that they will be among the few who might escape this fate. With the benefit of hindsight, however, this desire proved to be no more than wishful thinking: it took another twenty five years before the one hundred and thirty remaining residents finally left the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home. When they did, in 2005, they were all transferred into smaller group homes.

After she says "Most of the people will be here for the rest of their lives," the camera switches to a longshot down a long, asylum-like corridor, at the end of which we view a young girl spinning around and around on the spot repetitively; the next shot cuts to rows and rows of residents seated at long tables in a workspace folding letters and stuffing them into envelopes: the implication is that although 'free time' and work time have a different topography - circularity and linearity - they share the same repetitiveness.

Romaine Grace then lists the ages and lengths of time spent in the Home of six of the residents, whom we will come to know as some of the forty residents who are taking part in the theatrical production. The lengths of time range from

twelve to twenty eight years. She gives us this information in the following form, repeated for each person: “This is Una. She ‘s thirty eight. She came to Sunshine when she was ten.” The active voice of the verb in the third and final sentence implies an agency at the grammatical level that elides Una’s lack of agency in what presumably happened to her at age ten.

Romayne identifies herself last: she is twenty-one and came to Sunshine when she was nine. She adds her own joky rider, which she accompanies with a laugh: ‘I’d just like to say that anyone that’s been in Sunshine since they were nine is crazy!’ On one level she may be indulging in an antipodean penchant for self-deprecation: anyone who’s been in Sunshine since they were nine is crazy, perhaps ‘crazy’ to have stayed there that long – as if they had a choice, or even possibly ‘crazy’ in a good way – in the sense of the grimly cheery workplace cliché ‘you don’t have to be crazy to work here – but it helps!’ On another level the sentence could have the connotation of ‘if anyone has been in Sunshine for nine years they will be crazy, the institution will institutionalize you and drive you crazy’. If it is an ironic statement, though, then *whose* is the irony? Who is party to the irony, who is in control of the irony?

Some sixteen and a half minutes into the documentary we see a male announcer on a black and white television screen who appears to be a voice of authority, and certainly what he says, in an accent heavily inflected with the vowel sounds and articulation of English Received Pronunciation, sounds authoritative:

1981 is the Year of the Handicapped but residents of the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home can’t wait for that . . . (*Stepping Out*)

There is an implied cheery impatience and agency in the phrase ‘but residents . . . can’t wait for that’ that belies the fact that these particular children have been waiting all of their lives in this institution and even when the Year of the Handicapped arrives it will not lead to their emancipation or change their material circumstances.

The announcer’s face on the television screen has filled the cinema screen as he has been speaking but as he says ‘can’t wait for that’ we hear a noisy reaction from a group of people and the next shot pulls back away from a television monitor and reveals a group of residents of the Home in a communal television room watching the broadcast. One of them shushes and encourages the others to be quieter as the announcer continues:

. . .they’ll be staging a unique theatrical performance at the Opera House next week. It will be the first public appearance by a group of intellectually handicapped . . . actors.

He leaves a slight but noticeable pause and moves his head forward as he stresses the word ‘*actors*.’ He cites them as ‘actors’, as if not quite believing it, they are presented as actors in inverted commas.

The television screen then shows outside broadcast footage of the entrance to the Home: residents of different ages, some holding hands, accompanied by staff, troop into the institution. At first as the images of the institution appear on the television screen one resident is heard saying “Ooh” but the kind of ‘ooh’ indicative of embarrassment rather than wonder. There then follows a sequence of non-verbal expressions of emotion and individual and group reactions. Initially there are sounds associated with embarrassment and then as the reaction spreads among the whole group, some cheers or sounds emerge indicative of recognition, approval, or even excitement. The next shot

shows some thirty or forty of them sitting in the television room. A female voice-over from the television news footage is heard saying:

There was a time when brain damaged children were hidden away and too often the hiding place was a bleak institution. Out of sight out of mind. No thought was given to enriching their lives. No thought to their right to develop.

During this the camera pans slowly around the group of residents in the television room. The juxtaposition of the Australian television news programme's narrative of the historical conditions of 'brain damaged children being hidden away in . . . a bleak institution' with the images of the residents of the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine is also ironic. There was a time when brain damaged children were hidden away in institutions but look now at this progressive institution and its residents becoming actors.

The initial response in the television room to the appearance of the Sunshine Home on the screen is a kind of ironic response in the control of and communicated by the residents. The television broadcast voiceover that speaks of brain damaged children and bleak institutions juxtaposed with the panning shot of the residents seems to me to be an irony which is more in the control of the film-makers. It is more difficult to locate where the knowledge and, therefore, the agency is in the irony of Romaine's joke about 'anyone that's been in Sunshine since they were nine is crazy.' There is an element of her laughing off what in many ways is an intolerable situation, but there is also the possibility that the film-makers are making her the subject of an irony of which she may be unaware. Obviously the entire text of her voiceover is selected and edited by the film-makers but in the context of the whole documentary we see enough of Romaine Grace in a variety of interactions with others to make a judgment that

she is capable of a complexity of response to situations over which she has no apparent control. That particular irony might then be said to have been negotiated between Romyne and the film-makers.

Noonan's documentary technique is a version of the *cinéma vérité* employed by Cassavetes, but, of course, such a 'fly on the wall' technique is never neutral or objective. In the sequence in the television room I believe the documentary opens up the possibility of a multiplicity of perspectives, the 'view' of the mentally handicapped implied in the television broadcast, the patronization of the word 'actors', the viewpoint of the residents looking at this mediatization of their life in the institution. This multiplicity of perspectives encourages the possibility for an ambivalence of response in the spectator. The viewer is encouraged to question how the residents are supposed to interpret or respond to what is being said about them. The talk of 'brain damaged children' cannot be assumed to be going over the residents' heads.

This is possibly an indication of the dialogic process in which Noonan engaged with the subjects of his documentary: the residents of the Sunshine Home and Aldo Gennaro. Authority and power may not have a voice that is overt in the documentary but the residents are powerfully controlled by the gaze and the stare, the various ways in which they are interpellated or included but only on 'special' terms. The institutional constraints in the Sunshine Home in 1980 are more liberal and relaxed than those of the US institutions of the 1960s period but what the documentary reveals both explicitly and implicitly is the systems of control that govern the behavior of the residents at the level of thinking, feeling and desiring both within the Home and when they leave the Home on sanctioned excursions.

Romayne is not so much an untrustworthy as an incapacitated narrator. She is a narrator not apprised of all the facts of her situation. This is not because of her 'mental handicap' but because what she can say is constrained within discursive formations that diminish her ability to express desire and to take action. She is, for example, operating under the pressure to be a cheery, self-deprecating Aussie, as an attempt to appear or to 'pass' as normal. She is also a resident in a segregated institution, where staff look after and support her, but also control her liberties and rights, where freedoms and privileges need to be negotiated constantly, a situation within which cheerful compliance and being what Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* termed a 'docile body': 'A body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (36) might achieve far more than stubborn rebellion or resistance. It is extremely difficult for her to express her desires and frustrations *overtly*.

This is illustrated in a scene in the hall of the institution. Aldo Gennaro leads the group through contact improvisation pair-work exercises, and Romayne says:

Being in the hall, it's cut off from the Home when we're using it. It's like a home away from home, you might say. I think it was a good place to work.

As we hear her speaking of a 'home away from home' we see the residents in the exercises touching each other and lying on top of each other and Romayne herself doing an exercise in which she and her boyfriend Chris mirror each other, which then collapses joyfully into cuddling and hugging. The camera goes back to show others in the midst of exercises and switches back to Romayne and Chris in intimate conversation, at exactly the same time as her voice-over continues:

and I think we should have our room to ourselves *no matter what anyone says*. (my emphasis)

She thus indirectly cites and challenges the voices of the staff of the Home or of the family members implied in the phrase 'no matter what *anyone* says.'

In a later scene in which we see Romaine and Chris 'stepping out' from the Home, unsupervised, to walk to the local dairy to buy ice creams and this is accompanied by an extended voice-over during which Romaine says of Chris:

I don't think I'd give him up for anything. Not even if I was given five dollars I wouldn't give him up. He's too beautiful – *in spite of what Mum says* . . . (my emphasis)

Again the assumption is that a voice of authority seeks to gainsay Romaine's desire. Whether '*what Mum says*' is intended to be an indication of Romaine's mother's serious disapproval or of her affectionate deprecation of Chris as a boyfriend is difficult to determine.

What does become apparent in this extended sequence is the difficulty for Romaine and Chris to express intimate feelings. The documentary presents this incapacity in carefully observed scenes. Romaine and Chris step out of the Sunshine Home in order to spend some time together, suggesting another meaning of 'stepping out together' or dating. There are, however, a number of limitations on just how far they can step out. They go to a dairy just across the road and practically on the Sunshine Home campus, but even so the documentary shows the difficulties they experience trying to cross the road as traffic flies past. At one point Romaine makes a start to go across but she has to check and stop herself, thus unbalancing herself. She grabs onto Chris's hand who then also loses his balance and it takes them quite a while to cross the

street. The documentary captures both the vulnerability of their desire and the fragility of the possibility of their emancipation from the institution.

The shopowner asks them what ice creams they would like. Chris points at a display showing images of the various products. The shop-owner is uncertain as to what he is pointing at and asks, "A Splice? Or a Gaytime?" to which Chris, wishing to assimilate and participate in the dialogue even at the expense of his own preference, replies, simply: "Yes." The shop-owner then says something about not being sure he has any left, searches around in the refrigerator, then turns to Romaine and suggests: "What about two Triple Treats?" Romaine and Chris both eagerly and happily agree to this suggestion. The documentary shows their docility in settling for what is easiest or for what others tell them should be desired. Crossing the road or buying an ice-cream become activities fraught with difficulty not because of any innate 'mental handicap' but, the documentary implies, as a result of their lack of independence from the institution.

When Romaine later talks about her feelings for Chris, her desire for intimacy is in tension with the path of least resistance of settling for what is:

I'd like to be a lot closer to him but at the moment we can't. I'm trying. Chris is enjoying it. I am. . .

Maybe in the future we might get married or have kids but for the time being I'm right (she laughs) the way I am. I think Chris is too. Cos there's a lot of work to going into being married and having kids.

There may well be the encouragement, advice or even the demand of others at stake in the option of 'choosing' a homeostasis that becomes her identity: 'I'm right the way I am.' When she says 'Cos there's a lot of work to going into being married and having kids' it sounds like a citation of someone else's voice or

viewpoint, a recitation of what she has been told is best for her, a policing of her desire that she has internalized.

It is interesting to look at how Romaine herself seems to regard the performance in which they are both involved, and its effects on their relationship:

I think once the play is over and everything settles all down again I think we'll be quite happy again because at the moment we're having a bit of a task trying to keep together and – I don't know . . .

As she and Chris sit on a bench outside the dairy eating their ice-creams she addresses Chris directly, voicing her underlying fear of his engaging in public performance:

I reckon you'll be going into showbusiness the rate you're going. Yeah. Honest. You'll be going into it if I'm not careful! I'll be losing you to all the women out in the air – out in the world!

Her fear of losing Chris to showbusiness or to all the women out in the world may be a displacement of what for her is an unarticulable fear: losing Chris to another relationship, that with the director Aldo Gennaro.

Earlier in the film, in a section that introduces the viewer to the spaces and rhythms of the institution, we see a shot of Aldo Gennaro sitting cross-legged on the floor of the Hall surrounded by the forty residents in the Drama Group seated in imitation of him. He is taking them through breathing exercises, a technique common to both meditative practices and actor training, that takes on an interesting resonance in the context of a Home for the 'mentally handicapped.' Much conventional actor training is a kind of unlearning or *via negativa*: unlearning and relearning how to walk, to handle objects or, indeed, how to breathe. This training assumes a kind of incapacity or dis-ability on the part of

the actor in training who needs to unlearn their particular habits to achieve a neutral.¹⁷ The residents commit to the exercises with remarkable intensity and focus, perhaps because they are used to being approached as if they are incapacitated.

We then see Aldo Gennaro take a smaller group, that includes Chris Dobbins and Romyne Grace, through the 'mirror exercise.' At this point we hear for the first time his voice-over, with his own distinctive grasp of English:

These people, for the first time, they start unlocking themselves. Institutions, whatever institution happen to be, suppress individual creativity. Creativity is our tool to keep growing. It's no other one. The mirror exercise has become a commonplace of actor training in many countries but it is reasonable to assume that Aldo Gennaro from Chile would have come across it through the work of Augusto Boal. The point of the exercise is that at some point it should become unclear who is leading or who is following: 'we seek ourselves in others who seek themselves in us' (126).

His methodology becomes apparent in a scene in which we first see Chris standing holding two oriental circular fans with his arms crossed in front of his chest. Behind him in the Hall are two upright mirrors. We then see Aldo Gennaro standing facing him, his hands crossed over his chest in an identical way. It is clear Chris is mirroring Aldo, as mimesis, rote repetition. We see Aldo lock eyes with Chris and Chris with Aldo and hear Aldo's words in voice-over:

I see Chris the thing he's good in, the thing he feels completely free and joyful with, is movement, dancing, he's present that with all his body, but at the same time he's a very insecure - have a lot of lack of confidence because suddenly he's exploring something new to him . . .

¹⁷ Carrie Sandahl 'The Tyranny of the Neutral' discusses how this approach excludes many actors with disabilities. Sandahl and Auslander 255-267.

The only thing I can give is just the little touch of confidence.

The next shot cuts to Aldo's car driving through Sydney. He and Chris emerge and go into a shop where Aldo puts various kimonos on Chris. There are shots of Chris looking at himself open-mouthed in a mirror. He practises a fluttering, undulating movement with the fingers of both hands. He seems to be practicing the movements of transformation into the butterfly. These fluttering fingers crossfade into a scene in which Chris is in the Hall, he sits back on his heels dressed in the kimono from the shop, Aldo Gennaro sits in a similar way facing him, they bow to each other and bring their heads back up, they are mirroring each other again. The Keith Jarrett piano soundtrack then becomes more intense and developed and mixes with a recording of "Un bel di vedremo" by Maria Callas, as Aldo leads Chris in movement through the space and shows him the pose he wishes him to make. Chris duly imitates Aldo's pose, and imitates Aldo's liquid, expressive 'feminine' gestures as he extends his arm and gracefully upturns his hand. Chris is imitating Aldo imitating Madame Butterfly. The camera follows Chris through the space, past a supremely uninterested female resident sitting on the stage, as Aldo leads Chris in a sweeping circular movement around the space with one arm across the body, hand and fingers extended and the other reached out behind as if a force is impelling the body to move against its will, and in that struggle La Callas hits a swooping, beautiful, but pained, climactic note.

The camera often catches Aldo and Chris gazing one at the other, caught in each other's reciprocal gazes. During another rehearsal sequence in the Hall, Aldo looks on as Chris improvises a butterfly dance at the end of which Chris looks to Aldo for approval, which is given, to the obvious delight of Chris. We

then see a montage sequence of residents putting on various costumes for the production, and Chris bare chested putting on a white kimono, walking with his arms undulating, and finally wearing the kimono, walking delicately on the balls of his feet, his arms undulating gracefully like the wings of a butterfly and wearing a black wig with the hair caught up in a bun in the style of a Japanese female. We are shown the stages in his transformation into a version of Madame Butterfly, hinting at another motif of the production: the emergence of a butterfly from a chrysalis as a paradigm of spiritual development, the unlocking of creativity in people with intellectual disabilities. As this transformation proceeds we notice around the edges of the Hall, others looking at him, staff members, some not really knowing what to make of what they are seeing. We even catch sight of Romaine. As Chris passes her, he fails to see her, lost in his transformation. The documentary makes the viewer aware of these other viewpoints around Aldo and the Drama Group, the viewpoints of those who are not as invested in the importance of the production, or who are suspicious of the camp theatricality's threat to established orders of able and disabled, male and female.

The documentary's carefully edited revelation of gazes and stares is even more apparent in a sequence in which Aldo Gennaro takes a group of residents out of the Home to buy leotards. They go to a specialist dance outfitters in one of Sydney's shopping arcades, the distinctive late nineteenth century edifices themselves modeled on Parisian models. It is a scene of stepping out reminiscent of Petra Kupper's citing of Benjamin's turtle walker and the Parisian arcades. The camera, positioned one floor above, shows Aldo Gennaro leading or shepherding a group across a footbridge in the arcade. The camera angle seems

to heighten the sense of the exposure of the group, of their difference from the other shoppers in the arcade; some of the shoppers stop and stare at the unusual or remarkable group. Accompanying these images is Romaine's voice-over:

At the moment people on the outside don't realize that we even do exist. I think that's very bad because we do exist and yet it's also very hard for us because getting to know people on the outside is even harder.

The camera shows Chris emerging from the changing rooms in a sleeveless powder blue leotard that is extremely figure-hugging, especially around his genitals. The next shot shows a mirror in which a female shop assistant is visible taking a long look. Chris goes in front of another mirror, looks at himself and makes a gesture with his arms that starts as a flexing of his biceps but develops into an odd kind of movement with his shoulders forward, suggestive of his undulating butterfly wing movements.

The next shot is a very noticeable intercut to another young female shop assistant standing to one side and exhaling cigarette smoke and looking up, her eyes flicking from side to side in some astonishment – the inference of the film grammar of the documentary is that her astonished look is at Chris. There is then a full-length shot of David, a lithe twenty-year old with long dark hair who is shown in a white leotard with sheer white tights. The camera pans down his body and then there is an abrupt intercut to the same female shop assistant whose mouth is now open. She looks to the side to see if anybody else can see what she is seeing, and her eyes open wider as she repeats this action. The camera then cuts to a pan up from David's legs encased in white tights to reveal him now in a different figure-hugging leotard of bright pink. Intercut with Chris and David gazing at their transformations in the full-length mirrors are the stares and double-takes of the young female shop assistant who clearly cannot

quite believe what she is seeing. Whether her unguarded reactions are to the unusual and remarkable display of the 'mentally handicapped' in public or to the barely suppressed homoeroticism of this scene, or both, is not clear. What is it that is on display here? Stepping out here is not only 'cripping the arcade' - the unusual appearance of a group of people with intellectual disabilities in a dance outfitters in Sydney in 1980 - but perhaps also 'queering the arcade'. Given that homosexual acts were still criminal offences in the state of New South Wales at this time, and given the repression of sexuality in institutions like the Sunshine Home, anything that the documentary can show must be implicit or suggestive of love that dared not yet speak its name.

In the climactic scenes of the theatrical production we see Chris out in front of the stage curtain, caught in two spotlights, dressed in a 'male' kimono, holding up two fans, moving them until they are across his chest. The fans are decorated to resemble butterfly wings. These actions are accompanied by chords on a Japanese shamisen and a male voice recites the following extract of a prose poem "The Chrysalis" by the Rosicrucian, Frances Ono, on the spiritual trope of the emergence of the butterfly from the chrysalis:

In a luminous early morning meadow I happened upon a new-born butterfly climbing out of its green, gold-spotted case. Here is a being changed, transformed, my mind thought. And within his mind a person may incubate new attitudes about himself. He will grow and change within and suddenly emerge anew, a changed, more fulfilled person.¹⁸

The camera then shifts perspective to a backstage view of Aldo Gennaro looking out at Chris through gauze screens and then back to Chris as he ceremoniously changes into the 'female' kimono and dons the black wig, the hair of which is

¹⁸ Qtd in *Rosicrucian Beacon*

caught up into a bun with a coronet of cherry blossom. We are now shown Chris as a version of Cio Cio-San from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, in a scene that conflates the opera's most famous aria, "Un bel di vedremo", from Act II with the ending of the opera: Cio Cio San's performing *seppuku* or ritual suicide.

Chris moves upstage to pull back screens that reveal three large mirrors in a triptych arrangement facing the audience. As Maria Callas' voice swells, he picks up a sheathed Samurai sword, comes downstage, turns his back to the audience and faces the upstage mirrors, and Aldo Gennaro behind them. He then kneels, lifts the sheathed sword horizontally high above his head, unsheathes it, holds it with both hands high above him until a phrase in the music finishes with a great crash of a gong at which point he brings the sword into his body and falls to the floor. He then drags his body upstage toward the mirrors, holding his right arm up high, fingers fluttering as he drags himself upstage. The arm with the fluttering fingers drops lower and lower until his hand hits the stage and his movement ceases. The music continues as the audience is left to gaze at the prone body split into multiple reflections in the three upstage mirrors. The lights dim, the screen goes to black and there follows a two-minute sequence of applause.

The relationship of Aldo and Chris is presented in the documentary as a narrative. It is one among other narrative strands in the documentary: the progression of the theatrical production from rehearsal to performance, the journey of the residents from the segregation of the Institution to appearance in public at the Sydney Opera House, the transformation of the residents into actors and their growth in confidence and (self-) performance skills, the waving of the flag of inclusion in Australia in the International Year of the Disabled Person. All

of these narrative strands have an underlying *telos* of development but the Aldo-Chris narrative is different, its underlying features are lack and loss.

The documentary attempts again and again to capture the 'presence' or the elusive Real of the 'mentally handicapped' residents or performers, but these moments reveal themselves to be instead what Phelan in *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, adapting Lacan, terms 'the hole in the Signifier or the Real-impossible' and what is exposed are the processes of signification and representation:

Representation follows two laws: it always conveys more than it intends; and it is never totalizing. The "excess" meaning conveyed by representation creates a supplement that makes multiple and resistant readings possible. Despite this excess, representation produces ruptures and gaps; it fails to reproduce the real exactly. (2)

These 'ruptures and gaps' are particularly apparent in the play of significations, intimations and possible interpretations around the presentation of the relationship between Chris Dobbins and Aldo Gennaro. Chris's climactic butterfly/Madame Butterfly sequence represents the climax of the presentation of the spiritual or psychoanalytic tropes of mirroring and transformation and of the relationship that has been developing between Chris and Aldo.

What it is that is being enacted in Chris's climactic solo scenes on the stage of the Opera House? He is first presented in a frame of exotic difference, an Orientalist 'inscrutability.' Perhaps this attempt to 'other' Chris racially is an attempt both to exoticise him and make reference to his otherness as a young man with Down's Syndrome. His movements are slow, precise and ritualistic as he transforms onstage, putting the more ornately decorated full-length 'female' kimono over the shorter plain blue 'male' one and placing the 'female' wig on his

head. The voiceover that accompanies his actions speaks of an observer viewing the emergence of a butterfly out of its 'case' and how that inspires in the observer thoughts of how 'the mind' can change the self so that a new 'more fulfilled' person will emerge. At the linguistic level this text appears to flirt with difference, the observer is differentiated from the butterfly, the mind from the observer 's thoughts and the abstracted person – the abstracted person's attitudes and this 'person' before and the changed person after the thought transformation but in effect any idea of difference or otherness is elided in the identification of the I of the observer with the butterfly and with the mind and the abstracted person of the indefinite article. The text assimilates any difference or otherness into what Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* terms the Same of identification:

The I of representation is the natural passage from the particular to the universal. Universal thought is a thought in the first person. (126)

This appropriation of Difference into the Same operates at the level of this spoken text but also determines and informs other aspects of Aldo/Chris's performance text. Differences are elided into identification, the 'difference' of Japanese culture is elided with Chris's difference of appearance as a person with Down's Syndrome and elided with Aldo Gennaro's difference as a South American migrant, a former priest and, according to the laws of the time, a sexual deviant. All of these differences of course are posited as difference from a norm, a majoritarian or universalizing 'mainstream' but their elision merely creates a kind of universal and transcendent idea of 'Difference' which is behind all diversities subsumed in the notion of 'diversity' prevalent at that time, encapsulated by the following list in *Aspects of Creativity* by Dulcie M.Stone a

colleague and contemporary of Gennaro: 'people who are disabled, disadvantaged, unemployed, nursing home residents, prisoners, children, the aged, and other non-mainstream people.' (108)

As the scene proceeds, Chris/Aldo transforms into a version of Cio Cio San, an elision or slippage of identity in terms of sexual difference. In characterizing the theatre of drag as the best performative example of the phallic function Peggy Phelan states:

Performing the image of what he is not allows him to dramatize himself as "all." But the performance of drag does not and cannot reproduce "the woman." (17)

The scene on the Opera House stage when Chris steps out as Cio Cio San is a complex nexus of enactment part drag, part camp, part projection and introjection vis a vis Aldo Gennaro and Chris Dobbins. Aldo Gennaro is projecting or acting out through the performance of Chris his own desire to 'dramatize himself as all' to see himself in Cio Cio San and to see himself in the feminized 'mentally handicapped' young man, but:

The failure to secure self-seeing leads again to the imagination of annihilation and castration. (20)

In his reworking of Puccini's opera Aldo Gennaro is impelled to conflate Cio Cio San's aria with her suicide: 'the scopic drive returns us to the failure of representation.' (20) The split within the subject and between the subjects is laid bare in the diffusion and dissolution of images, personae and representations of butterfly/Madame Butterfly/Maria Callas/Aldo/Chris and this is realized theatrically in the closing image of Chris's prone body and the three reflections in the three mirrors. Chris has stepped out into Aldo Gennaro's phantasm, a phantasm incorporating elements of drag and camp.

What Aldo Gennaro took away from the experience of the performance in the Opera House is articulated in this extract from a radio interview with Caroline Jones on 'The Search for Meaning':

That was the first time I experienced real love in my life, unconditional love. And these people have the ability. They don't love you because you are special, they love you because the only thing they do is love. And every time an intellectually disabled person touched me, I feel something very special, I felt something, a sense of release and I realise some sort of healing having happening inside of me. For they are very wounded people, and they have the ability, they are the healers, the only real healers having come involved in my life.

Aldo Gennaro as dramatherapist gives an emotional account of how he is the recipient of a kind of therapy as well as a practitioner, an account that also reveals a fetishization of the Other in his view of the residents, a thematization of 'the mentally handicapped' Others as quasi-shamanistic wounded healers.

There is also a record of what happened to Gennaro in the immediate aftermath of the release of the documentary in article in *The Age* of 29th December, 1981:

The board of the institution criticized an "excessive display of affection" between two of the people in the film. Later Aldo Gennaro and several staff members were sacked. ("Drama Review")

The Sydney Morning Herald of 27th December 1980 also referred to how Gennaro's:

reformist approach to the care of the handicapped brought him into conflict with the tried and established practices at the home and he lost his job.

and continues more explicitly:

Mr Gennaro believes in the rights of the handicapped; rights to freedom of expression, both artistic and sensual . . .raising the question of the sexuality of the handicapped. ("A Voice to be Heard")

Gennaro's interview on "The Search for Meaning" was conducted just before his death in 1987 from an AIDS-related illness and in the archive around that interview there is a reference to his being one of the first people in Australia to speak publicly about dying of AIDS.

There is no similar archive for Chris Dobbins or the forty or so members of the Drama Group at the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home. It is, therefore, more problematic to speculate about what Chris received in the process, what the nature of the ethical relationship was, whether, in Spinozan terms, his capacity to act, in an aesthetic and political meaning of the word, was augmented or diminished. It could be argued that Aldo Gennaro's methodology was bad directorial practice, that Chris could not have been empowered in a process of mere imitation and that at a deeper psychoanalytic level Aldo is projecting his own wishes, desires, phantasms trauma and attempts to deal with his own sense of difference onto Chris.

An argument may be made that Aldo Gennaro was 'acting out' his desires and wish fulfillments through the performance of Chris Dobbins, that he was imposing or projecting his tastes, his desires, his phantasms and his trauma onto Chris to heal his own 'self':

The pleasure of resemblance and repetition produces both psychic assurance and political fetishization. Representation reproduces the Other as the Same. (Phelan *Unmarked* 3)

Chris Dobbins 'imitates' Aldo Gennaro's gestures and mannerisms and his imitation may be very good. As an institutionalized 'mentally handicapped'

person he may have developed a capacity for imitation as a coping strategy to assimilate or pass as normal. If we look at the specific gestures and movements of what Chris is attempting to imitate in those moments of Aldo's rehearsal process recorded in the documentary then we become aware that Chris's imitation of Aldo is already an *imitation of an imitation* Aldo is himself imitating Cio Cio San, imitating a gendered female Other, an Orientalist Other and Chris is imitating this.

If we stop to consider what is at stake in Aldo's strategy of enacting the gestures and mannerisms of Cio Cio San, they may well be modeled on an actual female body performing similar gestures, but as Judith Butler has pointed out in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination", a female body, or a body gendered as female is already an imitation:

Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original; in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of the original as an effect and consequence of the imitation itself. (125)

Aldo Gennaro is, however, not trying to get Chris to imitate a 'female' body but to imitate a 'drag' version of a 'female' body, to refer again to Judith Butler:

There is no original or primary gender a drag imitates, but gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original. (127).

This hall of mirrors of imitations of imitations, in part explains Aldo Gennaro's use of mirrors in the production, *Life Images and Reflections*, which is then developed by Chris Noonan in the film *Stepping Out*. Does all this mirroring reflect back a narcissistic self-realization of Aldo Gennaro enacted on Chris Dobbin or an imago, a distortion of Gennaro that disrupts and undermines his unitary image of himself?

Gennaro's transfiguration of himself and Chris is haunted by melancholia as he punishes himself for his desire. The phantasm of Chris as Cio Cio San has to kill her/himself. So again in attempting to investigate Chris's agency, the figure of Aldo steps up, because at a deep level Aldo projects his own phantasm of transfiguration and melancholia onto Chris and this is in effect all there is for Chris to imitate.

When John Haydon Langdon Down observed the 'Mongolian idiots' in "Observations on an Ethnic Classification of Idiots" he saw in their supposed facility for imitation and mimicry a method of transforming these stigmatized and hopeless cases into socially useful and productive subjects:

This faculty of imitation may be cultivated to a very great extent, and a practical direction given to the results obtained. (262)

Down assumed that this imitative faculty could be employed in the imitation of the 'originals' of socially acceptable or socially and economically useful behaviour.

Erving Goffman's radical insight in *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* was that just as gender has no original, the self itself, as in the performance of self in the everyday, may be likewise a performative construction:

A correctly staged and performed scene leads the audience to impute a self to a performed character, but this imputation – this self – is a *product* of a scene that comes off, and is not a *cause* of it. The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited. (252-3)

This would locate Down's faculty of 'Mongolian idiots' for imitation in the social sphere as an imitation of an imitation for which there is no original. So if people perceived to have intellectual disabilities may achieve 'credit' by imitating socially productive or acceptable behaviour, what of such faculty for imitation in the supposedly aesthetic sphere of theatre? Following Goffman's insight that the self may be performative in everyday life then the distinction between 'social' and 'aesthetic' begins to breakdown. In the moments of his performance Chris Dobbins steps out to inhabit the place of 'actor' or 'dancer' on the Opera House stage which presumably changes the perceptions of his capabilities in those viewing him. From the perspective of the audience in the Opera House he shows his capacity for 'drama' in the sense of gestures and behaviours appropriate to the musical soundtrack, costumes settings and props, he shows his ability to inhabit a character or persona very different from his own.

It is interesting to examine what emerges in the discourse and attitudes of those staff supporting the residents as performers. In the dressing room, a woman slightly off camera, who has been putting make-up on Chris, pronounces him and the group "true actors tonight" as she taps him on the shoulder, in a kind of echo of the Australian television announcer's inverted commas of emphasis around the word 'actors.' The residents are specially marked as 'actors', but only on this particular occasion. The implication is that when they leave the Opera House they cease to be 'actors' in both an aesthetic and social sense. On the other hand the residents themselves, in the face of fairly persistent enquiry into how they are feeling or whether they are nervous, respond to concerns over their well-being with statements such as: "I know how to calm myself down and pull myself together" and "I can take it as it comes to me. I really can. I can take it as

a man. I can take it,” in which it is apparent that ‘acting’ for them is a form of validation as a person, a marker of a kind of capacity not normally ascribed to them.

The documentary uses particular visual metaphors and metonyms to represent the ‘presence’ of the residents/performers. One prevalent image is of faces in chiaroscuro, the white face of the performer in makeup caught in the hand-held lighting in the darkness backstage. Backstage is a liminal space and time in which the camera seeks the very moments when a Sunshine Home resident is transforming into an Opera House performer. Given that these performers are people perceived to have intellectual disabilities their passage from the darkened spaces of the wings backstage to the brightly lit space onstage resonates as a metaphor for the journey out of the institution into visibility or inclusion. They are faces in transition between darkness and light, in a state of becoming or potential.

There is a tendency throughout the documentary to fetishize the heads or the faces of the performers, particularly those with the distinctive features of Down’s Syndrome as if by dwelling on them the camera might penetrate the mystery of their identity. When these faces are covered in white face makeup a new veil is added which heightens the mystery: does the Real behind the appearance of the residents become more or less visible in theatrical performance? The documentary asks the question but leaves the answer open.

What was achieved by the performers stepping out? How might the social or political efficacy of this performance be assessed? The performance was an important moment in the genealogy of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disability in Australia and beyond. In Australia this

performance was a precursor to a burgeoning disability culture of theatre and dance which has seen the development of companies such as Back to Back, Restless, Rawcus, No Strings Attached, and support organisations such as Arts Access Australia with an explicit commitment to 'intellectual disability arts.'

I would contend something else was achieved. A particular artistic and social vision of Aldo Gennaro, a vision of 'creativity' applied to the 'disadvantaged' led to Chris and the others stepping out on the stage of the Opera House. What emerged, however, was greater than the sum of the parts of the production with its community arts aesthetic, and its vague social justice and spiritual agenda. The documentary bears traces of an emergent 'something else' that people with intellectual disabilities bring to theatrical performance. The efficacy of the performance and documentary was perhaps greatest with regard to the scenes of 'excessive display of affection' that created a dissensus that led to the dismissal of Aldo Gennaro and other staff. These scenes indicate the possibility of a shift in perception of what can be seen or heard or said of people with intellectual disability, a shift in perception from infantilized to sexual beings. This potential sexuality also, of course, underscores the various fetishizations, mirrors and veils of representation of the Chris-Aldo-Madame Butterfly scenes. After the first screening of the documentary this potential for emancipation was, however, immediately foreclosed by the sacking of Gennaro and the return to the Institution of the residents, now no longer the Drama Group.

These scenes that caused such offence or such dissensus retain their force in the documentary in the Hall in the Sunshine Home, in the 'home away from home' that Romyne describes. She connects this 'home away from home' to

another imaginary space: 'I think we should have a room of our own, no matter what anyone says' she blurs her desire for a space of intimacy with Chris with the intimacy the space in the Hall became during the scenes of physical contact and improvisation. In these scenes we see her seated next to Chris on the floor, they lean their heads against each other, they kiss, not demure kisses on the cheek, but fully engaged open mouthed kisses. We see them lie on the floor and touch each other, head pressed against head, arms around each other. These scenes make us aware of a different kind of voyeurism. Perhaps a re-distribution of the sensible takes place in our viewing.

In these scenes of intimacy in the 'home away from home' that which is both heimlich and unheimlich comes into view: bodies touching with tenderness, bodies touching with desire. Between and amongst the bodies in the Hall and the bodies watching the documentary, bodies in very different times and places, pass affects: of desire, of anxiety, of embarrassment, of empathy: fellow feelings that open up a commonality in desire and vulnerability. The documentary sensitively shows the shortcomings of this attempt to theatricalize the incapacities of people with intellectual disabilities as a method of emancipating their creativity. The production revealed instead the incapacity of a certain transcendent and narcissistic concept of creativity that required people with intellectual disabilities merely to mirror the tastes and sensibilities of a person without intellectual disabilities.

Mirroring inverted: Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles

Robert Wilson attempted to reverse this binary of the mirror. Whereas Aldo Gennaro a non-disabled director required Chris Dobbins a disabled performer to mirror him to make theatre, Robert Wilson a non-disabled director seeks to mirror Christopher Knowles a disabled man in order to understand him and to make theatre. Robert Wilson's artistic collaboration with the 'autistic poet' Christopher Knowles was initiated in *A Letter for Queen Victoria* (1974) and continued into other works such as *The \$ Value of Man* (1975), *Dia Logs* (1975) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). The collaboration of Wilson and Knowles raises similar questions to those raised by the performances in *A Child is Waiting* and *Stepping Out* about the negotiation of power relationships, agency, volition and collaboration in the access to voice and presence of a person perceived to have intellectual disabilities. Wilson explored these questions of incapacity and theatricality to evolve an avant-garde theatre/performance art form influenced by the modernist or historical avant-garde's fascination with tropes of what Berger has characterized as 'the disarticulate.'

There are a number of different versions of the genesis of Robert Wilson's collaboration with Christopher Knowles. Wilson himself sought to mythologise the origins of this collaboration, his discovery of the young autistic poet, just as he did his previous discovery of Raymond Andrews, a young, deaf African American man. This myth of discovery connects with those stories of finding an *enfant sauvage* or 'wild child' in the forest. Wilson's mythologizing also allows him to identify with the wild child in himself, with his sense of his own intellectual disability, an acknowledgement of incapacity that was important to him as out of it he was able to reimagine and recompose basic principles of

space, time and meaning-making in a highly distinctive and influential aesthetic at the intersection of theatre and performance art.

One version of the myth of the origins of the collaboration is that in 1973 a friend of Knowles's parents gave Wilson an audiotape that the thirteen-year old boy had made of a poem he had written about his sister: 'Emily likes the TV, because she watches TV, because she likes it.' Wilson's reaction was:

I was fascinated from the very beginning with what Chris was doing with language. He'd take words we all know and fracture them and then put them back together in a new way. He'd invent a new language and then destroy it a moment later. Words are like molecules that are always changing their configurations, breaking apart and recombining. It's very free and alive. (qtd Ebrahimian 71)

Wilson saw in Christopher Knowles a combination of *enfant sauvage* and *idiot savant*: Knowles' incapacity with the phonemic and syntactic properties of language opened up new possibilities of emancipation at an aesthetic level.

In a later interview with the *New Yorker* Wilson describes his first meeting with Chris in epiphanic terms:

When I first met Chris he was in an institution for brain-damaged children and that was one of the first things I thought about is that everyone in the institution was trying to correct the child his speaking his making writings on a typewriter his doing things inventing languages I found it very beautiful as an artist and was shocked to see in this school this institution that it was being corrected so I said why are we saying no to this what's wrong with it? I think we should support it. (*Absolute Wilson.*)

Wilson opposed the corrective and stultifying strategies of the institution in which he found Knowles with his own acceptance of Knowles' capabilities as an artist:

As I took Chris back to school one day, I decided to spend the day there to

see what it was like. I was shocked. I couldn't believe what was going on. Everything the boy was doing was either being stopped or corrected. I went to the Head of the school and asked, "What's wrong with this behaviour? I know it's a bit strange, but I'm an artist and I find his behaviour fascinating." (Wilson *Have You Been Here Before*)

The epiphany that was hinted at in Cassavetes' vision of Mike's painting without paint is here rendered explicit in Wilson's validation of Knowles. Wilson could realize the potential of Knowles' 'incapacity' in art. The O.D. Heck institution in which Wilson found Knowles attempted to correct Knowles's access to language and the symbolic, presumably in an attempt to give him access to the social sphere; Wilson wished to reconfigure Knowles' perceived incapacity in an access to the aesthetic sphere.

How Knowles was to occupy this aesthetic sphere in practical terms was in a radical emancipation from the institution: in a cohabitation as well as a collaboration with Wilson:

After some months and many conversations with his parents Chris left school to live with me. . . A couple of weeks later he said, "Dear Madam, most gracious of ladies, I will be in no way possessed of an honour of an introduction" I asked him, "What? What is that?" He said it was a letter for Queen Victoria. . . Because of this, the next work I made for the theatre was called, "A letter for Queen Victoria". And, of course, it had text by Christopher Knowles. (Wilson *Have You Been Here Before*)

Wilson's project then became at once a con-viviality or living together: part artistic collaboration – in which Knowles was at times mentor, at times muse - and part duty of care - given Wilson's status of guardianship. Wilson was re-enacting an earlier relationship with Raymond Andrews, the genesis of which as recounted by Wilson involved a similar epiphany with regard to the boy's capacity and incapacity:

In 1967, I was walking down the street when I saw a policeman about to hit a 13-year-old black boy. I stopped the policeman and asked, "What's going on?" The policeman said, "It's none of your business." In utter shock I replied, "But it is! I am a responsible citizen. Why are you about to hit this child?" After a brief discussion, I decided to accompany the police officer and the boy to the police station. Along the way, I listened to the sounds coming from the boy and recognized them to be that of a deaf person. (Wilson *Have You Been Here Before*)

This encounter eventually led to Wilson adopting Raymond Andrews, becoming his legal guardian just weeks before the boy was due to be institutionalized. It also led to Wilson's making a work of theatre based on Raymond Andrews's 'observations, drawings and dreams,' which became the seven-hour *Deafman Glance*. These epiphanic encounters with Knowles and Andrews did not arise quite as haphazardly and fortuitously as Wilson's accounts of them suggests. Wilson's accounts mythologize an artist's spontaneous discovery as a response to the aleatory, but a context for these encounters may be located in Wilson's previous work.

For some time he had been exploring the blurred line between therapy and arts and the particular aesthetic challenges of working with people with severe incapacities and limitations of access to spoken language, gesture and movement. In 1967 Wilson had been involved in a project at Goldwater Hospital for the Terminally Ill, in which he again describes an initial encounter:

I walked in, wow fifty people in iron lungs just tanks sitting on tables with plugs in the wall just their heads sticking out of tanks. So most of the people were catatonic and I was hired to encourage them to speak. In the beginning I wasn't quite sure whether that was something I wanted to do or if I would feel comfortable doing it er but you know once I got in there

and started working with the people I realized I had to forget about all my problems and their problems was what was important (*Absolute Wilson*) His first reaction to this encounter is reticence but this is overcome by an ethical imperative. Robyn Brentano, a member of Wilson's Byrd Hoffman group gives an account of some of Wilson's initial efforts to evolve a kind of theatrical or therapeutic practice for people at the limits of communicative capacity:

Bob began doing some very interesting theatre exercises with some of the patients who were completely paralysed and the only movement they had were very small movements, either their hands or they used mouth sticks to communicate. He connected them all up with photosensitive string put on a dark light and all of them were together in the room connected with each other and their piece was about the sort of communication between them but it wasn't verbal it was more about energy it was more about the sort of psychic connections between people. (*Absolute Wilson*)

Wilson recomposes the medical space as an aesthetic or quasi-ritual space, a literal and localized redistribution of the sensible, of the sensory terms of expression. What is somewhat obscured in the account's references to 'energy' and 'psychic connections' is what kind of efficacy these exercises had. If this is theatre, who is the audience - or is there, in fact, a need for an audience? If this is therapy, how do the patients respond to it or benefit from it? Is this 'incapacity aestheticized'? If such practice emerges from the isolation of the therapeutic context to the public space of theatre does it become an aestheticization of the incapacity and suffering of others and, therefore, exploitative? These are questions which will recur in analyses of the ethics of the theatricalization of incapacity in subsequent twenty first century theatre practices – and not just involving people with intellectual disabilities. In *Giulio Cesare* Romeo Castellucci theatricalizes the incapacity of performers who were morbidly obese and

emaciated or an actor who has had a laryngectomy who speaks in a voice which Castellucci seeks to characterize as another aesthetic and social rebirth in incapacity:

a laryngectomised man, as a mystagogue, as a prophet of a new voice ... a voice which, consequently, is reborn, just started. (Castellucci qtd in Taylor)

In 1962 Wilson had 'worked privately with a small group in Texas, researching body movement with brain-damaged children.' Accounts suggest the work proceeded by means of a kind of *via negativa* similar to certain types of actor training: 'It involved going back and "re-learning" very simple movements that had become distorted in the course of day-to-day living by various anxieties and inhibitions.' In Bill Simmer's account of the processes in "Robert Wilson and Therapy":

The emphasis was on the personal growth of the people involved. Wilson wanted them to be able to present themselves naturally onstage, without self-consciousness. (103)

Wilson's reported objective, the facilitation of the peoples' 'ability to present themselves,' is located interestingly somewhere between a therapeutic imperative towards greater socialization and a kind of theatricality or presentation of self in the aesthetic context of the stage.

It is possible to relate all these theatrical and therapeutic practices, the early private experiments with 'brain-damaged children', the work at the Hospital for the Terminally Ill, the work with Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles, to Wilson's sense of his own intellectual disabilities. Christopher Innes in *Avant-Garde Theatre 1892-1992* refers to 'the self-

promulgated myth that up to the age of 17 severe stuttering had kept him virtually speechless' (201) and in the words of Wilson himself:

I had big problems to learn how to read and write. I couldn't catch a ball. It's a processing disorder. I didn't understand it and my parents neither. It made for a very difficult childhood. (*Absolute Wilson*)

This disability narrative certainly plays an important part in Wilson's image of himself, his desire to trace the genesis of his creativity to his own incapacity, disability or sense of difference and his desire to identify on a deep empathetic level with Raymond Andrews, Christopher Knowles and others forced to negotiate a sensual and cognitive relationship to the world very different to the constructed normalcy of the conventional and the consensual. Early on in his career he was given advice to deal with this processing disorder by his first teacher, the dance instructor, Byrd Hoffman (after whom he named his company), to 'slow everything down' advice that remained with him in the aesthetic of slowness of movement and durationality for which he is renowned.

Wilson's collaboration with Christopher Knowles therefore, comes out of his previous experience of encounters with people with disability, which were in turn perhaps the re-enactment of an encounter with his sense of disability in himself. In talking of Knowles, Wilson feels the need to stress a sense of identification or fellow-feeling:

Chris and I think alike, a lot alike. His mother saw my notebook and she said it looks a lot like Christopher's. It was amazing how that we were often like on the same wavelength (. . .)
Chris is I think the closest one to me. I think of all the people I know it's the one who moves me the most. You know Chris can't tell a lie. That breaks my heart. (*Absolute Wilson*)

Wilson describes their first appearance on stage together which occurred after his receipt of an audiocassette of Chris reciting one of his poems and after Wilson had contacted the family by telephone and invited them to a performance of his seven-hour performance, *The Life of Joseph Stalin*. As Wilson relates the encounter, as he was sitting in his dressing room, a half hour before the performance there was a knock on his door and Mrs Knowles and Chris appeared and Wilson persuaded Chris and his family to allow Chris to come on stage with him:

Just before the performance was to begin I took Chris by the hand and we stood together on the stage. I addressed the audience, "Ladies and Gentlemen because 'A'" And Chris said, "Because she likes Mickey Mouse." And I said, "Because 'B'" And Chris responded, "Because she likes Bugs Bunny" Then I said, "Because 'A'" Chris replied, "Because she likes the Flintstones" And again I said, "Because 'B'" And Chris followed, "Emily likes the TV because she watches it."

After we left the stage there was an applause. (Wilson *Have You Been Here Before*).

Wilson then sought to revisit this scene in the dramaturgy of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* in the entr'actes where, as Bonnie Marranca describes it in *The Theatre of Images*, the pair 'play with certain clusters of letters ("HAP" "HATH" "HAT") and put together words, letters and sentences like building blocks' (43).

Marranca characterizes the structuration of these sequences as incorporating the 'behavior patterns of autistic children: echolalia, wordplay, imitation.' (43).

Wilson adapted the strategies of imitation he had developed in his personal encounters with Knowles into a key devising and rehearsal methodology for the production, as Stefan Brecht recounts in *The Theatre of Visions*:

Wilson's idea . . . seemed to be that we, the performers, were to learn from Chris, by talking to and being with him, and by imitation of him (imitation would make communication possible. (271)

This is a complete reversal or inversion of the strategy of imitation that Aldo Gennaro employed with Chris Dobbins. Brecht's account of the rehearsal process goes on to say, however, that this attempt by professional actors to imitate the speech rhythms of an 'autistic' young man failed due to the actors' inability and unwillingness:

The rehearsals were initially designed to accord to Chris this role of praeceptor. But the project aborted: partly by its difficulty, partly by the resistance of some performers . . . (272)

That the actors may have been uncertain as to what it was they were supposed to imitate is suggested in Brecht's attempts at describing Knowles's 'voice':

Chris's voice then had a perfectly empty and marvelously sustained enthusiasm; his repetitions lined out, in arabesques in place, the heartfelt arrests of mind. (271)

There are interesting confluences of incapacity and theatricality in Brecht's description of Knowles' speech. Knowles' enthusiasm is both 'perfectly empty' *and* 'marvellously sustained' which I would interpret as a kind of relentlessness of delivery married to a perceived flatness or affectlessness of those elements of speech related to emotional engagement: variation and modulation in pitch and emphasis, breathing 'inspired' by new thoughts, and so on. Similarly Brecht conflates the term 'arabesque' with its meanings of patterning in design, movement or music with an 'arrest' or lack of movement, and finally conflates the 'heartfelt' with the 'mind.' All of which suggests a kind of breakdown in being able to interpret Knowles' distinctive use of language and speech patterns that

would account for the difficulty or resistance experienced by the actors in attempts at imitating them.

Brecht characterizes the actors' attempts at imitating Chris's 'voice' as falling somewhere between the strategies adopted by two of the actresses involved in the project, Sheryl Sutton and Cindy Lubar, 'the former spoke with the accents of the trained actress, while Cindy maintained a powerful ostentatious inexpressiveness, speaking her lines mechanically.' (274) This incapacity of the trained actors to imitate Knowles is also apparent at the visual level in the video recording of the Chitter Chatter sequence of Act III in which 'five couples seated against a large backdrop painted in a symmetrical arrangement of the words "chitter" and "chatter" gossip . . . and as they speak gesticulate wildly' (Marranca 43), as Jensen-Moulton points out:

the entire cast's movements on stage reflected Knowles' mannerisms such as hand flapping, spinning, rocking, sudden marching across the stage, and other movements that, today, would be considered signatures of autism spectrum behavior. (19)

It seems that Christopher Knowles is fully present in the 'stereotypy' of these gestures whereas the trained actors struggle to imitate them:

Knowles' performance/presence appeared more live, more full than any other performer's affect leaving the others to appear as automata
(Davies)

The gestures of stereotypy that were manifestations of failed acting in the theatrical representations in *A Child is Waiting* and *Stepping Out*, become in Wilson's strategy benchmarks of an innovative technique that the so-called 'able' actors fail to attain.

Bonnie Marranca assigns far-reaching social implications to Wilson's aesthetic strategy of the imitation of Knowles:

Here autism is assigned an aesthetic value. By finding a creative place for Knowles in his theatre Wilson has challenged psychologists' insistence that the autistic child cannot be integrated into society. He has proposed him as a model member of a new society through his use of the phenomenology of autism as an aesthetic anchor of his theatre; so it seems, since the performers imitate Knowles rather than vice-versa. (44)

Marranca's interpretation connects with the trope of the 'disarticulate' in modernism to which James Berger refers. 'Autism assigned an aesthetic value' attempts to re-locate the perceptual world of the marginalized and excluded into the exclusive and set apart space of art and the aesthetic. At a deeper level this connects with what has been characterized by Stuart Murray in *Representing Autism* as on the one hand:

the complex desires of a society that wishes to be fascinated with a topic that seems precisely to elude comprehension . . .

and on the other:

the allure of potentially unquantifiable human difference and the nightmare of not somehow being 'fully' human . . . (4-5)

both aspects of which I would connect to the underlying affects of 'wonder' and 'guilt' which Malabou and Johnston in *Self and Emotional Life* interpret as the basic motivator for projects of knowledge, 'wonder' in terms of theoretical philosophy 'epistemology, ontology, metaphysics, logic and so on' and 'guilt' in terms of practical philosophy 'ethics, morality and politics.' (xv-xvi).

Contemporary responses to Wilson's 'use' of Knowles or of 'autism' in *A Letter to Queen Victoria* and subsequent performances included accusations of exploitation and impropriety on Wilson's part:

I was of course interested in the fact that Wilson had been somewhat autistic in his early years, that he came late to reading and speaking and that he was involved with a youth of an even more autistic nature whom

he was pushing forward at us. I don't feel that that's necessarily an immoral act but it does seem in some ways exploitative (*Absolute Wilson*)

Simon's accusation was refuted by Wilson in emotional terms:

People have said with Chris that I was taking advantage of a brain-damaged child. A judgment is put on, a superficial judgment without talking about the work. Chris is I think probably the closest one to me I think of all the people I know it's the one who moves me the most. You know Chris can't tell a lie. It breaks my heart. (*Absolute Wilson*)

The charge of exploitation was also, significantly, refuted in distinctive style by Christopher Knowles himself many years later in an art work referred to in a New Yorker article by Eric Kingsberg on Knowles's readings and exhibition of paintings at a gallery in the West Village in 2013:

Another painting, which consisted solely of the words "JOHN SIMON POLLUTE YOUR ANGER," had been inspired by the theatre critic John Simon's dismissive treatment of Wilson's work. (Simon called him "a charlatan" and accused him of exploiting Knowles.) He (Knowles) pointed at the edge of the canvas, where he'd drawn Simon with a cartoonish face, and giggled. "He's not smiling at all," he said. (Kingsberg)

Others responded to *A Letter for Queen Victoria* as if it were an exercise in therapy for Christopher Knowles, Harvey Lichtenstein refers to the 'eternal gratitude' of Chris's parents to Wilson for giving him:

a context, a meaning, an opportunity to be . . . a person in himself and to feel that he was accepted and can express himself (*Absolute Wilson*)

Stephanie Jensen-Moulton argues a case that Knowles should be acknowledged more not only for his collaboration on the three earlier works but also for his contribution to *Einstein on the Beach* that helped to establish the artistic reputations of both Robert Wilson and Philip Glass.

Jensen-Moulton also cites a contemporaneous critique of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* by John Gruen in the New York Times in which Wilson is cited

defending the project by equating tropes of autism with contemporary non-autistic and artistic experience:

Today, there is an increase in autistic behavior. The pattern of artists, of many people, is becoming autistic. You might call autistic what Gertrude Stein did with language, with words, with sounds. It's the repetitiveness and the obsessiveness of it all. Of course, autistic people are usually institutionalized. But autism simply means that one is daydreaming. If a child wants to go to the window and watch the sky change for six hours, that's considered autistic behavior. Well, I believe in autistic behavior. I believe in alternating it, but also in reinforcing it. (Gruen xi)

What becomes apparent in this response is the entangling of myths, tropes and thematizations of 'autism' in relationship to avant-garde artistic processes but also in regard to contemporary subjectivity at a moment where modernism is in the process of becoming postmodernism. Wilson himself makes explicit the connection between an idea of 'autism' and urban alienation, 'autism as an increasingly common psychological response to the pressures of contemporary life':

More and more people are turning into themselves . . . You can see it in the subways where everybody is bunched together, and nobody is looking at anybody. What they are doing is signing off. They have to because there's so much overload . . . It's actually a means of survival (qtd Innes 202)

Wilson's relationship and work with Knowles connects to a continuing fascination with the idea of 'autism' in modernism, postmodernism and beyond. This fascination emerged in modernism amidst deep anxieties ultimately over subjectivation, as James Berger argues in *The Disarticulate*:

The mentally impaired figure in modernism is a point of convergence at which aesthetic, philosophical, ethical, political, medical, and scientific

discourses come together and which, further, is immersed in deep anxieties associated with these discourses and their intersections. (70) This fascination, caught somewhere between wonder and guilt, continues in a proliferation of studies and investigations which reflect both the convergence and the suspicion of discourses of projects of knowledge with regard to autism as a trope of unknowability.

Autism then is not only a term that generates metaphors and mythologies but these are metaphors and mythologies that are particularly important to both aesthetic and political movements in thought in the development from modernism to postmodernism and beyond, in the period in which Robert Wilson was collaborating with Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles in an exploration of reconfiguring the aesthetics of theatrical performance.

I will now consider the specific details of the methodology with which Wilson sought to find ways of communicating with both young men and how these influenced performances he created with the various groups of people with whom he worked in the 1960s. In “Robert Wilson and Therapy” Bill Simmer outlines the methods of communication that Wilson first evolved in contact with the young men and which was then incorporated in the work of Wilson’s company, the Byrd Hoffman Group of Byrds. When Raymond Andrews was living with him, Wilson noticed his physical response to notes played on the piano: lower notes would evoke movement in Andrews’ lower body and higher in his upper body, so that he was, in a sense, hearing. While unable to hear conventional speech, Wilson noticed that Andrews responded to an imitation of the sounds he himself made. Wilson extrapolated from this that Andrews was using a ‘language’:

All the work I've seen or heard about with the deaf had never considered the idea of learning the language. All the work was imposing a hearing world's language on a non-hearing person (. . .)

But through imitating what we do there is some understanding, and in turn, society could assume the responsibility in reverse, and imitate what they do. (101)

Wilson took this practice of learning Andrews' 'language' into the work with the Byrd Hoffman group so that movement and improvisation exercises were developed to:

learn Andrews' language by imitating him. They learned his gestures and the way he moved as well as the sounds he made. (101)

A particular sequence of movements and sounds that Andrews devised and the group imitated was then incorporated into the seven hour performance of *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* where a whole row of soldiers performed the same sequence.

When Wilson brought Christopher Knowles into his home and into the group he followed a similar process:

Much as he had done with Andrews, Wilson tried to understand Knowles' unique vision. To do this, he began trying to learn Knowles' language.(107)

Again imitation or mimesis was crucial to Wilson's strategy, but a reversal of the mirror image strategy that Aldo Gennaro employed with Chris Dobbins:

He will never never put things together the way we do, because the brain is organized differently . . . it is absurd for us to impose upon him our way. We can try to have him imitate us, but maybe we should try to imitate him too. (107)

This form of imitation was developed by Wilson in his personal interactions with Knowles and then adapted into the working methods of the Byrd Hoffman Group:

After Knowles, the brain damaged youth, joined the Byrds, imitation became a regular feature of the workshops. Knowles was often asked to lead the group activities. Usually, he would stand at the front of a long line and the others would follow, doing whatever he did and repeating whatever he said. (Simmer 104)

What are the implications of these particular strategies of imitation in terms of the relationship between people with and without disabilities in the construction of performance? The process of imitation that Wilson sought to apply to the encounter with Raymond Andrews is problematized somewhat if we consider what it is that Wilson and his group were seeking to imitate. It is interesting that Wilson refers to attempting to learn the ‘language’ of Raymond Andrews who as a ‘deaf mute’ in disadvantaged circumstances has been outside of the commonality of communication. What is this language? The movements and sounds that Andrews produced and that Wilson then required the Byrd Hoffman group to imitate were viewed as a kind of purer form of expression and communication than the conventional subject caught up in the imaginary of spoken language. What was it though, that Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman group were imitating in imitating the sounds and gestures of Andrews and is it useful to speak of the ethical implications of this imitation? What Wilson perceived as Andrews’ ‘language’ was presumably Andrews’ attempts at communication and expression given his restricted or impaired access to the spoken and written word. These attempts could be termed his own ‘affordances’ of his incapacity in language. I have taken this term from the work of Arseli Dokumaci¹⁹ and others on the ‘affordances’ of the everyday, adapted from James Gibson’s ecological

¹⁹ See Arseli Dokumaci “Disability and the Affordances of the Everyday”

psychology²⁰, in the mobility of people with disabilities. A person with an invisible disability such as severe rheumatoid arthritis may develop a particular sequence of movements to afford their ability to pick up a spoon or get out of a chair. These are performances emerging out of incapacity. Raymond Andrews does this at a much more complex level to 'afford' some kind of entry into the symbolic order of language. What Wilson and Byrd Hoffman may well be imitating then is his attempt to participate in communication and expression, his affordances of his incapacity. From these sounds and movements and gestures a kind of imitative choreography emerges. What occurs in this imitation?

According to Byrd Hoffman group member, Cindy Lubar:

Doing Raymond's movement and sound with him – I did not do it exactly the same way he did – but just trying to do that myself was really a breakthrough of some kind for me, in terms of getting in touch with my own vocabulary of movement. (Simmer 104)

The imitation will be imperfect, will fail, but will help to reconfigure or reinvigorate the movement vocabulary of a trained performer. Here Andrews' disability is an enabling of artistic practice.

Critical responses to *Deafman Glance* at the time emphasize the otherness or other worldliness of its aesthetic as is exemplified in the famous letter Louis Aragon sent to Andre Breton after seeing the performance:

The world of a deaf child opened up to us like a wordless mouth. For more than four hours, we went to inhabit this universe where, in the absence of words, of sounds, sixty people had no words except to move...I never saw anything more beautiful in the world since I was born. Never never has any play come anywhere near this one, because it is at once life awake and the life of closed eyes, the confusion between everyday life and

²⁰ See James Gibson *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*.

the life of each night, reality mingled with dream, all that's inexplicable in the life of a deaf man. (4)

The letter is a prime example of a Surrealist or modernist view of 'disability' as a kind of primal difference more in touch with deeper mysteries than the lives of those without disabilities and connects with Berger's observations on the place of the 'disarticulate':

In the post-Babel condition that has been so widely depicted in Europe and America at least since World War I, the abject, the traumatic, and the transcendent have been linguistically indistinguishable. (Location 2169)

Aragon's reading connects Wilson's engagement and collaboration with Andrews to the preoccupation of modernism and the historical 1920s avant-garde with the relationship of the artist and the tragic, mentally different other as muse. This relationship is documented in, for example, Andre Breton's second novel, *Nadja* based on his interactions over ten days with an actual young woman, Léona Camile Ghislaine Delacourt, a patient of Pierre Janet. The novel's famous last sentence 'la beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas' (beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all) (158) encapsulating a typical Surrealist and Modernist mixture of beauty, the sublime, the different and the repressed other of madness.

Wilson's encounters with Andrews and Knowles are informed by modernist variations of the Orpheus myth: the irrecoverable one as muse inspiring the artist's mourning of the loss of the transcendent incapacity of madness in himself exemplified in the Breton/*Nadja* relationship. This myth may also be traced and the connections and correspondences made between Joyce's assault on the conventions of language and meaning-making in *Finnegans Wake* and the discourse of his daughter, Lucia, diagnosed as a hebephrenic

schizophrenic and subjected to confinement in mental institutions for fifty years of her life.²¹ A particular intertwining of wonder and guilt inflects the myth and its variants.

In the development of Wilson's aesthetic Raymond Andrews was the preceptor of his theatre of images, Christopher Knowles the preceptor of a highly particular relationship with the spoken and written word. Just as he had done with Andrews, Wilson attempted to get inside the 'language' of Knowles. But what was it that Wilson and the Byrd Hoffman group were imitating in Christopher Knowles? In Simmer's account there is a confusion of the imitation with the stated intention of imitation: 'By imitating him Wilson was eventually able to approach some understanding of his thought processes' (107)

This is apparent in Wilson's own words:

I saw that he had very similar concerns as I had . . . in terms of language- in terms of his patterning words and thoughts. Once I learned . . . his patterns, then we had this exchange through his way of structuring his thoughts. (107)

The identification that Wilson obviously felt with Knowles perhaps clouds the openness to the other with which Wilson might have approached his process of imitation: 'I saw that he had very similar concerns as I had' Wilson found what he was looking for in Knowles but it is a moot point whether this was done by appropriating the latter's Otherness into the Same of identification.

Simmer also cites an account of the relationship of Wilson and Knowles by Dr Hugh Lafave, a key figure in the connection between the two. He had been Knowles's supervisor at O.D. Heck and instrumental in persuading Knowles' parents to let Knowles work with Wilson. He characterized the relationship

²¹ See Ellman 320.

between the two as proceeding in stages, stages which he compared to those of the development of language – an initial non-verbal stage of looks and ‘the way they sized each other up’ followed by communication through movement and dance ‘it seemed to me there was a lot of body language going on between them’ (108), followed by an exchange of drawings and pictures and then spoken and written language, including Knowles’ creation of graphic patterns of word and letters on a typewriter. I think it is significant that Dr Lafave compares the development of their relationship to the development of a language. It exemplifies a view of the autistic Knowles as a kind of *enfant sauvage*. Wilson can then be positioned as an artist-therapist-shaman who through the power of intuition and empathy can unlock or awaken what has lain dormant in the intellectually disabled young man.

A very clear example of this assumption of quasi-miraculous power is given in an account by Christopher Knowles’ father of Wilson at the O.D. Heck Centre cited by Simmer that I would like to cite at length as it encapsulates a kind of theological underpinning to the negotiation of the participation of people with intellectual or communicative disabilities in theatrical performance which emerges in this account but also influences subsequent views of how this kind of performance is produced: either in the wonder of the healing touch of the arts or in the guilt of the puppet-like manipulation or exploitation of the disabled by the non-disabled:

There were perhaps eight or ten very badly damaged kids, neurologically damaged, both physically and mentally . . . And there was one little guy who was about three feet long, about six years old, who had arms about as big as your thumb. And he was just lying there whimpering and a woman was sitting there stroking his back and trying to console him . . .Right

adjacent to her was one of those electric organs- there were two actually – so Bob went over and looked down at the kid and he touched the kid ... with the back of his hand, the back of his fingers. And the kid stopped whimpering and with great effort, lifted his head up. And then Bob with the kid still watching him, went over to one of these organs and just put his hand down on the keys and made a noise. And he just held it there, and the child looked at his hand, and then crawled over to the adjacent organ and put his hand down and made a noise. It was the first time this child had ever done anything voluntarily in the whole time he'd been at the school. And then he looked up at Bob, sort of making a communication, saying, "Look, I can do that too." And then Bob very carefully raised his hand and moved it over so it made a different sound: and the kid realized that, and he made a different sound, too. No whimpering. Suddenly he was doing something that was meaningful. He'd learned something. The entire process took at least five minutes. It is a question of Bob understanding what that kid's rhythms were and being able to work with that kid in the same rhythms. And of course everyone was stunned, that in five minutes time he suddenly had this kid operating, when no one else had ever been able to reach him. As we left – there's a real Chaplinesque ending to the story – the young lady who was sitting there with the kid started plunking out "Jesus Loves Me" on the organ. She was going to teach him to play "Jesus Loves Me." (104-5)

The description of the boy in the bed is of another limit-human, for all the world another Mussulman. The touch that Robert Wilson gives the young boy is presumably different to what the boy has previously experienced. It is with the back of the hand and the back of the fingers, which is unusual, and contrasted with the woman's touch stroking his back presumably with the palm side of her hands and fingers, actions performed in Ed Knowles' view to try to 'console' him. The implication of Ed Knowles' narrative is that the woman's touch does the child no good because it offers a generic timeless sympathy, a sympathy that is

going nowhere, whereas Wilson's unusual and unexpected touch acts as a kind of provocation to the child, it stops him in the tracks of his whimpering and causes him to sit up and take notice. The process of imitation between Wilson and the child which then ensues leads Ed Knowles' to an interpretation which assumes explicit agency on the part of the child: 'It was the first time this child had ever done anything voluntarily in the whole time he had been at the school.'

While it is possible to appreciate the rhetorical force of this statement it has to be logically inadequate or absurd. Even assuming the child had been constantly observed, how would anyone know if and when the child's will or volition were involved in any given action or response? The phrase 'Suddenly he was doing something that was meaningful' is interesting because it affirms a particular meaning to 'meaningful' – the application of the child's hands to the keys of the organ in a similar place to where Wilson's hand had been on the other organ is meaningful in the sense of entry into the symbolic order, unlike the (unmanly) whimpering and the consoling touch of the woman which are discounted from having any 'meaningful' meaning. It is difficult to avoid seeing a kind of Oedipal drama within Knowles' parable of the touch of the maestro causing the disarticulate young boy to awaken into meaningfulness.

Christopher Knowles, of course, did not arrive in Robert Wilson's life as an *enfant sauvage* raised in isolation. Prior to his time at O.D. Heck his parents had enrolled him in the Institutes for the Achievement of Human Potential in Philadelphia, the therapeutic practice of which Ed Knowles, cited in Simmer, describes thus:

These are the people who have kids creeping and crawling and kids are manipulated, made to move in infantile patterns, which, according to the

theory, would re-establish whatever neurological pathways had been damaged. And this went on for about eight years. Very intensive work – eight hours a day, seven days a week, no time off. (106).

The founder of the Institutes, Glenn Doman, outlined the ethos and methodology of the organization in *What To Do About Your Brain-Injured Child*. Although subsequently widely criticized and discredited, the IAHP is still in existence. The fundamental ethos of the organization is that children with a range of diagnoses of intellectual disability are “hurt” and may be cured through their intensive programme which includes: *Gravity/Antigravity activities* – rolling, somersaulting and hanging upside down and *Gagging* in which the child breathes into a plastic bag until gasping for breath. This is based on the belief that it will cause maximum use of the lungs and thus maximize oxygen circulation to the brain.²² The IAHP and its methodology is fairly representative of organizations capitalizing on the anxieties of the parents of children with a range of behavioural issues and intellectual disabilities by offering intensive - and expensive - miracle cures the efficacy of which are, at the very least, dubious.

Was Knowles’s ‘autistic’ behavior alleviated or exacerbated by this intensive treatment at IAHP? Was Robert Wilson in his desire to imitate Knowles, as with Raymond Andrews, imitating the young man’s coping strategies, strategies evolved in coping with having been fairly traumatized by eight years of this ‘treatment’? These are of course now imponderable questions in terms of discovering ‘truth’ but what they do indicate is a problematization of *any* binary of ‘original’ and ‘copy’ in negotiating relationships and processes between people with and without intellectual disabilities that will lead to theatrical performance.

²² Qtd Zigler and Hodapp “Searching for Miracle Cures” in *Understanding Mental Retardation*

The working relationship and process of collaboration between Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles was complex and not solely motivated by Wilson's desire to empower a disabled Knowles. What becomes apparent in the archive around *A Letter for Queen Victoria* and the later productions on which the two collaborated is that there was, precisely a collaboration: a working together, a two-way process.

What emerges in the recordings of the production - and a television interview given by Knowles and Wilson at the time that is included in the documentary *Absolute Wilson* - in which they both launch into the 'Sundance Kid' text - is that the two voices interweave in a kind of spoken text version of Boal's mirror exercise in which it becomes unclear who is leading and who is following. If we look again at Ed Knowles' emotive description of Wilson's reaching out to a young boy in the O.D. Heck School then it is about a connection made where 'self' and 'other' are in a more dialectical relationship. Perhaps Wilson's touching the boy with the back of the hand implies less agency, less control in the intention of the toucher, it carries no threat, no desire for one 'self' to impose itself on the 'other.' Perhaps in this haptic exchange there are more positive affects in play, as is suggested in the following passage in Alphonso Lingis's *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common*:

What recognizes the suffering of the other is a sensitivity in my hands . . . which finds itself no longer moved by my own imperative but by the movements of abandon and vulnerability of the other . . . What recognizes the suffering of the other is a movement in one's hand that turns one's dexterity into tact and tenderness . . . (31)

The spontaneous dialogue that then takes place between Wilson and the boy is conducted through the third thing of a musical instrument and is one in which both can participate.

There is a re-definition of 'presence' here as co-presence in the sense of *being there for* the other person, sensitive enough not to impose, open to possibilities, not rushing to make judgments of how to interact too soon, sensitive also to the co-presence of the non-human presence of objects and the surrounding environment which had been present in Wilson's earliest work with people with severe impairments. Robyn Brentano, cited in Ebrahimian's *The Cinematic Theater*, provides another account of Wilson's work with patients in iron lungs that suggests the emergence of different ecologies of theatre and therapeutic practice:

I remember Bob did a theatre piece with the patients on C-12, which was a ward of polio victims who were either in iron lungs or in respirators. . . Many of the patients were completely paralyzed so the work he was doing was extremely minimal, often more mental than physical. He basically just got them to work with what they were hearing and what they were thinking and the very, very small movements they were able to make. . . He could get patients to respond by bringing them to the window to look at the boats on the river or listen to steam in the pipes or watch the plants grow in the solarium. The whole point of his work was that he tried to get people to open up and be much more aware of the small things in their environment. (Ebrahimian 16)

The potential inherent in this kind of work is still being realized. Wilson was asking the people to recompose their sense of their environment from that of the hospital or the institution to an increased awareness and sensitivity to elements in another conceptual and sensual space. This gentle work based in an 'aesthetic' of the sensorium: sound, sight, smell, touch carries a political and aesthetic

potential of recomposing the relationship of the participants in that performance to and with their environment, a conception of performance so very different to the 'institutional theatrical' the performance in *A Child is Waiting* or the inhabiting of the conventional theatre space in *Stepping Out*.

I have thus far discussed in detail certain modalities and paradigms of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities emerging in the United States and Australia in the period from the early 1960s to 1980. I will now turn my attention to performance in the first two decades of the twenty first century. In this period such theatre, for a variety of reasons that I will discuss, emerges from the margins of therapeutic and community practice to the profile and visibility afforded by the international theatre and arts festival circuit and to the forefront of critical thinking about performance. I will consider the development of theatre with people with intellectual disabilities in the work of Christoph Schlingensiefel, Back to Back Theatre and Jérôme Bel with Theater Hora. This later work connects to the Reality Trend²³ in contemporary performance and the continuing investigation of the ethics of participation and spectatorship. This work also intersects with the burgeoning field of Performance Philosophy and its debates on the interrelationship between theatre, theatricality, performance and performativity in postdramatic, or even posthuman, theatre and the continuing contestation of what constitutes the political in theatrical performance.

²³ Qtd Rimini Protokoll website.

Chapter Three

FreakStars 3000, Back to Back, and Disabled Theater

In the next section of the thesis I will be examining how ideas of incapacity and theatricality play out in the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in Christoph Schlingensiefel's *FreakStars 3000* (2004), Back to Back Theatre's *small metal objects* (2005), *Food Court* (2007) and *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* (2009) and Jérôme Bel and Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater* (2012).

In the period between the production at the Sydney Opera House in 1980 and *FreakStars 3000* in 2004 a number of theatre groups emerged pursuing different political and aesthetic models of participation involving people with intellectual disabilities. These companies include Mind the Gap in Bradford in the United Kingdom. The content of this work ranges from theatrical adaptations of literature reappropriating intellectually disabled figures, such as Boo Radley in a staged adaptation of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (2009) and Lennie in *Of Mice and Men* (2011). The Shysters in Coventry have established a body of performance work and a relationship with the commercial Belgrade Theatre. They have also collaborated with Royal Central School of Speech and Drama on the development of a course in Applied Theatre and on a limited training course that includes people with intellectual disabilities. Blue Teapot Theatre Company in Ireland have been in operation since 1996 and their repertoire has evolved through versions of classic texts such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Alice in Wonderland* to their recent production of *ID*, a work devised by the company and presented at the 2014 Galway Arts Festival. In Europe Compagnie de

l'Oiseau Mouche in Roubaix in France was founded in 1978, established as a professional company in 1985 and evolved a path of development through 'theatre des gestes' from 1987 onwards to development in the early 2000s that saw them incorporating the texts of Racine and Shakespeare. The Dutch group Theater Maatwerk was established in Rotterdam in 1987. In Germany Theater RambaZamba have been in existence in Berlin since 1995 producing a combination of spectacle theatre and devised projects and Theater Thikwa have been in operation there since 1990. In Zurich, Theater HORA have been in operation since 1993. They have staged over fifty productions since, and their work includes art exhibitions, music projects, theatre festivals and since 2009 a theatrical training programme for 'people with learning difficulties.' *Disabled Theatre* their collaboration with Jérôme Bel will be discussed at length later in this thesis. This is by no means a definitive list but it is important to give a brief context in which to locate the productions I wish to discuss. I have chosen to analyze the work of particular artists and companies that address ideas of incapacity and theatricality in ways to challenge what theatre is, or can be.

The first production I will consider, Christoph Schlingensiefel's *Freakstars 3000* not only explores the meaning of 'freakery' with regard to the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities in contemporary performance but also opens up questions about what constitutes the public sphere and spectatorship, part of an ongoing intermedial exploration in Schlingensiefel's previous projects of what constitutes an audience or public. As Christopher Balme notes of an earlier Schlingensiefel project, *Bitte Liebt Österreich*:

This kind of installation makes it difficult to even define spectatorship, as we can distinguish live bystanders, interested and disinterested, media

viewers who watch the performance on the internet and possibility vote; the wider media audience who followed the five days from the relative comfort of their living rooms by newspaper, radio and television. (Balme) The audience that *Freak Stars 3000* constituted included the television audience of the Viva TV series, the online voters on www.freakstars.de, the audience in the Volksbühne for the live performance and those who have subsequently viewed the dvd that deliberately unreliably documents the project. Balme points out that 'we need to examine how these staging devices functioned to create a public sphere.' *FreakStars 3000* is also situated within the context of the rest of Schlingensief's work as a constant interrogation of, and provocation of the norms, expectations and conventions that underpin both avant-garde and popular culture.

Back to Back have developed from origins within community performance to operate on the international Festival circuit but have also developed what they refer to as an ongoing dialogue developing from production to production and involving their audience – with particular reference to talkbacks and post-show discussions – where one production incorporates elements offered as a response to the reception of a previous production. The staging devices of the company whether within a large inflatable (*Soft*) or in a configuration of public space (*small metal objects*) or within a conventional proscenium (*Food Court*, *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* and *Super Discount*) explore 'theatricality' – in the sense of 'literarity' in literature – a reflexive exploring of the company's 'issues with theatre' from within the spaces of theatre itself, which offers particular challenges to spectatorship.

Jérôme Bel brings to theatrical performance with people with intellectual disabilities an avant-garde practice that centres on a rejection of theatricality,

virtuosic choreography and what he calls the 'narcissistic' strengths of the performer. This anti-theatrical stance becomes complicated in his use of the term 'disabled' in his collaboration with Theater HORA, performers with intellectual disabilities. All three theatres interrogate not only the place of people with intellectual disabilities but also assumptions of aesthetic and ethical community in contemporary theatrical performance.

It is important to give the context of Christoph Schlingensiefel's previous work to show how *FreakStars 3000* emerges from his ongoing concerns and how the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities was as but one group of people with which he worked, among many other groups perceived as socially disadvantaged, outsiders or 'other.' Schlingensiefel's work crosses and blurs boundaries. He worked in film, theatre, television, activist social interventions, installations, art and opera. He became widely known in Germany for a series of intermedial projects that comprised live theatrical performance, broadcast television, public interventions and installations and online interaction. He was considerably influenced by the ideas and practices of Joseph Beuys and the Fluxus movement. He adapted Beuys' well-known maxim 'Everyone is an artist' and his extended definition of art and the idea of the 'social sculpture' as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* or complete work of art. In fact Schlingensiefel's influences can be traced back to the historical avant-garde, specifically the Surrealists and the Dadaists. Out of these varied influences Schlingensiefel evolved a highly fluid and shifting praxis blurring and crossing boundaries between media, between theatre and art practices and social engagement, often creating anti-theatricality in theatres and anti-art in galleries. He has been variously described as 'the pain in

the arse of German political theatre’²⁴ and a ‘troublemaking holy fool turned into a pragmatic humanitarian’²⁵ This last reference is to his last project, before his death from lung cancer in 2010: the non-profit project *Opera Village Africa*, a large-scale, counter-imperialist European intervention in Ougadougou.

The exploration of a deconstructive and iconoclastic approach to the aesthetics of performance aligned with an imperative to explore social engagement recurs throughout his work. In *Passion Impossible* staged in Hamburg in 1997 he set up a mission for homeless people and drug addicts and encouraged them to participate in a series of social and political interventions in the city. He also engaged, somewhat anachronistically, in high art practice: directing *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, but Schlingensiefel’s work is not easily categorizable and the fluidity associated with projects under the aegis of Fluxus remained. A comment that he made in an interview with Florian Malzacher, cited in Forrest and Scheer’s *Christoph Schlingensiefel: Art Without Borders* captures something of his approach to politics and aesthetics:

Perhaps I was always already political, but from an aesthetic point of view. And what I am doing now is even more political because it assumes that the individual can’t deal with himself. (210).

The comment also captures his particular take on the Beuysian project that everyone is an artist is implicated with the belief that everyone is at the same time incapable of dealing with themselves. His work provokes spectators, participants and the public spheres generated around them to adopt multiple and contradictory positions.

²⁴ Roos “Palpating.”

²⁵ Johnson. “Former Auteur.”

In *Chance 2000: The Last Chance Party* a 'public action' was undertaken in 1998 in which he founded a political party with the aim of supporting disabled, unemployed and other marginalized people to become independent electoral candidates, a project reminiscent of Joseph Beuys' founding and co-founding of political parties in the 1960s and 1970s. The slogan of this public action 'Vote for Yourself' was influenced by Beuys, but is also caught up in a tension typical of Schlingensiefel in that his challenge is that anybody should vote for themselves not as a promotion or affirmation of self but as a provocation of what 'self' means in the distribution of the sensible:

The focus is on the individual. This refers not to the abstract notion, but to the concrete, mortal individuals who deal with their daily routine and do what they can to cash in society's promise of bourgeois happiness.

("Chance 2000- The Last Chance Party," Schlingensiefel.com)

Voting for yourself was not about a neoliberal notion of self-promotion to which all subjects are required to subscribe, but more in the sense of self as a multitude of singularities. Within this multitude are people with disabilities amongst others, or amongst other others who need to lay a claim to their own haecceities of 'self.' The project included Schlingensiefel's:

weekly shopping trips to Berlin's KaDeWe department store with a continually growing number of unemployed people, welfare recipients, disabled individuals and other qualified disqualified people.

(Schlingensiefel.com)

an indication of Schlingensiefel's ongoing engagement with the people involved that extended beyond the workplaces of studio or theatre.

Mario Garzaner and his parents, Kerstin Graßman, Horst Gelonnek, Achim von Paczensky, Helga Stöwhase Werner Brecht who participated in *Chance 2000* also appear in *FreakStars 3000*. An ensemble was developed, the 'Schlingensiefel

family' – which also included film actors who had worked in a similar ongoing way with another *enfant terrible* – of the New German Cinema - Rainer Werner Fassbinder.

Members of this ensemble were also involved in another Schlingensief project that provides important contextualization for *FreakStars 3000: Bitte Liebt Österreich: Please Love Austria: First Austrian Coalition Week*. Schlingensief staged this retake of *Big Brother* as an intervention in 2000, the year Jorg Haider's far-right FPÖ (Austrian Freedom Party) entered into government in Austria in coalition with the Christian Democrats (ÖVP). It involved a dozen asylum seekers living in conditions of some privation in a shipping container placed outside the Vienna State Opera in the centre of the city, underneath a banner inscribed 'Ausländer Raus' (Foreigners Out) and the blue flags of the FPÖ. The container was equipped with closed circuit television cameras that broadcast what was happening inside the container 24 hours a day to Webfreetv. Members of the public were asked to phone in or vote online to evict two candidates each day who they were informed would then be deported back to their native countries until one winner remained who would receive a cash prize and the possibility of Austrian citizenship through marriage, if that could be arranged with a sympathetic bystander.

Mario Garzaner, Horst Gelonnek and others intermingled with other members of the public outside the container expressing their vehement opposition or support for the 'project' –understood as an actual 'reality television contest'. The vehemence and stridency of the opinions expressed by Mario Garzaner and other people with intellectual disabilities is in no way

remarkable, different or out of place amongst the equally extreme and vehement opinions of the dissensus expressed outside the Vienna State Opera.

Spectatorial unease and dissensus is provoked and encouraged throughout. In the documentary that gives an account of the project²⁶ there is a moment when the prominent banner is first unveiled from on high as Schlingensiefel announces into a microphone with enthusiasm: 'Das ist Österreich' and an assistant pulls off the covering paper to reveal 'AUSLÄNDER RAUS.' People applaud and cheer - but what is it that they are applauding and cheering? – are they cheering the racist sentiment behind FOREIGNERS OUT or the exposure of this clear agenda of the FPÖ and by extension the Austrian coalition government, or are they applauding what they assume will be another Schlingensiefel provocation? The revealing of the banner leaves the answer to these questions deliberately unclear. It is a 'social sculpture', a performance in the social sphere in which everybody present is involved except nobody knows in what kind of performance they are involved. Schlingensiefel and his team likewise operate on a principle of taking risks: they cannot be sure what will be provoked by their provocations. Beuys configures a 'social sculpture' as a *gesamtkunstwerk*, Schlingensiefel reconfigures it as a *gesamtkunstwerk* of dissensus. Schlingensiefel is often labeled a provocateur but if he is, it is with a difference: he has no real idea of the outcome of the provocation, his provocations generate work that is 'fluid and open in its structure' and requires a responsibility and performativity in the audience. As Forrest and Scheer articulate, the subject matter of his performances:

²⁶ Foreigners Out!:Schlingensiefel's *Container*.

the recent success of far right parties across Europe; the indignities of unemployment and homelessness; the lack of visibility of disabled people in the media; the politics of fear in the post 9/11 period ; and the legacy of the Nazi past in contemporary Germany. (5)

are all highly political issues but he does not push any one political agenda or viewpoint. His intention is:

To provoke the audience to think for themselves and to approach the topic from multiple angles: 'self-provocation.' (5)

FreakStars 3000 then needs to be viewed in this context. Schlingensiefel was not suddenly turning to the 'subject' of the visibility of people with intellectual disability as he had already included people with intellectual disabilities *among others* in his previous works. I would contend that Schlingensiefel's *Freakstars 3000* completely steps outside of - or disrupts from within - the discourses that inform the aesthetics and politics of theatrical practices involving people with intellectual disabilities that had been established from the 1960s onwards.

Schlingensiefel's methodology and intentionality - and it is only possible to speak of such notions with regard to his work in any but the loosest terms - are *anarchic*. He comes to work with people with intellectual disabilities in *FreakStars 3000* from a background of anarchic, iconoclastic, pranksterish performance provocations. His work not only defies classification into genre but in his collaborations with people with intellectual disabilities he is completely irreverent toward any pieties of political correctness or the façade of ethical concern. Because he approaches a project like *FreakStars 3000* with a non-discriminating irreverence he opens up a possibility of egalitarianism between people with and without intellectual disabilities. He assumes equality between people with and without disabilities as a starting point just as he assumes an

equality or equi-valence between high and low art, professional and amateur performers, popular culture and the avant-garde. They are all equally contentious and contestable terms in the profound self-provocation Schlingensief puts them and himself through – and that is the crucial point: he includes himself in the provocation -Schlingensief, the auteur, the director, the artist.

He creates a framework in which contradictory and diametrically opposed ethical, aesthetic and political positions can be adopted to provoke a complete re-examination of all those positions or discourses. His is not a project that creates a safe or politically correct viewpoint or position of judgment for anyone –including those who profess avant-garde sensibilities or a particular liberal or radical leftist political viewpoint.

Schlingensief seeks in his aesthetic and political practices a democratic nonchalance: a lack of concern for, or judgment of, tastes and sensibilities or the rightness or wrongness of values and arguments, all of which arguments and counter-arguments, tastes and judgments he seeks to provoke in a creative exposing of dissensus. His strategy is ethically, aesthetically and politically risky. It risks incapacitation, the incapacitation of ethical and aesthetic judgment. In the provocation and experimentations of his hybrid performance projects as soon as a particular aesthetic or political formation emerges, Schlingensief seeks to incapacitate that formation. His work is anti-theatrical in the same sense that Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater* is anti-theatrical but with Schlingensief it is a joyful anti-theatricality, a *jouissance* of anti-theatricality.

FreakStars 3000

FreakStars 3000 was first broadcast in 2000 as a six-part television series on VIVA influenced by talent shows such as *Popstars* and *Deutschland Sucht den Superstar*. *FreakStars 3000* is a casting show with a difference in that only people with intellectual disabilities and psychiatric diagnoses comprise the two dozen contestants from amongst whom a select few will be chosen to perform at the Volksbühne as the 'free jazz' band Mutter Sucht Schrauben. From this television series and the performance at the Volksbühne a 2003 dvd also called *FreakStars 3000* was compiled and it is to this that I will be referring in my analysis.

In *FreakStars 3000* Christoph Schlingensiefel goes into an institution, just as in *A Child is Waiting*, and takes the residents through a process that is supposed to culminate in a performance at a prestigious cultural venue, just as it did in the Sydney Opera House in *Stepping Out*. Along the way, however, he re-frames the format as a mockumentary of the selection process for a talent show, the search for Freak Stars. Along the way he also parodies other commercial media formats: a Home Shopping channel and cultural and political talk shows. His satire is swooping and comprehensive and the targets of that satire include the current avant-garde practices of the Reality Trend of Rimini Protokoll and other groups, the use of untrained actors as 'experts' in performance and relational art practices and the use of people with intellectual disabilities in the work of avant-garde theatrical practitioners Peter Sellars, Pippo Delbono and Rodrigo Garcia.

In titling the project *FreakStars 3000* Schlingensiefel is at the same time invoking nineteenth century freak show display and spectacle. Schlingensiefel's intention is not merely to expose the shallowness of contemporary popular broadcast culture nor merely to expose the freak show latent in both attitudes to

people with intellectual disabilities and underlying the Schadenfreude of so much 'reality' television. The intent is rather to encourage the spectator to *think through* these expected oppositional responses and, therefore, to approach the questions of 'taste' and 'appropriateness' that the FreakStars project raises from a multiplicity of different positions.

This can be illustrated in an analysis of how the project is positioned from the outset to the viewer of the dvd. The first thing that appears in the main body of the dvd is an introductory commentary. White text on a black background scrolls up the screen, accompanied by an energetic male voiceover:

Dear film fans!

Watch cool young people fulfill their dreams of a career in music, with talent and 100% dedication. Hear German originals use song to highlight the problems of the non-handicapped. During filming actors were consistently abused, and forced to act handicapped. Every fit, every breakdown is therefore authentic and unique! (*FreakStars 3000*)

This format of text and voiceover is normally reserved in broadcast and film media for the guaranteeing of a discourse of truth or authenticity, or conversely for the guaranteeing of fictional content, but in this particular announcement many of the terms are revealed to be problematic at quite a deep level. This announcement is a parody of the kind of conventional 'disclaimer' which might state that no animals or other vulnerable subjects were harmed in the course of the filming; but it is a kind of dis-disclaimer or it 'disses' (disrespects) the usual or expected disclaimer around 'sensitive material', disclaimers that themselves generally paradoxically encourage viewers to bring to mind the very behavior that is being disclaimed. The introductory statement or preamble introduces

disability as a term but in its antithesis in the negated negative term 'the non-disabled.'

This reference to the problem of non-disability is capable of a number of different readings. In "Productive Discord: Schlingensief, Adorno and FreakStars 3000" in *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders* Tara Forrest offers one reading:

it is clearly the perceived prejudices and shortcomings of the audience – rather than any 'shortcomings' of the contestants themselves – at which Schlingensief's criticism is leveled. (130)

From this perspective the text could be read as quite sincere in its intention: the great problem of 'the disabled' is the non-disabled in terms of attitudes, behaviours, legislation, medicalization and so forth, as the social model of disability articulates. Forrest immediately goes on to point out:

In Schlingensief's productions, however, criticism is never straightforward. (130)

The 'social model of disability'²⁷ reading is, though, only one of the possible readings and it is not set forth as an underlying truth or an underlying reality that gives point to the irony. On one level the text could simply be contrary, ironic, mocking of expectations in an absurd reversal of expectations. My contention is that the text affords both a 'social model' reading *and* a mockery of the 'piety' of this reading and in this respect is an example at the molecular level of the whole project's 'treatment' of the subject of intellectual disability.

Schlingensief's strategy of 'self-provocation' continually eludes any one moral or ethical standpoint, seeking rather to provoke an ongoing critical self-questioning, uncertainty and, therefore, a degree of creativity and responsibility

²⁷ Found, for example, in Oliver. The social model of disability attempts to distinguish between impairment in the person and disability in social environments and situations.

from the spectator in response. His strategy could be said to be one of incapacitating the faculties of judgment of the spectator to emancipate other, diverse ways of thinking and seeing and of questioning what can be thought and said, or the distribution of the sensible, around particular ethically sensitive issues.

Schlingensief's 2004 project is a kind of postmodern parody²⁸ of a documentary format that has become hybridized with the inexorable, teleological structure and confounding of backstage and onstage of a talent show quest. In the popular television talent show, reality show format backstage and onstage are confounded as both are required to serve its particular narratives, which are narratives of selection: either the would-be performer/chef/designer struggles, faces their demons, overcomes adversity and triumphs or they err, implode, embarrass themselves and thus create a compelling drama of incapacity and reinforce the place of the performance of winning and losing in late capitalism.

The documentary format that might have still been trusted in the period Noonan made *Stepping Out* has now become imbricated with the highly manipulative dispositions of the meaning of 'reality' in 'reality television' and the Schadenfreude and freak show dynamic of the talent quest. Schlingensief's 'subject' in *FreakStars 3000*, the subject of his parody and provocation is a multiplicity, a constellation that includes a) how the talent quest/reality show emerges as a freak show, b) how the involvement of people with intellectual disabilities reflects on the freakery of the talent show with its group of telegenic 'cool young people' with talents for conventional performance set in competition

²⁸ See Hutcheon 58.

with each other to gain greater capital and c) how the talent show format reflects on the terms of visibility of people with intellectual disabilities within public spheres, within popular culture and within mainstream and avant-garde theatrical performance.

Immediately after the introductory announcement/disclaimer there is then an abrupt cut to the flashing of an image suggestive of the white noise on a television monitor accompanied by the sound of breaking glass and of an electronic glitch, the combination of which suggests a television malfunctioning or breaking down. The screen then switches to a man walking down a tree-lined street dressed in a white jacket which appears to be too big for him, wearing an ill-fitting black wig. He is singing offkey and his voice is on a permanent vocal fry. From the outset the television screen shows the presentation of a television programme in a state of breaking down and, the implication is, the talent quest breaking down in the face of the untalented. At the same time these breakdowns themselves are clichés of short attention span television or ‘zany’, ‘wacky’ television comedy – and, the implication is, people with intellectual disabilities are susceptible to being viewed in the same way: zany, wacky others who are the latest contribution of weirdness to voyeuristic reality television, or, given Schlingensiefel’s credentials, the latest guarantors of both otherness and authenticity to post-dramatic and anti-theatrical performance. The spectator is left in a state of uncertainty both as to the target of this parody and in a state of uncertainty as to whether they themselves might be the target, or that there may be no discourse or attitude that is not being parodied.

This is followed by a Terry Gilliam-esque animation sequence, accompanied by a soundtrack of carnivalesque, sideshow music and the sound of

uninhibited, slightly demented laughter. Prominent in this sequence is a graphic of an instrument suggestive of both cranial calipers and a vice, but certainly some sort of anthropometric measuring device. This same graphic is superimposed on each auditionee throughout the audition process. As Tara Forrest points out this connects the 'measurement' of talent in contemporary talent quest television and processes of normalizing or setting up norms that have a history that includes the destructive eugenic agenda of the Nazis and others:

By introducing anatomical measuring devices at the start of the program, and by superimposing images of those devices on the footage of contestants as they participate in the audition process, Schlingensiefel confronts viewers to question the degree to which certain National Socialist ideals of what constitutes a 'normal' and/or 'desirable' retain a certain currency in the contemporary media and popular cultural spheres. ("Productive Discord" 132)

This is certainly a part of Schlingensiefel's agenda in *FreakStars 3000* but as Forrest herself recognizes 'in Schlingensiefel's productions criticism is never straightforward.' In the superimposition of the anatomical measuring device and in other sequences in *FreakStars 3000* the dvd, for example when Achim von Paczensky appears in a political discussion show as Jorg Haider with a felt pen moustache and hair parting applied to his face as a caricature of Hitler, Schlingensiefel is also breaking the taboo in German broadcast media of not speaking about the Holocaust.

This is an agenda to which Schlingensiefel returns in the corpus of his works. In *Quiz 3000: You are the Catastrophe*, a Schlingensiefel provocation of the television quiz show format of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, which was staged at the Volksbühne in 2002, the following questions appeared, cited in Forrest:

Order the following concentration camps from north to south:

A: Auschwitz B: Bergen Belsen C: Dachau D: Ravensbrück

and:

The rape of members of which minority group are, according to the German civil code, less heavily penalized?

A: Men B: Animals C: Children D: People with Disabilities

According to Forrest:

What is disturbing about the questions pertaining to concentration camps and the legal consequences of the rape of disabled people is the degree to which they short-circuit the experience of pleasure associated with the contestant/audience's capacity to answer the question. (128)

She goes on to infer that if the contestant/audience member gets the question about the concentration camps correct, the arousal of the memory of the camps and the atrocities would both 'outweigh the pleasure gained from providing the correct answer' and 'make(s) it difficult to proceed in an enthusiastic manner to the next question.' While this is certainly one aspect of how these particular questions subvert the *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* format and provoke the spectator, there are other issues at stake. Testing knowledge of the concentration camps based solely on their geographical location and relative positions on a north-south axis is ludicrous. This occludes other knowledge of what these camps mean by only referring to their relative locations. The concentration camps have become of the same status as the trivialized knowledge of any random 'general knowledge' question in a game of Trivial Pursuit. Schlingensief's work repeatedly provoked an interrogation of processes of remembering, and of forgetting, the Holocaust.

Schlingensief's strategy seems to be to isolate and to highlight issues that are 'sensitive' in that they are in a state of uncertainty in the doxa of

contemporary morality or ethics. It is a strategy of offering spectators a number of different positions from which to respond, many of them compromised or morally and ethically dubious, so that they are forced to confront their own prejudices. They are provoked to examine both knee-jerk reactions *and* those reactions motivated by a show of ethical concern to be 'politically correct'. I think Schlingensief's pranksterism and provocation aligns with Rancière's idea of the 'political.' Politically correct ideas are based on consensus, whereas for 'the political' for Rancière and 'self-provocation' for Schlingensief are very much about creating dissensus, a clash of discourses or a disruption of discourse.

In *FreakStars 3000* Schlingensief sets up the particular discourse and narrative structure of the talent show quest in a segregated, residential home for people with intellectual disabilities and psychiatric disorders. At first sight this might seem like a deliberate disconnect, an inappropriate or ironic juxtaposition. The initial auditions take place within the institution of Thielier Winckler House and the spectator is immediately aware of the 'embodied difference' of the residents with disabilities from amongst whom will be chosen the candidates to go on the talent quest. Schlingensief forces the conventions of the format to fit this environment. The jurymembers, who will judge the talent are all non-disabled and include Schlingensief himself. As he outlines the rules of the audition process to a crowded room in the institution he struggles to make himself heard above the hubbub. He raises his voice and asks for quiet but an off-camera voice interrupts him in mid-flow, the camera cuts to one of the residents later identified as Bernhard who shouts out 'NO! NO!' and we hear a loud screaming in response. This comes from a female resident who will later be identified as Gabriele. We see her shaking agitatedly on her chair. Bernhard,

visibly upset, spits out 'Shut your trap . . . your mouth' as the loud screaming continues. Bernhard storms out of the room. Somebody we assume to be a staff member of the institution follows him out as Christoph repeats his name attempting to call him back in. A male voiceover is heard:

Everyone is on edge. Tensions are running high. Jurymember Christoph tries to calm them down.

Schlingensiefel invites Bernhard to come back and sit at the front. The staff member leads him by the hand, saying 'Come here, dear.' Bernhard resumes his seat but still fires off another comment at Gabriele: 'I'll smash your face in!' Schlingensiefel says: 'We'll do it together, now. Everything's okay right? We'll keep going.'

In this brief disturbance one institutional dispositif is set off against another: the talent quest against the segregated institution. The voiceover, added in post-production, 'Everyone is on edge. Tensions are running high' is from the discourse of the talent quest narrative, an attempt to gloss over the disturbance of the behaviour of two of the segregated residents as if it is part of this narrative of hyped-up enthusiasm of the talent quest. The interaction of this discourse with that of the institution – the staff member's 'Come here, dear' - draws attention to both the tensions between these two discourses and their similarities in terms of the control and disciplining of the affect of those subjected to them. The interaction also reveals the 'third thing' in this dialectical encounter: Schlingensiefel's project of 'social sculpture' or socially engaged arts practice. This project is not overtly activist in that it says *either* a) see how 'reality' talent quest television is as controlling as an institution for the intellectually disabled *or* b) see how the intellectually disabled are reduced to

the level of freaks in a freak show in a society based on norms of appearance and behaviour that they are set up to fail to achieve. This is a dialogic process in which multiple discourses may emerge and thus the place of people with intellectual disabilities in this project can not be said to be either one of exploitation or of empowerment as the project encourages the spectator to be aware of both of these perceptions. It also encourages a thinking through of the blind spots created by thinking in terms of *either* exploitation, 'a send-up of disabled people', or empowerment, 'highlighting the problems of the non-handicapped'.

We see this troubling of easy binaries upon which judgment and taste is predicated in the audition process in *FreakStars 3000*. This takes place in groups of three over the course of the programme and in one group we first see Anne Marie, who is microcephalic. Her appearance invokes a history of images of the freakshow: Schlitzie the pin-headed sideshow performer who appeared in Tod Browning's 1932 film *Freaks*, or, indeed, those unnamed bodies paraded as *Lebensunwertes leben* in the Nazi eugenics propaganda films, *Erbkrank* or *Opfer der Vergangenheit*. When required to audition, with the attention of the whole room on her, Anne Marie brings one finger up to her lips and makes a shushing sound. She smiles broadly and turns to look at the other residents in the audience. Axel, who is sitting near her, says encouragingly and gently: 'Sing us a song.' There are other noises of encouragement and laughter. We hear Christoph's voice: 'Quiet now! Let's be quiet. So, Anne Marie . . .' Anne Marie continues to smile beamingly, turns to Axel and says something inaudible. This is the extent of her participation. The talent show music and graphics press on inexorably.

The next contestant is introduced: Axel. He has phocomelia, the foreshortened 'flipper' arms associated with thalidomide births. Axel sings from a book a few lines of an anti-war song. As he sings this, we can hear Gabriele's animated laughter and the sound of shushing. Axel continues, singing the refrain: 'So why do we have wars? So why do we have wars.' His singing is sincere but tuneless and he seems to be smiling in acknowledgement that singing is not his forte. He is taking an in-breath for the next line when Schlingensiefel interrupts him with a 'Bravo' and the soundtrack of the mockumentary plays the fanfare that greets the end of auditions. The voiceover adds a comment: 'Why do we have wars?' An important question nowadays. How will the jury react?' Schlingensiefel also responds: 'Why do we have wars? No idea. Perhaps we should discuss that, yes?' At that point Gabriele responds: 'Yes! Yes!' She shakes both arms in movements characteristic of stereotypy and shouts and screams 'Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!' She makes several repeated joyful screaming sounds as she stands in front of the other residents. Schlingensiefel is seen laughing and pronounces the single word: 'Enthusiasm' and her audition ends.

On one level this audition sequence demonstrates how the project tries to negotiate 'the fine line between presenting and exposing its performers.' In Schlingensiefel's project the formations of the talent quest format, in this case the audition, are used heuristically. The participation of Annemarie, Axel and Gabriele all in their own ways disrupt the theatrical and narrative expectations of this process. Whether they and others pass or fail the audition is shown throughout the mockumentary to be the result of arbitrary decisions by the jurymembers. These are performances of another order entirely to the showing off of technique or the ability to imitate current models of virtuosic performance

of conventional talent shows. At the same time the possibility is raised that a spectator's suspension of critical judgment in the face of the 'failure' of these auditions is itself patronizing, a patronization encapsulated in Schlingensief's pronouncement of the word 'Enthusiam' after Gabriele's outburst. It is unclear, however, and I believe it is deliberately unclear, how much this patronization of the efforts at 'talent' of these three residents is a citation of patronization, a parody of the relentless upbeat positivity of talent shows, or whether it is a parody of the pity and sentimentality that infects the appreciation or judgment of the efforts of people with disabilities cast into the spotlight of the media or theatrical performance.

On another level Schlingensief's comment 'Enthusiasm' can be taken at face value. All those present in Thielier Winckler House invest with great energy and enthusiasm in Schlingensief's version of the talent show. The format of the television talent show requires the inflation of an enthusiasm on the part of the participants and the audience that borders on the hysterical. The residents appear to be enjoying themselves tremendously in what they are doing and participating in Schlingensief's provocations with humour and 'enthusiasm.'

It could also be argued that Schlingensief appropriates the talent show form in what Christopher Balme has described, with reference to *Bitte Liebt Österreich*, as a strategy of 'ironic over-identification', a term that Žižek adapted from Lacan to refer to:

forms of political intervention and resistance where an idea or issue is not opposed but embraced and given form in a hypertrophic version . . . by taking the system more seriously than it takes itself. (Balme)

If *FreakStars 3000* is an over-identification - of the aesthetically and politically reactionary television talent show format - does that strategy depend upon the

intellectually disabled residents of Thielier Winckler House taking Schlingensief's version of the talent show seriously? Does Schlingensief achieve his ironic over-identification at the expense of the gullibility of the residents?

This interpretation is, however, posited on the assumed lack of agency of the people with intellectual disabilities in Thielier Winckler House. One response to this argument is that Schlingensief is at least being democratic: just as the over-identification of *Bitte Liebt Österreich* is based on certain publics believing in the 'reality' of the rejected asylum seekers being repatriated when they have been voted out of the Container so *FreakStars 3000* is based on the belief by the contestants in the 'reality' of the contest and the choosing of the final group of performers to present the 'free jazz' concert at the Volksbühne at the end of the project – an event that does actually take place. What is also interesting in this respect is the composition and responses of the audience at the Volksbühne. Did they come to see intellectually disabled people perform or a work of avant-garde provocation by Schlingensief and how might their horizon of expectations have affected their response to the unmusical, chaotic 'talentless' concluding performance? Another response to this argument is that *FreakStars 3000* is not just a version of a talent show, it encompasses *Hit Parade* a parodic version of videos of middle of the road musical stars – such as Nana Mouskouri and Peter Black – promoting bulk lots of their cds on a Home Shopping Channel, *Freakmann* – a version of a political/arts discussion show and *Presse Club* in which the residents enact particular versions of the heated and ranting discussions of German politicians and journalists. In all of these forms the residents participate with commitment and energy. They and Schlingensief are palpably enjoying themselves.

The intricate problem of (re)presenting disability – particularly intellectual disability or psychiatric disorders - is imbricated in the talent show as freak show format:

The freak is in the situation itself, which forces us to make a distinction between what is and isn't normal. (qtd "Productive Discord" 132)

At times this results in a level of parody in which it is not clear whether the target of the provocation is the talent show of the society of the spectacle or the 'show' of concern for 'the disabled.' This blurring or overlapping of the target of the parody is evident in the unfailingly positive reactions to auditions, however disastrous they may be perceived in conventional terms of success and failure. 'Super' is the most common response. At times the three judges chant in unison 'Re-spect, Re-spect, Re-spect.' At such moments the layers of irony are complex. At one level the chants of Re-spect could be without irony: the performers, people with disabilities, whatever level of conventional talent they may or may not have, are approaching the audition with engagement, commitment and energy; they deserve encouragement and respect for this. At another level this chanting might expose the sham, show or veneer of respect that the talent show format appears to offer to all, while at the same time the format is based on a hope that there will be performances that are so bad that they will generate a powerful affective response in audience and viewers. At another level the chanting of Re-spect may be ironic at the expense of those who make a show of uncritically accepting whatever people with disabilities offer in terms of performance and the arts, those who unthinkingly respect 'diversity' as an abstract concept without acknowledging specific differences. On another level the irony could be directed at those viewers of FreakStars 3000 who would view

the whole project as *lacking* in respect for the performers with intellectual disabilities, as exploiting those performers and hence subscribe to the view that such a thing should not be broadcast or staged. Kroß cites Doris Kolesch's response to this last argument:

sweeping statements such as "theater must not do this"... only bear witness to the general reluctance of engaging with an aesthetic perception and to the recourse to a supposedly tolerant and liberal moral code which, by invoking the existence of seemingly intangible abstract values (such as equality, equal rights, etc.) only serves the purpose of avoiding experience. In fact, such a statement, no matter where or when it is pronounced, reduces disabled persons to their disability.

(Kroß 191)

Schlingensief's project in *FreakStars 3000* is to expose sensibilities or pieties of 'taste' that when applied to the participation of people with intellectual disabilities manifest in a desire to 'speak for, or on behalf of' such people. This is what Deleuze referred to as "The indignity of speaking for others."²⁹ It is a form of excluding those who are spoken *for* or *on behalf of* from ethical debate concerning them.

The particular problems around the 'taste' or appropriateness of involving people with intellectual disabilities – which can be exposed as a kind of show of, or pretence at, ethical concern – need to be situated within Schlingensief's much broader, political –and Nietzschean - questioning of values implicit in taste and judgment. By staging at the Volksbühne what might appear to be a talent show of the obviously untalented and by recording this process as a mockumentary within an institution for people with intellectual disabilities he

²⁹ See "Intellectuals and power: A conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze" in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1980), 205-217.

raises much broader questions of the aesthetic and political assumptions of 'taste' that distinguish between high culture or the avant garde and popular culture or *kitsch*. In the course of this examination, people with intellectual disability are crucially engaged but the subject or target of his investigation is not exclusively the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. I do not believe that Schlingensiefel attempts to broach the 'issue' of disability as he is conscious of the dangers of positing a disabled ontology, of reifying disability as opposed to engaging in a critique of the situations that create disability. He also wishes to facilitate the occupying of ambivalent and contradictory positions by the performers with disabilities.

One example of this is a sequence that is discussed by Kati Kroß in 'Consistently Abused and Forced to Portray Disability' in which Achim von Paczensky in his underpants is given a bath in a bath hoist (a piece of assistive equipment designed for people with physical disabilities, which Achim von Paczensky is clearly not) with the assistance of a nurse or support person. The format of this sequence is that it is introduced as one in an occasional series entitled 'Wie funktioniert eigentlich . . .?' 'How does ----- work actually?' a format which Kroß compares to a German children's television programme:

The structuring principles and commentating of the scene bring to mind
Die Sendung mit der Maus. (185)

Which leads her to read the scene as a critique of the 'infantilization of persons with disabilities.' In support of this reading she cites the accompanying voiceover:

This is Achim, and that is Yvonne. Achim heaves himself onto the bath lift and Yvonne pushes him to the bathtub. Now Yvonne can use the bath lift to lower Achim into the bath, gently and slowly, so as to avoid splashing.

And now the bathing fun begins. And if you're lucky, you'll also get a hair wash. (186).

and goes on to observe that:

The exaggerated and satirizing staging of the rough hair wash the protesting von Paczensky gets in Schlingensief's film highlights the innumerable practices of incapacitating disabled people in all sorts of welfare institutions. (186)

While this is certainly one aspect of the scene, what this analysis does not take into account is that it is Schlingensief himself who interrupts this scene to playfully and roughly wash Achim's hair, an action to which Achim responds by saying that his hair does not need washing. Elsewhere, in the 'extras' section of the dvd, Schlingensief interrupts an interview to camera with Achim von Paczensky by himself coming in to shot, poking him in the chest while questioning him about his being exploited in certain work practices and goes on to playfully wrestle with him until both of them end up rolling around on the floor. For me this behaviour is a paradigm of Schlingensief's overall strategy in this project. Issues of disability are raised - such as infantilization or workplace exploitation - not with the intention of offering a solution in activism or a corrective discourse but rather as part of a process of mutual, disrespectful and joyful investigation. Through a process of negotiation and dialogue Schlingensief's iconoclastic provocations align with the concerns and issues that affect the performers with disabilities. I would contend that this negotiation takes place dialogically, democratically in an acknowledgement of the debunking, incapacitating power of humour. This humour has been developed and shared over a long period of working together: Achim von Paczensky was by this point a longstanding member of the Schlingensief ensemble.

This approach does run the risk of overstepping ethical boundaries and of causing offence. One might pose the 'ethical' question of how would this parodic sequence where a bath lift is used by somebody who clearly does not need to use it, be received by a spectator who is sufficiently physically disabled to need to use a bath lift? Perhaps one answer to this is that such a person is more likely than most to understand when 'care' and 'support' descends into infantilization and patronization and it cannot be assumed that because somebody is physically disabled that their sense of humour is likewise impaired. The risk is, as Kati Kroß has articulated it, that the performers are 'exploited for making a political statement or legitimizing the *FreakStars* project' and she goes on to say that a 'whole number of scenes in Schlingensief's film could be interpreted in this way.' Certainly a number of contemporary critical responses chose this interpretation of *FreakStars 3000* but I would contend that this response fails to acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity of Schlingensief's strategies.

One example of this is a sequence involving Kerstin Graßmann. In her audition she sings an extract from 'Where have all the flowers gone?' The response of the judges and audience is of course positive and the voiceover comments that this is 'A wonderful song from a wonderful woman who we won't be forgetting any time soon' - the last phrase a grammatically negative formulation of a positive sentiment typical of the hyperbolic rhetoric of the talent show format. The next shot is of Kirsten having her makeup removed by a female crew member while Schlingensief stands over her, stroking her head. He remarks almost casually to camera 'Kirsten was schizophrenic . . .' then turns to her and strokes her head again 'but you're not any more.' Perhaps the humorous or whimsical suggestion is that performance has 'cured' Kerstin or possibly that

as you get to know her and get closer to her she does not seem schizophrenic any more. Kerstin's response is good natured but firm: 'I still am . . . yes.'

Schlingensiefel replies 'What?' as if surprised or feigning surprise. Kerstin nods and slightly more resignedly says 'Yes.' We then cut to Kerstin dressed and bewigged as Nana Mouskouri for a Hit Parade sequence in which she is followed around the garden of Thiele Winckler Haus by swaying fans/residents and interviewed by megaphone by Mario Garzaner and then sings through the megaphone: 'White roses from Athens . . .' One implication of this juxtaposition is both humorous and poignant: that behaviour which in one context is symptomatic of a diagnosis of schizophrenia is, in another context, performance.

This oblique, minoritarian approach to the politics of the representation of people with disabilities is indicated in certain aspects of the audition sequences. In these sequences the dispositif of the talent show quest with its strict narrative formation and expected affective arc is disrupted, or comes up against disjunctures, due to the distinctive participation of people with intellectual disabilities. Sabrina Braemer, a young woman with Down's Syndrome takes part in one of the audition sequences. She is seen aiding another auditionee, Werner Brecht, by singing along with him. Incorporating the discourse of the conventional talent show format which can tolerate the occasional relaxing of the prevailing competitive, individualistic ethos, all three judges take great pains to emphasize to Sabrina that her helpfulness to others gains her maximum points and 're-spect' and gets her into the next round. Her immediate reaction is to weep. The voiceover appropriates this reaction within the expected talent show narrative: 'The strain of the last hours is too much for some' She is, however, genuinely crying. Schlingensiefel goes over to her puts an

arm around her and holds her hand, saying 'Are you that happy? Are you happy? Yes?' Sabrina responds by nodding her head and saying, 'Yes' through her tears. Schlingensiefel then hugs her close and says 'You were great. You were really great.' and he leads her from the room with his arm around her. The tone of voice he uses with her is very different to the 'Super' of his citation of a talent show judge.

Later in the film when Bernhard is asked about the incident that blew up on the first day, the clash with Gabriele, the following exchange takes place:

Schlingensiefel: Bernhard, you got very upset on your first day?

Bernhard: Naw

Schlingensiefel: What upset you?

Bernhard: I dunno. I thought I'd done something wrong. I thought I made a mistake (*FreakStars 3000*)

I believe Bernhard's admission here connects interestingly with Sabrina's weeping and with the reactions of those residents when informed of their not being selected for the subsequent rounds of the talent quest. There are a number of occasions in the course of the mockumentary when individual candidates are told that they are not in the subsequent round. Norbert is told: 'You really impressed us, but you're out of the running' the camera stays on him for the expected reaction. There is not much reaction. He shifts slightly in his seat. Schlingensiefel continues: 'Are you very sad now?' Norbert: No.

Schlingensiefel: No? Norbert smiles broadly and shrugs. When Andreas, a wheelchair user with cerebral palsy, and an ACDC fan who 'plays' an untuned electric guitar, is rejected at the audition stage he takes the news with a similar equanimity, and when, later in the process, sympathetic Sabrina Braemer is rejected for the final round, Schlingensiefel asks her: 'Are you sad?' her face

betrays no disappointment and she firmly and clearly says 'No' Schlingensief pushes: 'No?' Sabrina replies: 'Not today. It's better.' The voiceover renders explicit how Sabrina's lack of disappointment and sadness disrupts the narrative expectations of the talent show: 'The sadness is limited. The jury had expected more.' While Sabrina weeps when she is accepted and praised, her reaction to rejection, like that of Norbert or Andreas, is much more matter of fact. What *FreakStars 3000* is implying is that, unlike the talent show contestants of the mainstream media, for Sabrina, Bernhard (ever watchful for when he has made a mistake) Norbert, Andreas and the others, rejection and exclusion is the norm and unremarkable, what is exceptional and, therefore emotionally harder to take, is validation.

In analyzing the question of the presence of the residents with intellectual disabilities in *Freak Stars 3000* Kati Kroß tries to make a case that, to adapt Garland-Thomson's work on staring, 'the freak stars stare back!' One example she uses are the sequences in the mockumentary in which Werner Brecht and Achim von Paczensky are shown in the control or editing suite:

the post-production emphasizes the staged character of the representations by repeatedly inserting shots of the freak stars at the control desk (191) . . . and even though the images shown do not document the actual editing of the film and the freak stars have no apparent influence on the post production. . .the film nevertheless reveals the camera's allegedly authentic representation of them as illusory. (191-2)

I find the logic here confusing as Werner Brecht and Achim von Paczensky have themselves been 'staged' in the control room. As Kroß acknowledges, they are merely 'acting' being in control of the production and the whole dizzying deconstruction of spectacle of the entire project of *FreakStars 3000* reveals the

illusory nature of the camera's representation of them. At the conclusion of her argument she refers to this scene again, referring to the work of both Schlingensief and Jérôme Bel arguing that whatever emancipatory or subversive potential this work may have, and however much Schlingensief and Bel allow disabled actors more influence on the ways in which they are represented, they both 'still revitalize the hierarchical dichotomy of *non-disabled/disabled* in favor of the first term.' She continues:

Schlingensief emphasizes this problem in the scenes that show the freak stars at the control desk. Obvious though it is that they have no direct influence on the editing of the film, Schlingensief develops a vision in which actors labeled disabled powerfully occupy this position. (196)

Again I find the logic confusing but I take this to mean that Schlingensief puts Werner Brecht and Achim von Paczensky in a scene of or *vision* of creative power or authority, even though at the control desk in *Freakstars 3000* they have no creative control. While I accept the point Kroß goes on to make that it will be interesting when performers with intellectual disabilities themselves are much more involved in creative decision making and choices I feel that the source of the confusion in the reference to the control room scenes is that Kroß hierarchically values a particular ontology of creative 'control' which would simply replace Schlingensief with performers with disabilities, one authority with another.

Schlingensief's critique, his 'self-provocation' is fundamentally a critique of the secure self, the self as point of origin or control in the aesthetic and the political sphere, which is ultimately also a critique of authority – hence the difficulty of placing the 'intention' of the work, the self-provocation goes on and on without occupying a place of reification. I do not believe that Schlingensief

wishes the viewer to be under any illusions about Brecht and Paczensky having any control in the control room. It is, however, merely one parody or masquerade among others, such as Achim von Paczensky as Horst Mahler of the NPD with a Hitler moustache and hair parting drawn on his face and forehead with felt pen or Werner Brecht as Elvis, parodies and masquerades which have been negotiated between Schlingensief and the performers.

Schlingensief operated in collaboration with the performers/residents, sensitive to their predilections and tastes and obsessions: schlager music, Nana Mouskouri, and Home Shopping channels and, indeed, talent shows. Achim Paczensky, Mario Garzaner, Horst Gelennek, Kerstin Graßmann and other performers from *FreakStars 3000* had previously collaborated with Schlingensief. The fact that the 'Schlingensief family' (Kroß 180) evolved meant that in effect the performers were in a process of collaboration in employment, in practical training and artistic development over a period of time and attests to Schlingensief's presence *with* them. Schlingensief worked *with* people with disabilities, not exclusively with people with disabilities - and not with any consensus agenda of inclusivity - just as he worked with other non-trained performers or outsider artists by developing a working and creative space that is occupied in common that was not about the commonality of a transcendent community. In many ways his work is an attempt to provoke dissensus within notions of community, a project in which people with intellectual disabilities could be said to participate on a much more equal footing than in previous - or, indeed, subsequent - performance practices.

Any consideration of the social political or aesthetic efficacy of *FreakStars 3000*, however, needs to be circumspect and subject to qualification, given the

anarchic pranksterism and provocation that hedges about the oeuvre of Schlingensief. With regard to the efficacy of the *Freakstars 3000* project there is a really apposite quotation that is, characteristically for Schlingensief, put in the mouth of a 'character' we only see in one brief sequence near the end of the mockumentary, who appears captioned as 'Rudi Zander, Produzent (Producer)' and who gives what sounds like a summary of the whole *Freakstars 3000* project:

Through the medium of televised broadcast I would say that a broad audience will consider the problems of the non-handicapped and thereby receive stimulus to do similar or different things.

This is wonderfully pompous-sounding language with which to attempt to articulate the efficacy of the performance as if it were mechanistically cause and effect. The effectivity or efficacy which is said to be achieved here is, however, a 'stimulus to do similar or different things' which in including similarity and difference basically covers every possible response, thus implying that the performance is, in effect, both totally efficacious and entirely without efficacy. It is in this paradoxical pranksterish context that any sense of the political efficacy of the project should be considered.

The project concerns itself crucially with the incapacitation or deconstruction of doxa and discourses of interpretation, validation and valuation as these reveal themselves in operation around the 'subject' of intellectual disability, and, I would contend, ultimately around the mediatized constructions of the 'subject' per se. In another paradox Schlingensief exposes a continuing ethical aporia in the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities by appearing to flout supposed boundaries of ethical behaviour in his strategies of involving them in theatrical performance. His practice still stands out as a more radical challenge to the recomposing of the politics and aesthetics of this type of

theatrical performance than much of the recent practice that has succeeded it and that I will now discuss. At the end of *Theatre and Ethics* Nicholas Ridout suggests that:

Theatre's greatest ethical potential may be found precisely at the moment when theatre abandons ethics. (70)

Schlingensiefel did not abandon ethics in *FreakStars 3000* but he certainly played fast and loose with ethical expectations around interactions with people with intellectual disabilities and in the process, I would contend, emerged a much more egalitarian and emancipating way of working. The next performances I will discuss also deploy a strategy of exposing what may underlie ethical niceties around the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance and assumptions of the efficacy of that performance

Back to Back Theatre

Back to Back Theatre was founded in 1987 with a commitment to engaging people with intellectual disabilities in theatre arts and performance in the local community of Geelong, a city located one hour's train journey from Melbourne, Australia's cultural capital. The company maintains a commitment to that local community with community theatre projects but has also developed, since the arrival of Bruce Gladwin as artistic director and Alice Nash as producer, a smaller ensemble of performers who have achieved great critical and commercial success internationally. This aspect of the company's work has led to their being designated Australia's most consistently successful professional theatre company, winners of numerous awards and the company regularly tours to international arts and theatre festivals around the world.

It is important to contextualize the company's origins in, and continuing commitment to community-based theatre as this is still influential upon the aesthetic and political development of the company's critically and commercially successful productions such as *small metal objects*, *Food Court* and *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*, productions that I will be analyzing in this section of the thesis. The ongoing artistic experimentation and development of the group aligns with a facilitation of the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance that seeks to accommodate both their capacities and incapacities and that plays with various incapacitations of the audience as an ethical and aesthetic community.

small metal objects

small metal objects seeks both to theatricalize a public space and to reconfigure at a fundamental level what is meant by spectatorship and audience. It reconfigures what an audience can hear. Each member of the audience is supplied with individual headphones. Individual members of the audience thus experience a decreased ability to hear the reactions of others in the audience and the sounds of the surrounding environment. It reconfigures what an audience can see. The four performers are at times subsumed into the surrounding environment of the public space. The headphone-wearing individuals in the audience become solitary and immunized from interaction with others, just like so many others around them, lost in the preoccupation with their own headphones and screens of phones and tablets.

In the Sydney Festival in 2007 I handed over my ticket and took a seat in a marquee opposite the transport hub of Circular Quays. We then became objects

of the gazes or stares of people going about their business, some, seeing us sitting there in tiered seats under cover of a marquee, lingered in front of us, stared or laughed at us, or did a little performance 'turn', giving us something to look at, taking the opportunity to perform in front of an audience without its performance. Some looked at the area of Circular Quays that we were looking towards, to see if they could see what it was that we had gathered to look at, then looked back at us, thinking that perhaps we were the performance. Some were too intent on their journey or commute to give us any more than a cursory glance, irritated at our being an awkward presence in the public space, while they clearly had places to go, people to see.

In *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship*, Bree Hadley writes of some of the complexities of response she experienced in attending *small metal objects*. She refers to a number of critical responses, typified by that of Owen Richardson in 'The Age', who felt that the staging of the audience and the placing of audience and performers alike out in the public space 'creates a special sense of solidarity with your fellow audience members and cast.' (86) Hadley goes on to note how many spectators felt that the particular configuration of performers and narrative to audience 'creates a sense of greater closeness with fellow performers and spectators' (86) that Hadley equates to Levinas' 'religion' or Jill Dolan's 'utopian' moment in performance.' (86) She then, however, goes on to describe how her own personal experience did not align entirely with this sense of solidarity in the face of the response of passersby:

On the day I attended this included a small child doing a dance, a pair of 'emo' girls disappointed their kissing display only drew a laugh, and old people asking the actors for directions, amongst other things.' (84)

She relates how her reaction to this activity caused her to rethink the notion of the audience as a solidarity or community:

Watching *small metal objects* I am not certain I myself felt precisely - or only - this sort of utopian community or communion with fellow spectators-as-performances that some critics celebrate. (86)

This is due in part to the complex web of interaction of looks and gazes between spectators and passers-by:

There were, though, also moments where some of our readings of the 'yuppie' characters, or the passers-by-as-characters, such as the 'emo' teens, could not really be classed as non-violent, community or ethically oriented readings. Our laughter was, at times, linked primarily to a sense of superiority available to us as a result of the solidarity and special perspective of the spectator group - which, in a sense, made us feel comfortable to sneer at some of the others, such as the 'emo' girls, in front of us in a way we might not normally have done. (87).

Hadley's reference to the sneer exposes the tendency, experienced by those seated as audience in the public space, to be judgmental of those passing through it. I felt embarrassed at the need of some passersby to give us a performance we had not come there to see, that mocked or drew attention to our presence as spectators. I was judging these public 'performers' in relation to a performance in which ideas of judgment themselves would be questioned, specifically with regard to the perception of people with intellectual disabilities. The spectatorship of *small metal objects* from the outset heightened an awareness of a tendency to judgment, a sense of separation rather than solidarity, and a discomfiting of audience as community.

In its reconfiguration of audience and performance in a public space *small metal objects* explores meanings of theatricality that Josette Féral outlines in "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language" in which she posits three scenarios that exemplify the 'theatricality of the quotidian.' The first is within a theatre:

You enter a theater. The play has not yet begun. In front of
you is a stage; the curtain is open; the actors are absent. (95)

In this example the space itself is theatricalized. The second example refers to a subway where one person argues with another about smoking on the train indicating a NO SMOKING sign but when they both alight at a station the one who has been smoking indicates a huge billboard for a tobacco company and the theatricality of this performance then emerges as an example of Boal's 'invisible' theatre. The third example is described as follows:

You are seated at a sidewalk café watching passers-by who
have no desire to be seen, nor any intention of acting. As they pass, they
project neither pretense nor fiction, nor do they behave as if showing-off.
Only by chance might they be aware of the watchful eyes following them.
However, your eyes perceive a certain theatricality in their figures and
gestures, in the way they occupy the space around them. As a spectator,
you inscribe this theatricality in the real space surrounding them. It is the
simple exercise of watching that reassigns gestures to theatrical space.
(97).

For Féral in the first scenario space is the vehicle of theatricality, in the second theatricality appears as a result of the performers' affirmed theatrical intention and in the third, which she concedes is the most marginal, 'theatricality seems to be a process that has to do with a "gaze" that postulates and creates a distinct, virtual space belonging to the other.'

The subtlety and the complexity of the staging of *small metal objects* is that it creates an interplay between all three of Féral's scenarios of the theatricality of the quotidian. The setting up of the marquee within busy urban environments creates a theatricality of space which is reflexive: Circular Quays becomes a stage set for the audience in the marquee but so does the marquee for the audience of passersby. The affirmed theatrical intention of the second scenario is embodied by the Back to Back performers but their presence generates both the unconscious theatricality of 'actual' engagement (people asking them for directions) and a conscious theatricality (the 'emo' girls). The third scenario is played out as the perception of intended or unintended performances in the background of the public space: performances that intricately interweave with or threaten to interrupt the scripted theatrical narrative of the microphoned performers.

At one point in the theatrical narrative of *small metal objects* Carolyn, the corporate psychologist, looking for illegal recreational drugs for a corporate event, says to Gary, one of the drug-dealers (in some of the performances played by Sonia Teuben):

CAROLYN: Gary, we are all living in a very different world (Grehan and Eckersall 69)

In the immediate context of the theatrical narrative this comment refers to Carolyn's work. Alan, the lawyer also looking for drugs, has described Carolyn as a psychologist. Gary has misunderstood this as being akin to a counsellor. Carolyn, after making the above comment, goes on to explain that her practice of psychology is not as a counselor but in the interface with corporations to effect 'change management.' She means that we are all living in a different world *now*

to the (understood) previous one in which psychology was something to be applied to damaged psyches, whereas now psychology has become a corporate discipline which involves in her words 'helping people be more efficient, more productive.'

In a wider context of the narrative Carolyn and Alan and Gary and Steve (played by Simon Laherty) are living in different worlds in that the former pair are successful urban professionals and the latter are outsiders, drug dealers and to a lesser or greater extent intellectually disabled. This is never really specifically referred to, but certainly implied. Steve's desire is expressed in the following terms:

STEVE: I want people to see me. I want to be a full human being (66)

When he is reluctant to participate in the drug deal it is the 'able' characters who swiftly move to a judgment of him, although it is still not specific:

ALAN: This guy Steve ... is having some kind of freak out.

CAROLYN: Is this guy stable?

ALAN: Hang on. You stable, Steve?

STEVE: No. (68-9)

And:

ALAN: The guy on the left in the white singlet is Steve: he's having some kind of metaphysical meltdown. (69)

Perhaps the audience may be led to judge him as being intellectually disabled due to his being played by Simon Laherty. The only specific, but oblique, reference to intellectual disability in the spoken text comes from Gary. In an earlier conversation with Alan, in an attempt to personalize the bare exchange of the drug deal, he states that he thinks he knows Alan from somewhere and asks the following question:

GARY: Alan, did you used to play footy for the Broadmeadows Special School? (64)

Alan, of course, answers 'No.' Gary's familiarity with this specific 'special' school coupled with his understanding of a psychologist as a counsellor and his friendship with Steve, all suggest that he has some familiarity with a world of 'intellectual disability' which Alan does not have. There is a difference in habitus between Gary and Alan, and the habitus of the audience is more likely to have commonality with Alan rather than Gary and Steve. We are all living in a very different world, disabled and non-disabled, and within the group 'non-disabled' different as to the degree to which we have contact with people with intellectual disabilities. 'We are all living in a different world' also resonates with a group of people sitting listening to this dialogue on their individual headphones as other groups of people swirl and criss-cross around the performers in the public space.

Hadley uses Habermas' term 'public sphere' as 'the public space or stage where people negotiate the accepted beliefs, attitudes and systems that are subsequently adopted as representative by the State' (2) and that it is in this public sphere that people with disabilities 'cause a commotion' in the phrase of Auslander and Sandahl. The various groupings of individuals wandering around and through the performance of *small metal objects* reveal public space as not necessarily a communal space. There is likewise a troubling of commonality in the disruption of the assumed solidarity or community of the audience. In "Putting the Public Sphere to the Test: On Publics and Counter-Publics in Chance 2000" in *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders* Solveig Gade refers to how in *Chance 2000* Schlingensief's strategy was 'to put public spaces to the test' and I

believe *small metal objects* operates with a similar strategy. Gade makes a connection between this strategy and:

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge's critique of the notion of the public sphere as a unitary and inclusive entity and, more specifically, their insistence that the public sphere is in fact constituted by a multitude of publics that relate to each other in more or less conflictual ways. (91)

Small metal objects exposes the public space not as a 'unitary and inclusive' public sphere but as a multiplicity of public spheres, a heterotopic space as Michael Warner outlines in *Publics and Counterpublics*.

It is in this context that *small metal objects* approaches the questioning of the current 'place' of people perceived to have intellectual disabilities and what 'they' might have in common with 'us' or, rather, what dialectical arrangements of 'them'-ness and 'us'-ness play across and between the bodies speaking through microphones, the bodies sitting in a marquee wearing headphones and the other bodies traversing the public spaces in the immediate environment.

How visible 'intellectual disability' is in *small metal objects* is in the eye of the beholder. Bree Hadley refers to commentary on the work: 'many spectators talk about whether or not they were aware that the performers had an intellectual disability' and cites Owen Richardson's naïve but telling questions in his review in *The Age*: 'What am I looking for? What does someone with an intellectual disability look like?' (85). Two performers emerge out of the crowd and because they are microphoned in the ears of the spectators before the spectator is able to pick out who in the 'scene' of the public space these performers are.

When the characters of Gary and Steve emerge it is unclear if they are intellectually disabled. Their dialogue is characterized by ellipses and non-

sequiturs, but then so is much dialogue in naturalistic theatre and, therefore, one can assume, in 'everyday' conversation. The spoken text is oblique, it blurs percept and concept, object and idea. Gary's repeated references to self-storage, ('I want to get into the self-storage business . . . Self-storage and childcare –that's where you want to invest your money' (62)) resonate beyond the banality of his views on money-making schemes to intimate obliquely to a blurring of identity of thing and person:

Steve: If I lost one of my things, I just couldn't go on living (62)

the commodification of the 'self' characteristic of the market-led discourse of the contemporary imaginary. Popular psychology might say that Steve's character struggles with issues of self-esteem, 'esteem' going back etymologically to an estimated value or valuation. He is unsure of what his value is in sexual currency and of what his self-worth is or the value of his 'self.'

The *small metal objects* of the title are objects of exchange. Currency is questioned both in its meaning of a system of exchange and the paper and metal objects invested with value in this exchange. There is a particular section of dialogue, which, due to its repetitive force, stands out in the surrounding context of the sparse, limpid and oblique text:

STEVE: Everything has a value

GARY: Everything has a value

STEVE: Everything has a fucking value

GARY: Everything has a fucking value (62)

This suggested conflation of monetary value, use value and sexual value is at the crux of the narrative. The moral or ethical meaning of value may likewise be implied in the meaning of currency as in that which is 'current', the current or contemporary fashion or way of thinking. 'Current' thinking on the inclusion of

people with intellectual disabilities suggests some sort of communal or consensual thinking which will be influential in actions at the individual level. Currency in what might be termed this 'neoliberal' sense of staying current or keeping current is akin to Agamben's 'contemporariness' in "What Is the Contemporary?," in *Nudities*, that he defines as:

... a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and at the same time, keeps a distance from it ... it is *that relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*. (11)

Commonality, currency and communication are constantly called into question in *small metal objects*. Back to Back Theatre in a statement of their artistic rationale include a specific disavowal of the contemporary:

Back to Back aims to propose work that is not contemporary, but a work for the near future. It is simultaneously a contention, an allegation and an affirmation for human potential. (Back to Back website)

Discussions of 'intellectual disability' in *small metal objects* centre around Simon Laherty's performance as Steve is the performer most visibly identifiable as intellectually disabled, a representative of intellectual disability. The following exchange has been cited as being an articulation of the problems of the person with intellectual disability:

STEVE: I've started being aware of myself

GARY: Is that good

STEVE: I'm missing something, a feeling.

GARY: A good feeling?

STEVE: A feeling that I've felt, sensed and known that I've always had.

GARY: Hmm

STEVE: It's my task to be a total man.

GARY: OK

STEVE: I want people to see me. I want to be a full human being (65-6).

The last two sentences of this exchange can be read as a reference to the lack of visibility or full personhood of people with intellectual disability. While this is one of the meanings implicit in this exchange it is important to look at the preceding context of these articulations of desire. 'I've started being aware of myself' just as 'I think therefore I am' (cogito ergo sum) is caught up in the limitations of language at the level of syntax, specifically the incapacity of pronominalization to account for the *process* of the construction of the self. Who is the 'I' in Steve's sentence and how is it the same as or different to 'myself'? 'I'm missing something' conflates 'I am lacking something' with 'I am desiring something I previously had' and 'A feeling that I've felt, sensed and known that I've always had' takes a remarkable journey where 'a feeling' is felt, sensed and known – running a gamut of different but related systems of 'experience' - when in fact it has always already been there. No wonder Gary can only reply 'Hmmm.'

Steve may be referring, however, to the 'totality' of being a man or the person with disabilities' desire to be perceived as a total man - a whole and not a lack or deficiency, the gaps and ellipses of what is being said strongly indicate that this sense of 'self' can only ever be a 'feeling' an imaginary desire for wholeness and completeness of a subject caught up in processes of subjectivation. Community is problematized at the level of its supposedly atomic structure the constituent in-dividual part.

Small metal objects' interrogation of self-worth and self-esteem, the value of a person, comes up against the split, the gap, and the diversity in selfhood. Bruce Gladwin commenting on *small metal objects* refers to:

A person's value is determined by their productivity and this is a question that's pertinent to people with disabilities. But it's increasingly pertinent to everyone in society. (qtd Hadley 85)

The questioning of the 'value' of a person perceived to have intellectual disabilities does not stop at people with intellectual disabilities it forces a questioning of the 'value' or quality of personhood. It is not possible to take 'person with intellectual disabilities' in isolation and to atomize it. To cite Jean-Luc Nancy:

one cannot make a world with simple atoms. There has to be a clinamen. There has to be an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other, of one by the other, or from one to the other. Community is at least the clinamen of the 'individual.' (*The Inoperative Community* 3)

Small metal objects concerns a number of communities or sub-communities that do not work, that do not function both within themselves and in relation to each other. Steve and Gary live in a shadowy or outsider community that includes drug dealing and they share some reference to a culture of therapy or 'counselling.' Alan breaks into the world of Steve and Gary and tries to speak the euphemistic language of a transaction to acquire drugs: 'Darren was 'helping me out' 'the 'what have you' has fallen through.' (Grehan and Eckersall 63)

Everywhere is the promise of a community, but that promise never seems to be fulfilled.

Simon Laherty's character Steve is, however, located in a position of power in the dramatic narrative. It is a power, though, that he chooses not to exercise, or rather that he chooses to exercise by *not* acting or doing. He chooses incapacity. His unwillingness to move or be moved is both the sticking point that incapacitates a drug deal, a financial exchange and a potential sexual exchange

and a kind of emancipation. In 'Pure Products Go Crazy' Hargrave refers to other possible choices or judgments being made in Steve's lack of movement:

Laherty's character hardly moves. For most of the 60 minutes he is still, a weightless touchstone in a moving world. There is something about his stillness that transcends the 'stubborn' and becomes eloquent, as if the character is making an aesthetic judgment as much as a psychological or moral one. (47)

Hadley offers a supplementary reading of this choice not to move:

Steve and Gary's stillness . . . differentiates them from the productive 'busyness' of the city space and the productive 'busyness' of Alan and Carolyn. (84)

Carolyn the psychologist friend of Alan, called in to try to help seal the drug deal that has stalled because of Steve's refusal to move, at first offers her services as a psychologist but Steve does not budge. Her final gambit to get Steve and the deal moving is resisted and in this resistance Steve can feel again:

CAROLYN: You're standing here dying and you could be living. Come to the locker and I'll suck your fucking dick.

STEVE: I'm staying here.

CAROLYN: You're a fucking useless piece of shit
(Carolyn and Alan exit. Gary and Steve meet)

STEVE: I feel much better now. Thanks. (Grehan and Eckersall 72)

Steve's refusal to move or be moved becomes his taking a stand, his standing apart. He actively chooses incapacity. Steve's stand is a resistance to various market pressures on him to move.

When at other times during the performance Simon Laherty as Steve did move through the space it was on his own terms. His movements followed a particular pattern of floortiling or some other geometric feature within the configuration of the structure of the public space. This trajectory of movement

revealed a patterning ‘normally’ ignored by those in a rush to proceed through the space. This was his own particular response to the strange and alienating patterning of the public space and it also revealed the strangeness of the movements of those bodies moving normally through the space.

The piece ends with the relationship of Steve and Gary. They rarely touch. In their exchanges their words seem at times to glance off each other and their conversational strategies proceed at times obliquely, at times potent with a depth of connection that their words and tone of voice seem ill-suited to expressing. They stand still and apart for much of the duration of the piece. In the assemblage that is *small metal objects* a group of individuals in a marquee sit together, yet apart. The spectators in the marquee, the performers with microphones, the bodies moving around them are also bodies in the same space together but apart. In the patterns of movement of these bodies what does the stillness of Steve/Simon embody? Is his lack of movement equated with a lack of engagement that is the trope of autism par excellence in the popular imaginary? Has this trope of autistic disengagement now become the nomos of the subject-consumer equally at odds and out of place in the currents of the public space? Is this stillness possibly a political act? Is the stillness or non-movement of Steve an act of resistance akin to the *durun adam* or standing man protests in Turkey or the tank man of Tiananmen? All of these questions suggest potential meanings in the subjunctive modality of theatrical performance.

Another question posed by this stillness is whether Simon Laherty stands there as a disabled man or a disabled actor – ‘actor’ in both an aesthetic and social sense of the word? In *Pure Products Go Crazy* Hargrave emphasizes

different meanings of non-acting with regard to Laherty's performance, quoting an interview with Bruce Gladwin:

There was something so amazing about watching Simon standing. No matter what else was going on in the rehearsal I would be drawn back to Simon. When he did stuff, I'd say, no, just stand. Don't move. That's how it started. Watching Simon standing . . . (46)

Hargrave then develops this idea:

Laherty, the most minimal performer, hardly 'does' anything. He is still for such a large percentage of the play that he comes close to an even more pared down point on the continuum: that of 'received acting'. This is where the performer, an extra for example, might walk on and stand in costume. They appear to be acting because their image is aesthetically framed but they are not actively feigning or representing something. (47-8).

I believe there is a danger in this latter reading of ignoring the high degree of skill Simon Laherty applies to the choices of incapacity he makes in his performance in both *Small Metal Objects* and in *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*. From another perspective an actor who can inhabit the space as if 'just being' is actually achieving the highest form of Stanislavskian or naturalistic acting. By the time Hargrave comes to write *Theatres of Learning Disability* he seems to have modified his opinion of Simon Laherty's acting equating the performance and Steve's choice of incapacity as equivalent to Melville's Bartleby and his *active* choice of incapacity encapsulated in the phrase 'I would prefer not to': a voice of small objection, a voice of the potential of the im-potential.

In "Making Room for Elephants" an interview with Richard Gough in *'We're People Who Do Shows'*, Bruce Gladwin refers to the emergence of *Food Court* from responses to the (re)presentation of people with intellectual disabilities in *small metal objects*:

there are a number of agendas in *Food Court*. One was in response to a series of comments in relation to *small metal objects*, which generally was received very well. Some people questioned the two-dimensional quality of actors with intellectual disabilities and suggested that they were always the victim. And it really got us thinking and led to the idea 'Well let's make something where the people with disabilities are the perpetrators of an action, as opposed to having to respond to it.' So that was a starting point, in terms of the idea of having the capacity to be evil. (241)

It is now important to proceed to trace lines of development of the aesthetics and politics of Back to Back Theatre from *small metal objects* to *Food Court*: from incapacity to the 'capacity to be evil', from particular attempts to incapacitate and theatricalize the audience in public space to the incapacitation of theatricality in a performative questioning of the ethics of spectatorship and spectacle.

Food Court

In *Food Court* Back to Back seek to reinhabit or reoccupy the conventional theatre space. From the outset this creates a tension: the production is both bound by and seeks to undermine the theatre space with its proscenium arch and orchestra pit and the techne of dramatic theatre. There is an attempt to reconfigure the relationship between actor and text: discourses and doxa seem to pass through and across the various bodies of actors in the space, all of whom are perceived as disabled. Back to Back made the decision to go back inside a conventional theatrical space for *Food Court* despite, or perhaps because of, what Bruce Gladwin has articulated as the group's 'issues with theatre' (Gladwin "Searchlight."). *Food Court* attempts an incapacitation of fundamental features of

representational or dramatic theatre: an undoing of the nuts and bolts of staging and characterization.

Spectacle, a feature of theatre which Aristotle denigrated in favour of a concentration on the causal logic of plot, and spectacle as subjected to Debord's critique in the *Society of the Spectacle* are both put through a process of deconstruction in *Food Court*: both presented and erased. The piece seems to shimmer and glimmer, to come in and out of appearance, to shine light on and to render obscure the bodies in the space: to make us aware of the dark spots and blind spots necessary for the construction of the visual field. Characterization as a coherent representation of a specific unitary individual undergoes a similar process of incapacitation. There is a blurring of character, persona and performer. Some characters bear invented names, some share a name with the performer. Speech is technically amplified and manipulated through a variety of microphones and sound software and the corresponding words are rendered simultaneously as projected captions. The result of this over-identification of the processes of communication and clarification is paradoxically confusion as to the site of the utterance. There is an uncertainty over where the text is coming from, a difficulty of locating these speech acts that come at the audience in so many different ways simultaneously. This confusion is enhanced by the deliberate indeterminacy of characterization, which feeds upon spectators' confusion over the extent of the agency of performers with intellectual disabilities in the performance. At times a spectator may well question whether a character is speaking what they 'feel', or speaking in the voices of others, of the 'cops in the head' and whether the performer is genuinely presenting their character, their disability or merely citing a stereotype of disability.

It is possible to read these features of the production in Deleuzian terms: the piece is becoming-spectacle: the actors are becoming-characters. The piece also invokes the 'becoming' in the meaning of that which is pleasing to behold and appropriate. It is at the same time, 'unbecoming' in the sense of that which is unsuitable, inappropriate and improper. The piece interrogates what is deemed becoming or unbecoming for people with intellectual disabilities in representations of sexuality, abuse and violence. In *Food Court* the performers with intellectual disabilities are presented as the perpetrators of sexual abuse and violence rather than the victims, but what is being interrogated is the formation that produces both abuser and abused. This in turn raises many questions of the place, or lack of place, of people with intellectual disabilities in the spheres of ethics and intersubjectivity. I will be referring to my own memories of attending a performance in the Adelaide Festival in 2010 and viewings of a vimeo recording provided by Back to Back of a performance in the Melbourne Festival in 2008.

The first part of the performance of *Food Court* takes place downstage in front of the stage curtains, the next section takes place within an onstage inflatable which reconfigures the light and the space to create the impression of voids, vacuums or abstract spaces. The use of a scrim renders the silhouettes of bodies in what appears to be a white box. In the last section, the inflatable is deflated to reveal a single body in space, in the blackness of a theatre space that extends to the back wall of the theatre building. What is characteristic of these strategies is that they are attempts both to create and deconstruct spectacle, both to encourage and to reveal different ways of looking, but this challenge to spectatorship is still very much within a theatre.

The orchestra pit is also made use of, but it is inhabited by The Necks, an experimental jazz trio who improvise on keyboard, bass and percussion throughout the performance. The relationship of their playing with the onstage performance is complex. It is not really an accompaniment in the usual sense, nor is it a soundtrack, which would suggest a kind of seamless underscoring of narrative or the emotions of the characters. What is improvised throughout the fifty minutes of the performance are arpeggio-like phrases in a minor key that promise a return or recurrence but never deliver. Piano, bass and percussion interact one with the other, at times pulsing, at times rumbling, at times crashing and thrashing about: never offering a resolution.

There is, moreover an interesting and unresolved interplay between what is being improvised in the orchestra pit and what is being rendered visible and audible on the stage. It is not easy to determine which element of the production 'leads' the other, in fact Helena Grehan in "Responding to the 'unspoken' in Food Court" in *'We're People Who Do Shows'* refers to promotional material for the show that describes it as 'a concert as much as it is a theatre show.' (Grehan and Eckersall 105) Indeterminacy as an aesthetic choice is present in the other technical elements of the production. In fact the *techne* of theatrical effects is problematized throughout the production: specifically the use of audiovisual technology and the techniques of conventional or naturalistic 'acting.' In *'We're People Who Do Shows'* Trezise and Wake in "Disabling Spectacle: Curiosity, contempt and collapse in performance theatre" refer to the use of captions: 'to render the oral visual and to foreground the background' while at the same time 'the spoken words work to render the visual oral, creating a kind of speech that reveals its own imperfections through its 'failure' to arrive unaided.' (126) It is,

in addition, unclear whether the captions are there to aid the audience or the performers, or indeed to draw attention to the process of understanding – and misunderstanding - between performance and audience, between people with and without disabilities.

Given this indeterminacy it is perhaps not surprising that it has provoked a variety of critical responses. Referring to the first section of the show that happens downstage in front of black stage curtains, Glen McGillivray in “Pleasure Out of Suffering: Negotiating Material Reality Through Fetishism and Disavowal in Food Court” makes the following judgment:

Food Court’s first act made it difficult for the audience willing to disbelieve. Set before a black curtain on the forestage of the Drama Theatre at the SOH, and lit by an unchanging open-light wash, this act was unrelentingly flat. (98)

He goes on to give a fairly detailed description of the movements and actions of the performers – as if partly to check he is not missing something -and concludes his description:

The audience is restless: nothing is happening, will the show reward my attention or am I about to be tortured by bad/obscure theatre/performance art? How long will this go on? (99)

McGillivray uses terminology more associated with an older form of theatre, the division of time into ‘acts’, and he uses a descriptor like ‘flat’ that assumes ‘theatre’ will be a condensed use of time rather than durational. His descriptions and judgments suggest he sides with ‘theatre’ rather than ‘performance’ in the theatre versus performance debate instigated by Michael Fried.³⁰ McGillivray seems to equate performance art with bad/obscure theatre just as a Fried equates theatricality with bad performance. McGillivray, when

³⁰ Referred to in Féral’s “Performance and Theatricality” cited previously.

confronted with theatre on the verge of collapse into performance that is the opening of *Food Court* struggles to comprehend or be engaged as he is expecting conventional, representational dramatic theatre which follows certain rules of characterization and movements and intensities in time and space. What the opening section of *Food Court* is offering, though, is akin to Féral's undoing of competencies in the specific meaning she assigns to 'theatricality'.

Trezise and Wake open their analysis, as McGillivray does, with a detailed description of Mark Deans' actions as he appears to set up the theatrical space, but their reading of these actions is quite different. They describe how Mark puts a chair on stage in a certain position and then removes a piece of masking tape on the stage so that it is closer to the chair, thus giving the impression that he has made a mistake in the placement of the chair. This action plays on audience assumptions that Mark, a person with Down's Syndrome has missed his 'mark.' This assumption, however, is confounded soon afterwards when a very precise downlight hits the chair that Mark has repositioned. The audience experiences what Trezise and Wake describe as: 'a sly and subtle joke on 'able' expectations of 'disabled' performers', a strategy which they locate in a wider context of the production's blurring of the 'boundaries between reality and representation, perception and preconception, ability and disability.' (119)

In the opening section Mark and Scott lay out the basic building blocks of the theatrical space, positioning chairs and microphones. Scott Price does a microphone check. Scott speaks the words 'Yes, yes c'mon. Yes c'mon. C'mon. Yes, yes, yes. Oh yes. Mmm. Yes. That's good' (96) as a kind of sexed up version of a check, but a sexing up which he delivers in a flat, affectless tones. Trezise and Wake read this as Scott 'cripping up' the microphone check. They characterize

his style of delivery as 'aggressively, tauntingly flat.' He is either a very bad actor, as McGillivray fears, or there is some reason for the 'flat' delivery. The reason Trezise and Wake ascribe to his delivery is that he is 'cripping up': 'he plays *on* and *with* expectations of how people with perceived disabilities *ought* (not) to perform (both on stage and in bed).' (124)

McGillivray's initial reading of this section of the performance is that it seems to be bad theatre, Trezise and Wake's that it is highly subtle, reflexive theatrical performance, what they term, after Elinor Fuchs, 'performance theatre' a hybrid form akin to performance art 'in its continuous awareness of itself as performance.' (123)

Trezise and Wake's analysis connects this self-reflexivity of performance theatre with disability in the following way:

To place a performer with a perceived disability in front of a mainstream audience- the majority of whom are likely to see themselves as able-bodied- is to invite that audience to undertake an act of double or triple perception: to perceive perceived disability as it were, rather than simply disability. (120)

They summarize *Food Court's* aesthetic and political efficacy in the closing words of their analysis: 'remarkably, we perceive ourselves perceiving.' (129)

Glen McGillivray's reading is a more straightforward perception of 'disability' in acting, acting that is incapacitated in the sense that it is inadequate or incompetent in terms of the communication of the spoken text or of the presentation of character:

Dialogue ensues between 'Gloria' and 'Jenny' in voices (when we can hear them) that are flat, lisping, nasal alternating between monotone recitations and harshly shouted outbursts. (99)

McGillivray goes on to offer an analysis of a scene in which Gloria and Jenny bully Leslie:

this portrayal of bullying is presented in such an unadorned fashion that the actors' distinctive physicalities and vocal qualities are exposed to our scrutiny. Yet 'Gloria' and 'Jenny', in particular, perform with an insouciance that heightens the *Verfreumdungseffekt* (sic) of the long list of epithets 'Gloria' hurls at 'Leslie' while 'Jenny' laughs. (99)

In this analysis it is unclear whether the actors are bad actors, disabled people achieving an unconscious *Verfreumdungseffekt* or whether they are in fact capable of the level of skill, technique and layered performance to achieve this *Verfreumdungseffekt*. I think the production encourages this blurring of the crucial question of agency as a strategy of deliberate indeterminacy. This strategy provokes a range of responses in the spectator who is left unsure of whether the performers are being disabled or whether they are playing up to or playing with tropes of disabled behaviour.

This indeterminacy over the agency of people with intellectual disability both within theatrical performance and outside it is deployed as a strategy by Back to Back to cause audience and critics discomfort and to question their own responses. In *Pure Products Go Crazy* Matt Hargrave relates his own particular discomfort at his reaction to the interaction of Carolyn and Steve at the end of *small metal objects*:

a middle class, middle-aged woman is offering to fellate a younger autistic man in a public space. Did my laughter at the line mask a discomfort with the idea of Steve having a sexual life? (46)

Trezise and Wake similarly catch themselves checking their own response to Scott's sexed up microphone check in *Food Court*:

These pornographic words, stripped of any context or desire, are doubly pornographic for how they sit against their speaker whom we perceive to be intellectually disabled.

Trezise and Wake like Hargrave, question the assumptions they make in their own subjective responses:

Has he had sexual experience? Does he understand it? Does he want it? Does he know that this blankly parodic speech exposes not only the words, but also a certain vision of him? Is he performing citation well, or failing to perform with emotion? (124)

This questioning of response again hinges around an uncertainty over the capacity of Scott Price to act or to know what he is doing by acting and his capacity as a sexual being. These 'pornographic' words are in some way speech acts or performative utterances in that the speaking of them is intended to increase libido or accompany the reaching of a sexual climax. They are at once ejaculations and pre-ejaculatory performative utterances. Scott is achieving something quite remarkable if he is *both* delivering these words flatly *and* somehow suggesting their sexual performative power. He is *citing* pre-ejaculatory utterances in an awareness of performativity many people would not associate with a person with intellectual disabilities

What is the space that Mark and Scott are laying out on the forestage in front of the stage curtains? The 'food court' of a shopping mall is the site of inspiration for Back to Back's production, the narrative is based on conversations the performers overheard there, and yet the production contains no visual reference to such a location, instead the theatrical space is configured in highly abstract ways. In this abstraction of the space the *Food Court* of the title is opened to other and shifting meanings - a food 'court' as a place in which people are judged before their peers.

When Rita Haleberrec and Nicki Hall arrive onto this scene they take us to another space of judgment. They are dressed in gold leotards and leggings, a costume sparkling with the glamour of trapeze artists or dancers. These are garments designed to display bodies trained to high levels of physical virtuosity but they draw attention to every folding and refolding of flesh of these young women's bodies. Does this exposure of their physiques also reveal the court of judgment instantly in session with regard to their body shape in the eyes and minds of the spectators? Is that visual judgment the same or different given their appearance as young women with Down's Syndrome? From the outset their appearance thus doubly challenges how the spectator judges them.

They sit on two chairs positioned stage right and, despite the fact they both wear face microphones, Mark brings on a boom microphone and swings it from one to the other as they speak to each other. What they say is also projected above them in white text on the black stage curtain. This excess of theatrical techne also suggests that this text is not originating in the bodies, and therefore minds, of the speaking women but that they may be involved in a process of citation. Theron Schmidt in "Acting Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and The Politics of Appearance" in *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political* characterizes these utterances as 'un-locatable speech-acts.' (207)

The challenge to the audience's judgmental scrutiny of the two young women is then transposed as the two young women judge Sarah Mainwaring's arrival centre stage as Leslie. She is slightly built but her gait and stance suggest palsy. She immediately becomes the object of scrutiny of Jenny on the chair centre stage. Leslie makes her way to the chair that is positioned stage left, audience right, a conventionally 'weaker' stage position. Gloria from the position

of most power stage right makes the pronouncement: 'She's fat.' At first Jenny, seated centre stage misunderstands this interpellation as being intended for her, asking 'Me or her?' to which Gloria responds 'Her.' Mark brings the boom microphone to Gloria as she asks Leslie: 'Have you got a name tag or something?' Leslie does not respond and Mark pokes the boom microphone at Leslie's breast, or where a name tag might be. As the interrogation proceeds Jenny prompts Leslie to respond: 'Use your tongue' and follows this up with: 'Do you know where your tongue is?' At this point Mark inserts the boom microphone into Leslie's mouth, pulls it out and lets it play around her lips. The interrogation-cum-accusation now includes tag-questions that assume Leslie's intellectual disability: 'You can't spell the word KETTLE, can you?' From afar Gloria calls Leslie 'Fat cripple.' (Grehan and Eckersall 96) This exchange both disconcerts an able audience – 'we' are not used to seeing people with intellectual disabilities as perpetrators of verbal abuse – and confuses them – to 'our' eyes all of the bodies on stage are perceived as disabled. What emerges is both the problematic of the perception of disability and a presentation of abuse as a system in which *any* body may be interpellated.

When Leslie continues to say nothing, Mark bangs the boom microphone on her head so that she at least produces sound if not speech, thus equating her with the voiceless or the animal. The abuse of Leslie continues and at one point Gloria stands in front of Leslie and harangues her: 'Look at you!' This command or demand echoes throughout *Food Court*. This imperative interpellates the addressee in a much wider field of scrutiny than their own gaze. The audience is of course implicated in this imperative to look at or look down on Leslie but

perhaps there is even a suggestion that they too come under its interpellation and need to look to themselves.

Gloria then shouts into a hand held microphone a list of abusive epithets while Jenny stands stage right laughing into the boom mic which picks up her laughter and manipulates it to reverberate. This sequence of berating, abusing and laughing goes on for three minutes before the long-suffering and silent Leslie exits as Gloria and Jenny stand in cahoots still laughing. The hyper-mediatization of the abusive epithets of the two young women draws attention to this text as citation of doxa, as Theron Schmidt articulates:

We do not know if the speaker is talking to the other woman or to a character who is represented by the woman, or repeating the things that she has been called. (200)

Helena Grehan summarizes this citation of doxa as 'a group of performers performing the 'majority.'" (Grehan and Eckersall 109)

When the three women have exited the stage Mark Deans appears to speak a form of narrative link between the food court and a forest. He speaks the text but also turns to read it as it appears projected on the back of the stage. Schmidt refers to a post-show discussion in London in which Bruce Gladwin explained Mark's role as a kind of incapacitated narrator:

Mark's text – the karaoke-like moment that marks the transition between scenes – emerged because Mark has never spoken in previous performances; Gladwin describes his strength as being with physical performance and creating strong relationship with audiences. The use of surtitles and text captioning was a way to support him speaking on stage. (203-4)

The way Bruce Gladwin and Back to Back frame him within the body of the company's work makes use of his persona of the humorous, hugging person with

Down Syndrome and some kind of parergon of intellectual disability – both hinting at the incapacity to make theatre: to speak, to remember lines, to fully inhabit a character other than one's own and at the theatrical power of what he brings to the stage as an affective presence. In *Food Court* the affable, comic persona he has developed over his years with *Back to Back* sits unbecomingly – deliberately unbecomingly – with the violence of the actions he performs in the first section – inserting the boom microphone into Leslie's mouth and banging it over her head.

Mark's role within the theatrical assemblage is complex. On the one hand what he is doing resembles 'non-matrixed acting', his actions are like those of a stage hand: he marks out the space, he operates the boom microphone. On the other hand his actions play with the spectator's perception of his acting. His marking of the space proves to be an ironic provocation or sending up of audience assumptions about his ability. His operation of the boom microphone is conflated with his perpetration of abuse and intrusion on the body of Sarah Mainwaring's Leslie. In a particular twist of the question of agency it could be argued that the point of the boom microphone entering Leslie's mouth, touching her breast or making sound by banging her head is to expose the invasion and abuse the technology of mediatization and theatre performs on her in seeking, probing and forcing her character to give 'voice' to who she is. The instrument of the boom microphone cannot, of course, operate without an operator. How responsible, then, is Mark's character for the abuse of Leslie? The production may also suggest that Mark's violence is a case of his 'only following orders' from Jenny and Gloria, the bullies, but Mark's character is still required on some level to take responsibility for the perpetration of the abuse. The confusion over

agency operates on yet another level as the audience may find it difficult to distinguish between 'Mark's character' and Mark Deans. I think all of these confusions over the extent of Mark's agency in his performed actions are deliberate: they force an audience into a confrontation over what they think Mark as a person with intellectual disability is responsible for, what capacity for action and intention he has.

To return to the karaoke scene that marks the transition in *Food Court*, it is similarly not clear whether Mark is the subject of, or subjected to, the techne and the language of this sequence. It is another example of Theron Schmidt's 'un-locatable speech acts.' His particular playing of the role of narrator is a reminder that what we are seeing here is a 'flickering of appearances and representations' (Schmidt 207) between actor, character and persona which is a (re)presentation of how Mark Deans, person with Down Syndrome is viewed both in the play and out of it and how perceptions of him in those two different contexts interact with each other.

Schmidt cites Bruce Gladwin's reference to this indeterminacy of spectatorship or witnessing:

There's a guy with Down's Syndrome. I wonder if he's playing a guy with Down's Syndrome. I think that's a tension that the audience is never released from. (197)

Schmidt also refers to a kind of split in spectatorship and an uncertainty of identifying with performers with intellectual disability:

I have one kind of relationship with the performers' performance and another kind of socially mediated relationship with the performers themselves and what I assume they might be going through as they perform the actions they are performing in front of me. Indeed my

assumptions are more than likely misconceived, and to cast myself as witness is to propagate these misconceptions. (197)

Both refer to the awkwardness, the uncomfortableness of the spectator, how spectators at a fundamental level can manifest a failure to see or a capacity to misconstrue what appears in front of them. Is this the anxiety of ethical relations that are themselves historically and currently confused and still in a process of negotiation? or is it, as Schmidt suggests, a breakdown in seeing and seeing-as-understanding. He goes on to refer to:

the disjunction between two different understandings of the nature of the event to which I am a spectator: whether it is 'real' or an 'imitation', and whether I am supposed to ignore or pay attention to the performers' eccentricities of speech and movement. (198)

What is opened up by the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in contemporary performance, and the challenges their presence seems to offer to the processes of meaning making, is how the act of 'seeing', in terms of paying attention, is based upon ignoring what is not being paid attention to, and how the act of understanding is dependent upon ignoring or glossing over what can not be understood. Such performance has the capacity to deconstruct both the sensorium and the sense-making of spectatorship.

The theatre space is then reconfigured using an inflatable and a scrim so that the figures who appear before the spectator appear both hazy and indistinct. Bruce Gladwin acknowledges the influence of the visual artist James Turrell's concept of the *Ganzfeld* (Grehan and Eckersall 242), experimental works with light and space which seemed to connect with Back to Back's concerns with the qualities of obscurity and translucency of different materials when lit from different perspectives. In this section the spectator becomes aware of the

shimmering but easily recognizable shapes of the bodies of Gloria, Jenny and Leslie. Gloria and Jenny's abuse of Leslie continues and intensifies. They command her to go to the toilet, then accuse her of missing the toilet. Gloria then issues a command: 'Take your clothes off' Leslie takes her clothes off down to her underwear. The Necks' soundtrack is curiously gentle at this point, rippling piano and soft cymbals, the scrim somewhat mitigates the act of voyeurism of the spectators but there is still an affective charge in witnessing two young women with intellectual disabilities compelling another disabled young woman to strip. When she has done so, the interpellative imperative is repeated: 'Look at you.' They then compel her to turn around and accuse her of having defecated in her clothes. They then command her to remove her underwear. Every action takes place slowly, the visual shimmer of the scrim and the accompaniment of the relentless but unresolving musical accompaniment ratchets up the tension.

Jenny and Gloria repeat the same question to each other 'What's next?' as if there is some narrative, some script to be followed in their abuse and humiliation of Leslie. Rita Halabarec, Nicki Holland and Sarah Mainwaring are obviously following a script, one which, according to the documentation of the company archive, they devised in improvisation and which they pushed to the point of performer nudity. 'What's next?' is a toying with the victim, an assertion of power by the perpetrators that also presents a masquerade of lack of power, a reference to a script or a procedure that must be followed. Gloria's answer is 'She's what's next?' Jenny commands Leslie to 'Dance over there. Slowly.' (99) and she dances, naked, moving and swaying her hips. As she does so, more and more bodies arrive to observe her and as they do so a new lighting state opens up the full expanse of the white stage space. One by one, ten, eleven people

arrive to observe her. The number of bodies, their stances and their all being positioned stage right looking at her, suggest an abstraction of a public space, the locus of an impromptu public spectacle.

Who makes a spectacle of this this naked, disabled young woman? Do her abusers make a spectacle of her, or is it the group of bystanding observers? Does this group stand for the sense of majority that always forms among the non-disabled when a person with disabilities 'causes a commotion' in a public space? How does this group relate to the other group sitting and watching all this in the auditorium? As Petra Kuppers observes in relation to another *Back to Back* production:

The point is not to answer these questions but to be aware of these projections, of these reading mechanisms at work in dramatic reception. ("Outsider Histories" 39)

In the actions of the group the victimization and bullying of the playground and disability hate crimes in the public sphere are conflated with the spectatorship of theatre.

After Leslie is rendered a public spectacle, the crowd disperses and Jenny and Gloria continue their abuse, alternately spitting out words of opprobrium to Leslie and expressing their affection for each other in flat, affectless tones. The actions and speech of Gloria and Jenny are presented as citations of emotion. Gloria and Jenny are incapable of finding a voice to express to each other the intimacy, tenderness and affection their words profess and they take out their frustration, shame and emotional incapacity on Leslie. Jenny punches Leslie in the stomach. The theatricality of this 'assault' is emphasized: each punch is accompanied by grunts from Jenny as Scott is shown banging boxing gloves

together into Mark's boom microphone. Gloria then kicks Leslie while she is on the ground and punches her. Jenny bends down and strangles her.

The guilt of abuser and abused is transposed. I believe something very dark concerning the othering of vulnerable bodies is being suggested. Gloria and Jenny are punishing themselves and each other by punishing Leslie. There is likewise a confounding of self and other when the perceived 'other' of people with intellectual disabilities are represented as the perpetrators, the aggressors, the bullies, confounding audience expectations of agency. This in turn seems to open up the possibility of a confounding of self and other in the relationship between observers and observed as is indicated by Avi Lipski's comment cited in Grehan:

I watched horrified as they inflicted pain onto one another, and felt a stirring deep inside me that harked back to memories of pain I had caused. (109)

People with intellectual disabilities are no longer just the equivalent of the *Musselmänner*, the victims at a limit point of humanity, they can now be imagined as perpetrators of violence. In *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* they become the Nazis as well as the victims in the camps.

According to Bruce Gladwin in an interview with Clare Morgan cited in Tresize and Wake, *Back to Back* developed the performance from improvisation devised by the performers:

Three actors . . . were improvising a scene in which a woman is abducted by two others and taken to a forest. Gladwin told the abductors that because they were in control, they could do what they liked with their captive. They immediately ordered her to strip.

From a director's point of view I started feeling really anxious, and so did other people in the room . . . I felt an obligation that maybe I should stop

the work. But at the same time I could see the actors really getting into it, and nobody wanted to stop. . .

It was like theatre gold at the time. When we finished the improvisation people were ecstatic. (127)

This anecdote stresses the 'agency' of the actors concerned. It is of course a facilitated agency in the context of a theatrical process: in the course of an improvisation Gladwin gave the actors permission to have control, to do what they liked. When Gladwin elsewhere comments on actors with intellectual disabilities presenting characters who are 'perpetrators as well as victims of abuse' in *Food Court* the force of his rhetoric elides a moral dilemma:

If you can't act evil, then you're subhuman, in a way, because we're all capable of being evil. (qtd Schmidt 202)

Food Court is political not because it explicitly advocates a particular moral or ethical standpoint concerning the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. Its politics lies, paradoxically, in its location in the apartness of the aesthetic sphere. Here difficult questions of morality and ethics can be posed, here the positions of abuser and abused can be reconfigured. When the roles of perpetrator and victim are both enacted by performers with intellectual disabilities this both challenges perceptions of such people as always already victims and also raises awkward questions of the implications of the structuration of agency and empowerment. At the root of this problem is a kind of Levinasian ethical question: is agency or empowerment always at the expense of others?

In the last section of *Food Court* Leslie finally does get to speak, 'proving' that she can speak after all and that she has in effect been 'playing dumb.' When she does speak it is a highly theatrical 'speech': Caliban's speech from Act III

Scene ii of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* which begins 'Be not afraid the isle is full of noises.' The speech is also presented in a highly theatrical and mediatized dispositif. She delivers the speech into a microphone which not only amplifies but manipulates, reverberates, echoes, and alters the pitch of her voice while her words are projected onto both the screen of the transparent inflatable in which she stands and onto the still visible back wall of the theatre. In addition, each word or phrase of the text 'arrives' in a distinctive way: the captioning or surtitling is animated and voice activated using software specifically developed for the show. Bruce Gladwin, the director, describes what he feels is at stake in the use of the technique:

She has an ABI – an acquired brain injury – and there's a quality of staccato delivery. She's always starting and beginning and not finishing words and needing a visual reference to get the word formed. So she would have two or three attempts at it and the word would float up or the letters would float up, jumbled, and as they get closer to the line they assemble themselves, but if she doesn't deliver it with enough force they float back down . . . It's like a visual representation of her speech pattern. (Grehan and Eckersall 243)

As she struggles to enunciate the words, the letters and words of the captioned text 'bounce around, seeming fragile and isolated as if they are stuttering or left hanging in space.' (Grehan 110) This is at once a highly theatrical form of Derridean *différance*– and a representation of her incapacity to breathe or speak the line unsupported. The technology does not support her; it is not so much an assistive as an aesthetic technology. It is another example of an 'un-locatable speech-act' (Schmidt 207) There is a deliberate indeterminacy of aesthetic in the (re)presentation of Sarah's voice. Of what is Sarah's voice constituted? Where is the speech coming from? The words come from a classic of the Western canon of

dramatic theatre, couched in the baroque conceits and lexical innovation of the English Renaissance. Visually it looks as if the captions are emerging from the prone body of Sarah Mainwaring as Leslie, as the letters and words rise in jumbles and clusters and sway and loop and dance from where she lies on the stage to the level of the surtitles. How are they animated? Are they voice activated? What constitutes her 'speech pattern'? Is it her, or her ABI? Here we seem to have a different configuration of un-locatable speech acts caught between orality and textuality.

The last line, which she says twice, sounds particularly faltering and wavering. It is as if there is a sob within it: it throbs or reverberates both at the 'source' of her articulation and in its electronic manipulation. An electronic prolongation of this reverberation persists as the projection of the forest seems to speed away into white space, all the letters of all the words disperse into black and we see her silhouette and a fade to black. The music continues and then we see the translucent inflatable being lifted above her, hanging there like a canopy of clouds and we finally see her again, this time unmediated through scrim or inflatable, standing alone in the opened stage space in front of a green light on the cyclorama. She appears to wave with her left hand, and her right hand holding the microphone is still moving in what we may read as involuntary movement. In an earlier part of the production, in a kind of visual pun, she 'shakes hands' with one of her bullies, a gesture which is part of a social code of competence, but after the other's hand is withdrawn, her hand continues to shake. At the end of the Caliban speech her hand still shakes, but is the shaking indicative of emotion or dystonia? On one level the production beautifies and theatricalizes her voice but at a deeper level generates an 'un-locatable speech-

act' flickering and wavering between theatrical representation and performance, incapacity and theatricality.

Leslie is finally revealed standing centre stage after much of the mediatization of theatrical techne is removed. This is a form of revelation, but veils of mediatization remain, she is still lit, there is a green light behind her, the music of the Necks still accompanies her. The protracted closing sequence serves to leave the impression on the retinas of the spectator of her figure in the empty space. The blackness or periods of limited visibility serve to enhance the presence of the retinal after-image. When the performance finally ends the relentlessness of the assault on the senses ensures that the ears of the spectators are still resonating with unresolved phrases, the eyes are still accustoming themselves to the plays of light and dark, visibility and lack of visibility to which they have been subjected. In the immediate aftermath of the performance the images and sounds still vibrate. When we see Leslie in a less mediatized space we become more aware of how our own organs of sense perception and sense making contribute their own interference, flicker and shimmer, their own points of focus and, hence, blind spots. As Trezise and Wake, previously cited, conclude: 'we perceive ourselves perceiving', or as Schmidt expresses it: 'this theatre is a place where appearance is seen: it is this that makes it political.' (207)

In order to delineate more fully what constitutes the potential meanings of the 'political' in the ongoing work of Back to Back Theatre and how the political plays out at the level of the aesthetic and is revealed or obscured in concerns with the ethical it is necessary to go on to consider how these issues are explored and embodied in *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*.

Ganesh versus the Third Reich

What the audience first sees of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* is an arrangement of objects in what appears to be a backstage space. Centrally placed is a chaise longue or ottoman, a piece of furniture that is a kind of essential building block for naturalistic theatre. The other objects denote the nuts and bolts of theatre: brushes and mops, an A-frame ladder, sheets of plywood, a lighting gantry, crates, a worker light shines from this upstage location to cast light downstage onto the floor of the theatre space configured as a black box. The workings, the hidden labour, the support mechanisms of theatre are exposed, but artfully: the extreme upstage space, which is lit while the main stage is in darkness. The arrangement of the theatrical space suggests to me the lit doorway at the back of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*. If this is fanciful, there is at least the suggestion of an interior or still life as well as the kind of theatricality of the space to which Josette Féral refers in "Theatricality: The Specificity of Theatrical Language." Michel Foucault discusses *Las Meninas* at length at the beginning of *The Order of Things* as a paradigm of both the construction of, and the problematizing of, the viewing subject.

This particular theatricalizing of the space from the outset makes the spectator aware of their own positioning and perspective with regard to what they are seeing. The position of spectator will not always be comfortable. The production posits various models of spectatorship that are subsequently incapacitated to leave spectators uncomfortably aware of the prejudices in their

previously held assumptions around intellectual disability but I believe the intention of this strategy is heuristic.

Across this framed space Simon Laherty and Mark Deans casually walk on; the latter sits with crossed legs on the chaise longue. The opening dialogue between Simon Laherty and Brian Tilley is heard, but what is seen is Mark Deans looking from side to side in time with the turn taking of the exchange between the two others. He is ignored, and not part of the conversation, but centrally positioned and in plain sight. He is in a kind of anteroom of the theatre, a backstage rendered onstage, or an onstage representation of backstage. His presence and positioning is at the same time liminal: on the threshold of the stage, on the edge of a conversation, and in the centre of the frame, centre stage. This is indicative of his function in the whole piece: he appears to be left 'free' from the constraints of narrative and characterization. His presence confounds any hierarchy of dominant meanings or of what is the centre and what is the periphery of the piece, a confounding of *ergon* and *parergon*.

The dialogue that goes on around him opens with: 'Are you playing the main character?' This question is later revealed to be quite problematic as the piece itself shifts and interweaves between the mythical, epic narrative of Ganesh's attempts to retrieve the symbol of the swastika from Hitler and the rehearsal narrative of a group of intellectually disabled performers led by a non-disabled director creating this epic narrative.

Who is playing the main character? Is it Brian, as Ganesh, or the writer of the play? David Woods, as the director of an ensemble of performers perceived to have intellectual disabilities and Vishnu? Simon Laherty as 'Simon' or Levi the Jew or Hitler? Scott Price as 'Scott' the conscience of the piece, and an SS guard?

Is it Mark Deans, who opens and closes the play, a free floating, un-castable but compellingly watchable presence - a 'presence guaranteeing authenticity' to cite one of the later parodic exchanges of the text. 'Are you playing the main character?' is a question that is never answered. In a play that Brian states from the outset is 'a story about power' it is not easy to determine who wields and who is subjected to that power.

The three performers go on to talk about casting decisions in a play that has, of course, already been cast. Simon's line to Brian captures something of the odd twists and turns of power and intersubjectivity in the piece when he asks:

Do you think I might be interested in getting a part in the play? (160)

It's the 'wrong' question. It should either be 'Do you think you might be interested in giving me a part in the play?' or 'Do you think there is any chance of me getting a part in the play?' or somesuch. The line as delivered, however, captures the odd powerplay of agency and lack of agency in which the performers with intellectual disabilities in the ensemble seem to find themselves. Having established that Simon is required, the next section of dialogue Simon deals with Mark's inclusion. Simon to Brian: 'Would you include Mark?' Simon to Mark: 'You don't have to, but you can be in it' Simon to Mark: 'Mark are you available?' Brian explains that he will play Ganesh, God of Overcoming Obstacles and suggests to Simon:

BRIAN: Maybe you could be one of the obstacles? (160)

This playfully refers to the idea of the 'dis' in disability as an obstacle to the assumed abilities or competencies of an actor. Brian and Simon settle on Simon being cast as a Jew:

SIMON: That sounds better than being an obstacle. (160)

Mark, he's given us another option. Would you like to be a Jew?

MARK: Yeah

SIMON: Like two Jews on the run from the Nazis. You'd be with me, Mark.

(160)

The playful and humorous suggestion is that people perceived to have intellectual disabilities do have choices as to what roles they occupy: they can either be an obstacle, 'something that stands in the way or that obstructs progress' or a Jew on the run from Nazis, a role reiteratively on offer since the middle of the previous century. The line that suggests that at least there will be some sense of solidarity in Simon and Mark participating – You'd be with me, Mark – a conditional tense with a connotation of hope – proves to be a promise only fulfilled on certain terms in Mark's case. He is *with* the others onstage throughout but never really integrated into either the mythical or historical narrative.

The next scene is also a scene of origins and is presented diegetically by David Woods as Vishnu. It is a story of how symbols became gods. In the mythical sweep of this narrative Parvati wife of Shiva, the destroyer, persuades her husband to let their son Ganesh go to reclaim the swastika from the Nazis. The play then begins again in a quasi-historical narrative, in 1943 in the guard-house of a concentration camp near the border of Germany and Poland. In this scene Woods plays Dr Josef Mengele and Simon Laherty plays his trusted, intellectually disabled, Jewish prisoner, Levi. Mengele interrogates Brian Tilley's elephant-headed Ganesh as another aberration to be added to his collection of abnormal curiosities. The histories of the Shoah and the extermination of the

disabled in Aktion T4 are conflated with a re-telling of Hindu myths of Ganesh. Back to Back pose a fundamental and highly current question - in which the politics of representation intersect with identity politics - who has the right to tell whose stories and what are the politics of the aesthetics of *how* stories are told?

Simon Laherty portrays an historically impossible figure: an intellectually disabled, Jewish concentration camp prisoner. In terms of the genealogy of the representation of people with intellectual disabilities this represents an interesting conflation of victim identities. Throughout the 'rehearsal narrative' of the play, concerns are raised about appropriating and exploiting the experience of others:

SCOTT: Hey, I am concerned about Simon and Mark

BRIAN: What?

SCOTT: They have no idea about the content?

BRIAN: What content?

SCOTT: Simon's playing a Jew and he has no idea about Judaism. Doesn't that strike you as wrong? (169)

Brian, in his role as writer of the piece, flippantly and superficially dismisses Scott's moral and ethical concern:

BRIAN: He looks Jewish to me

SCOTT: That's my point; he's been cast but has no connection to the material he's presenting

BRIAN: So? He looks like someone from Eastern Europe. (169)

This exchange I believe is an example of postmodern parody in which the audience is not encouraged to believe that *either* protagonist in this argument is

ethically or aesthetically 'right' – and, therefore, neither is 'wrong.' The exchange generates a discomfiting dissensus rather than the possibility of a morally secure, consensus of ethical response. It is indicative of the continuing ethical uncertainty and aporia in representation caught between witnessing and testimony that Agamben refers to in *Remnants of Auschwitz*.

In a later exchange Scott revisits this ethical discussion:

SCOTT: Simon, do you comprehend what it is to represent a Jew in the
Holocaust?

SIMON: Fuck off, Scott.

SCOTT: If you mess with the Holocaust . . .

DAVID: You add fuel to the deniers.

SCOTT: No, you will offend a lot of people. (170)

Scott asks what Simon comprehends of *what it is to represent* a Jew in the Holocaust, thus placing a heavy burden of ethics and aesthetics on the shoulders of Simon as an individual performer, regardless of his perceived intellectual capacity, hence Simon's terse rebuttal. Scott's 'If you mess with the Holocaust' is deeply inadequate and problematic. What could 'messing with' the Holocaust possibly mean? David's interruption and completion of Scott's conditional - you add fuel to the deniers – assumes a grandiose claim of efficacy for theatre – that it might effect an erasing of the memory of the Shoah. Scott's own completion of the conditional sentence – 'No, you will offend a lot of people' gets to the heart of the contemporary ethical 'aporia' between witnessing and testimony that Agamben diagnosed in terms of the *Musulmänner* but which continues to inflect the kind of 'ethical' thinking, or what passes for contemporary 'ethical' thought, in which the desire not to cause offence is a primary motivation. This suggests

that 'the Holocaust' has passed into such common currency that it can be spoken of as 'likely to offend some people.' It has been reduced to a 'trigger warning' among others. Bruce Gladwin articulates that the company was aware of such issues:

There's a large Jewish population in Melbourne, where the work was originally presented and there's an ongoing discourse in media circles about representations of the Holocaust. Each time there's a Hollywood movie such as *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*, there's an ongoing dialogue about who has the right to talk about which stories and about creating a fictional world within a point in history for which there's particular sensitivity. (Schmelzer)

When David Woods in the character of the director of the Ganesh play, a non-disabled director of a Back to Back-like ensemble, speaks to Brian of Scott's continuing ethical objections to the content and the casting he rebuts Scott's objections:

He keeps saying stuff about what we are doing and keeps coming up with these kind of, um, you know ethical problems and moral problems that we can't do this, we can't do that, and I just want you to be free. (Grehan and Eckersall 171)

'I just want you to be free' sounds like an emancipation from any concern over the ethics of representation. David Woods' character, though, is not Bruce Gladwin and the production goes on to show that he is highly unreliable and not to be trusted for any kind of direction, either aesthetic or moral. The freedom he offers is, on the surface, creative freedom but on another level it is a freedom from ethical responsibility that is problematic when it involves people with

intellectual disabilities: it connects with his later line 'I think anybody can play anything.' The argument he is making is akin to a 'freedom of speech' argument. 'I just want you to be free' and 'I think anybody can play anything' are part of a liberal discourse that could only possibly have validity if everybody was operating from a completely level playing field. It is a discourse that elides difference and in which the promise of emancipation in the word 'free' is confounded in the connotations of 'free speech' and the 'free market' in which not all have the possibility of free access. *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* is a lot more dialectically complex than the above argument implies but what I wish to indicate is that David's arguments should not be taken as a master discourse, neither should Scott's politically correct ethical concerns over appropriation.

The swastika, so crucial in the piece, is a clear example of the complexities around issues of signification and appropriation. In an account of the genesis of the piece Bruce Gladwin refers to members of the ensemble repeatedly drawing elephant headed Ganesh and the swastika:

When we came up with the narrative of Ganesh traveling to Nazi Germany to reclaim the swastika, we thought it's a great story line and a great hero's journey, but it's not actually our play to make. We don't actually have the right to make it. But then there was a turning point, where we actually started recognizing that the issues around why we felt we couldn't make it would actually make an interesting exploration about cultural appropriation and who has the right to tell particular stories.

(Schmelzer)

This is an acknowledgement from the outset that the theatricality of the story is to be found in the company's ethical incapacity to tell it.

Back to Back might have expected objections from Jewish communities to telling the story. That they did not perhaps testifies to the ubiquity of making representational capital out of the Holocaust. Objections that did arise came from an unanticipated quarter, in an interesting twist of intersectionality, from Hindu commentators and communities. The night I arrived to attend a performance at the Malthouse Theatre in Melbourne I was greeted by an orderly group of protestors who were urging people not to attend, carrying placards and distributing leaflets which articulated specific objections to the piece:

The play has an obscene innuendo surrounding Lord Ganesh, wherein one character asks another, whether the length of Lord Ganesh's trunk is long enough, and the audience laughs

A man with board shorts, no shirt and a garland plays Lord Vishnu

Lord Shiva is portrayed in poor taste and there is a scene where he plucks a human being into two. (Uncredited, Forum for Hindu Awakening, 2011)

Audience members who were undeterred by this polite protest were then greeted by the following sign that the company or venue had attached to the door of the theatre:

Please be informed the performance

GANESH VERSUS THE THIRD REICH

contains coarse language, adult themes and portrayal of Lord Ganesh which some may find troubling and offensive. The production is a work of fiction and does not purport to be an accurate representation of historical fact or scripture.

These texts attest to the seriousness with which the Hindu protesters took the theatrical representation of deities and the seriousness with which the company and venue took the protests. The company and venue went to great lengths to appear 'ethical' in the sense of not causing offence. One elephant in the room, perhaps, was the reaction by certain Moslem groups to dramatic and pictorial representations of the Prophet. The reaction Scott's character feared in his reservations about causing offence by 'messing with' the Holocaust was in fact enacted in the offence caused by the company's 'messing with' Shiva, Vishnu and Lord Ganesh, Overcomer of Obstacles.

The performance text of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* incorporated reference to this controversy:

SCOTT: Brian, what do you think the Hindus are going to think about us
using their gods in this show?

Brian's response is characteristically brash and located in the imaginary of popular culture. He refers to the second remake of the film *King Kong*:

BRIAN: When these guys took King Kong from the Island to New York City
Jeff Bridges' character says we actually took their God. (169)

What Scott or anybody is to make of Brian's response is open to interpretation. Does he mean that by representing Ganesh the production is taking the God – which in *King Kong* is then destroyed, so they are guilty of cultural appropriation? Does he mean that by 'taking' Ganesh the company will produce a block-buster success like *King Kong* and therefore the cultural appropriation is somehow justifiable? Scott responds 'Thanks for the chat', the audience laughs, they, like Scott, are none the wiser after Brian's response. Scott later reiterates this concern to David:

SCOTT: Not all the actors seem to understand the gravity of what they are playing. I'm concerned. Brian is playing an Indian deity. Do you think that's OK?

DAVID: Yeah. I think anybody can play anything. (170)

In the interview in Walker Art Schmelzer posed a question to Bruce Gladwin similar to Scott's objections:

How does it work to have actors with cognitive or intellectual disabilities addressing the Holocaust on stage?

Gladwin responded:

It's also a question of how can you *ever* represent it? Any representation of it is in some ways disrespectful to the actual experience of what it was. It could be the biggest, most expensive Hollywood film production and it would still be inadequate representation. In some ways the performance here is as good as Bruno Ganz's in *Downfall*. Both performances are inadequate and both great. That's what I think. (Schmelzer)

Gladwin deflects or opens up the question 'How is it possible for actors perceived to have intellectual disabilities to represent the Holocaust?' to 'How is it ever possible to represent the Holocaust?' What is begged in Gladwin's answer but implied in the journalist's question is: How is it possible for performers with intellectual disabilities to be aware of what they are representing? This question is also the source of Scott's objections to his fellow-performers. It is a question that *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* opens up and enacts on stage.

In order to discuss this fundamental question that the production both poses and answers performatively it is necessary to refer to another story of the genesis of the piece that has been discussed by a number of commentators. This

account comes from a particular response to a post-show audience discussion after *Food Court* that took place in Brussels. It is cited in Gabriella Coslovich's review of *Food Court*:

"I don't believe these people made this work," (an audience member said)
 "I have worked with people like this and I don't think they are capable of it." One of the actors, Scott Price, livid at the presumption, stood up, grabbed the microphone and said, "Well mate, you can just get out of here because what you said is so wrong and so offensive." (20)

The individual audience member articulates a suspicion, which may be characteristic of someone 'in the field of' intellectual disability. The questioner's sense of knowledge or expertise suggests they are accustomed to, a medicalized, therapeutic, perhaps institutional disposition of 'intellectual disability.' Their question articulates that in some way the representative contract between performer and audience is being disrespected and defiled by actors who are being 'exploited and manipulated.'

Bruce Gladwin refers to the same incident but in the context of other objections or concerns about the question of the agency of the actors:

We had a conversation with one festival director in Australia when we presented *Food Court*. She had some concerns and she had spoken to someone else who had some concerns about the process of us making *Food Court* and the actors' role within it and how empowered the actors were and questions about exploitation and manipulation. She said she felt uncomfortable about it and she had spoken to several other people who had felt uncomfortable about it. We also did this Q&A in Brussels at Kunsten festival and someone stood up and said 'You know, I don't

believe these actors are capable of doing this work and I know these type of people and there's no way they could make a work like this . . .'

(Grehan and Eckersall 246)

The Australian festival director has her discomfort reconfirmed by the discomfort of others until a community of ethical discomfort has been established to compensate for the absence of the reassurance of a community of aesthetic taste. In "Irony, Parody and Satire in *Ganesh Versus the Third Reich*" Helena Grehan refers to the ethics of spectatorship:

Ganesh versus the Third Reich unsettles its audience on ethical grounds – so that the ability to feel, think and respond to the issues being addressed in a way that allows spectators to make sense of them becomes almost impossible. In effect the work positions its audience in such a space of undecidability that it is difficult to know what 'good' spectatorship (in ethical terms) may entail. (197)

What she means by 'ethical' seems to be connected to a notion of moral spectatorship - 'good' 'in ethical terms' - but it is unclear whether she is really suggesting there is such a thing as appropriate or 'good' spectatorship or that Back to Back's strategy is to deny any possibility of 'good' spectatorship. What else might the 'undecidability' that the work generates provoke in an audience? Undecidability is a provocation to performativity on the part of the audience: they must make their own ethical or moral call on what they are seeing.

Grehan refers elsewhere to the unsettling of spectators in which she suggests that spectators police their own laughter:

Spectators feel as if they are constantly in danger of laughing at the wrong moment and hence being revealed as prejudiced and potentially condescending. (198)

This suggests the self-consciousness of an audience keen to prove they are part of an ethical and aesthetic community, who can show they can distinguish between the right and wrong moments to laugh. The wrong moment presumably refers to laughing at the incapacity of the performers. This is an idea of an audience anxious not to be revealed as politically incorrect. Is it not, however, just such a grouping that Back to Back wishes to provoke and parody in their strategy of unsettling spectatorial certainty? Grehan also makes reference to an audience's stifling of a desire to laugh:

Spectators experience a desire to laugh when Simon says with deep sincerity, 'It's really hard being a Jew' but of course any response is overcoded by our knowledge of the treatment of Jewish people and of disabled people by the Nazis and such a desire quickly evaporates. (201)

Whilst this reading may apply to the response of some audience members, phrases like 'our knowledge' make an assumption of commonality that I think is problematic. I believe the continuum of response is more nuanced and complex. There are a number of 'reasons' and affective stimuli that provoke laughter at this point. These might include being encouraged by the laughter of others in the audience. Simon Laherty's deadpan delivery of the line 'It's difficult being a Jew' does not necessarily quite equate to 'sincerity.'

I had a sense that Simon Laherty having rehearsed and performed the line a number of times, and having the kind of memory with which Bruce Gladwin credits him, knows as a performer that if he finds a particular groove of

intonation he will provoke laughter. Laughter can coexist with an awareness of the problems of representation. I am also not sure how a response may be 'overcoded.' Within an audience it is possible to hear laughter roll and build or peter out or be stifled in embarrassment or to 'die' abruptly, or to experience a dissensual response because some are laughing and some are not, but personally I feel that there is a greater range of possible responses to Simon's line than a desire to laugh which then evaporates.

A similar unsettled audience response to *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* is discussed in "The Impossible Fairytale or Resistance to the Real" by Anna Scheer in *'We're People Who Do Shows'*. She refers to a kind of sub-community of the audience: personal friends all of whom, she tells us 'share an academic background', people with whom she might have assumed community, but whose responses conflict with hers and instead provoke her to examine, or to articulate her own response:

A selection of their responses were bewildering as they came from those whom, I had assumed, shared a similar interest in challenging forms of contemporary performance and theatre. Their comments were, for the most part, variations of an expression of disapproval toward the meta-theatrical element of the play, in particular the role of the 'able-bodied' director, and a desire for the production, instead, to have 'just followed the fictional storyline.' (219)

Here responses that might be termed aesthetic and political overlap in the desire to confirm membership of an aesthetic community in response to the production. She goes on to argue that the 'questions of an uneasy spectatorship' for this section of the audience were alleviated in the mythic play scenes where

the audience is given an easier ride as ‘uninterpellated spectators’ as they favour ‘spectatorly comfort’ rather than the challenge to perceptions of the discomfort of perceiving the ‘egotism, abnormality, political correctness and unkindness’ of the director character who is ‘one of us.’ (226) ‘One of us’ is a neatly dialectical formulation, capturing at once a community of the so-called normal and non-disabled and citing the chant from Tod Browning’s *Freaks*, referring to a scene in which a non-disabled person becomes ‘one of us’ by being ‘reduced’ to the status of a sideshow freak. In another twist of appropriation and identity politics, this phrase has subsequently been reappropriated as a badge of community by disability activists.

The challenge to audience as community that is provoked by *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* becomes particularly apparent in that phenomenon of the contemporary reception of theatre: the post-show discussion or forum. When Petra Kuppers appraises the performance within “Outsider Histories, Insider Artists, Cross-Cultural Ensembles” she delineates a kind of mutual intersectional misunderstanding in the post-show discussion that was part of the Bodies of Work Festival in Chicago. Due to the controversy around issues of cultural appropriation, this discussion was moderated by Ashish Rajadhyaksa of the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society in Bangalore. Her description of the event is telling in terms of a dialogue that did not take place:

This was one mismatched moderator/artists set, with an Indian scholar visibly uncomfortable with the appropriation of cultural and religious heritage but trying to be polite in his pointed queries, and a theatre troupe that saw the point of its production clearly elsewhere. (38)

The format of the post-show discussion seems to be significantly imbricated in the work of Back to Back, feeding back into the development of the work of the company. The post-show discussion is an interesting phenomenon in terms of performance studies. On one level it fulfills a supposed contemporary desire for greater interactivity similar to the comments section of online press articles. It is a chance for the audience to have greater interaction after their relative passivity in the auditorium and it aligns with the marketing strategies of venues and companies that now employ post-show video interviews online and include quotations from individual audience members in their promotional material.

Post-show discussions after a Back to Back performance may provide a chance to check responses after what may have been a disconcerting experience of spectatorship. Do these discussions then seek to re-establish a community of response, a making sense or consensus or are they potential sites of dissensus? They take place in the space of the theatre, the audience still in the auditorium, the cast on the stage, but usually accompanied by the director and possibly other members of the creative team. This is a post-performance space and occurs in the immediate aftermath of the performance. What can be said is governed by the particular space and time of the format. The audience has been looking at the performers very differently to how they now look at them post-show. The performers have been caught up in the energy of performance. The discussion takes place within the professional space of the theatre, but the audience may perhaps wish to reconfigure the economy of exchange, from a financial transaction, to that of the gift, as Ridout suggests occurs in the curtain call (*Stage Fright* 162). What is significant in the post-show discussions of Back to Back is how the affect of wonder of the post-performance aura with which an audience

invests performers is implicated with an affect of guilt transposed onto those people perceived as the theatre-makers, the non-disabled-director and crew. It is as if the audience wishing to give in to both the wonder of theatre and to the remarkable difference of people with intellectual disabilities then experiences guilt as in the viewing of difference as spectacle.

Back to Back respond to such comments in *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* in a performative discussion enacted by performers with intellectual disabilities - only to pull the rug from underneath the audience's assumptions of what this discussion really concerns. Grehan discusses how this concern appears to be addressed within the rehearsal narrative of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*:

discussions and arguments seem so real and deal with questions 'we' (as non-disabled spectators) think 'they' (as a company of artists with disabilities) must negotiate) they leave spectators unmoored and uncertain. (198)

The important word in the above is *seem*. Her analysis is that the spectators are being drawn into this debate by the production heuristically. The objections that Scott raises within the production are very similar to the objections raised at post-show talkbacks. Scott, however, is speaking from within a piece of postdramatic theatre and within a narrative where the relationship between reality and fiction is problematized. For Grehan this apparent concern voiced within the dramatic narrative for the ethics of participation of people with intellectual disability is what she calls a 'wind', or wind-up, of the audience:

we want to know whether or not the performers understand what it is they are doing. But as we grapple with this 'want to know' we realize how profoundly judgmental it is. (204)

It is not the ethics of participation that is being exposed by these discussions but rather the ethics of spectatorship. The 'moral compass' of the audience is being incapacitated by the performance.

The production is relentless in the logic of its supposed investigation into the ethics of the participation in performance of people with intellectual disabilities. The issue of whether the performers understand the import of what they are representing, as exemplified by Scott's questioning of Simon's playing a Jew and Brian's impersonating the Hindu God Ganesh, is developed further as Scott goes on to question Mark's very right to be onstage given that he cannot distinguish what is real from what is fiction. For Grehan this questioning of the presence and agency of the performers from onstage is designed to create the maximum uneasiness and discomfort for spectators in the auditorium:

The uncertainty we have experienced throughout the show is revealed to be a sham and a shame. (205)

And:

We don't want to be bad spectators; instead we want some idea of what it is we should have been doing. There is no resolution. (206)

Her sense of the unsettling of the audience is heavy with the moral implications of spectatorship: 'judgmental', 'shame', we don't want to be seen as 'bad spectators.' For Grehan the burden of uncertainty and a certain moral and ethical failing emerges in the act of spectatorship or what she categorizes as the assumptions of non-disabled spectatorship.

For Anna Scheer, however, this uncertainty provokes a re-examination of the 'hereditary health or conventions of the theatrical institution,' (219) the mechanisms of theatrical representation. Petra Kupperts, coming from a

disability culture perspective, does not experience the same shame at judgmentalism that Grehan articulates when she offers her particular take on the participation of performers perceived to have intellectual disabilities and the problematic of being caught up in language in another reference to a Back to Back postshow discussion:

The talkback at the end of the performance offers few cues about how conscious the various actors are of the complex layering of cultural scripts, of how the show plays with audience expectations, or of the representational strategies at work in their script. All actors are onstage, and the nondisabled director of Back to Back Theatre offers the mike to them all. But what they say sounds rehearsed, as it might well be at this point in their world tour: two of the five actors offer soundbites and explanations, mostly swaggering and full of bravado, rarely in direct response to an audience query; more often just picking up a word or two from the questions and answering a more generic question based on those cues. Simon Laherty . . . is silent. Mark only opens his mouth to lead the audience in a cheer, his arms up above his head, magnetic, full-bodied, present. ("Outsider Histories, Insider Artists" 40)

Her response invites a comparison of the Back to Back actors with actors from any other company on a world tour. How articulate should any actors be in the course of a tour, immediately after a performance? In the same article Koppers also refers to the Ensemble statement on the Back to Back website³¹:

³¹ We are the Back to Back Theatre ensemble. We play with intention. Some days we work at headquarters in Geelong, and some days you will find us on tour. Brian is our pop culture specialist. He's pretty strong as an actor and as a person; he is likely to lift you off the floor. Simon is an enigma, and the rightful Captain of Quizzes. Scott is like an arrow; he is straight up like an arrow fired from a bow. Sarah is our courage. Mark is a free spirited type of person, he's King of

It is not hard to see this statement as something constructed in a theatre game, in play and openness. I can see the parallel constructions, the side-by-side-ness, and the slightly different register of the closing sentences, but I am not sure if I can make real inferences from these observations as to communal or individual authorship. What cognitive differences in their complex specificities might mean for textual authorship remains unclear, and the website statement plays with these uncertainties in ways that give me pleasures of (non)recognition. (40)

The statement is an ensemble – not a collective – statement. The desire for any *authentic* ‘intellectually disabled’ language or communication is a chimera. Any performer, any person perceived to have intellectual disabilities in their ‘complex specificities’ is likely to have to negotiate access, or possibly be supported to negotiate access, to language. Looking for evidence of empowered participation as some guarantee of authenticity risks essentializing ‘intellectual disability.’

It is possible to trace a relentless trajectory of development and logic from Scott’s questioning of Simon’s and Brian’s understanding of the cultural and historical import of their roles to Scott’s questioning of Mark’s very right to be on stage. At a certain point in the intertwining narratives, David in the character of the able-bodied director calls all the performers together. His reason is that ‘Scott has aired a couple of things.’ In front of them all, David says to Scott: ‘You said as well you feel like I’m manipulating the group’ and follows this up by

Comedy. He likes birds. Some of us identify with being outsiders. Some of us don’t. We wonder: what would we be outside of? We give everything, and everyone a go. We hope you will feel intoxicated by our shows, that our shows will entertain you, that our shows will make you question things. (Back to Back n.d., “About: Ensemble Statement”)

asking the question that seems to bother spectators at the performance, and questioners in post-show discussions:

DAVID: Do you feel you are being manipulated? Are you in control or not?

SCOTT: We think he's God, but he's not.

DAVID: No I'm not God; I'm just me. Scott, have you got it off your chest?

SCOTT: Yeah, I have. (180)

I think this exchange is another example of postmodern parody, there is no master discourse of truth here and each viewpoint is both valid and problematic. There is a deliberate irony in David's reply to Scott's intimation that they as a group of performers with intellectual disabilities are giving the non-disabled director too much power, God-like, power. His response denying his God-like status includes 'I'm just me' an ironic reference to the 'I am what I am' of YAHWEH. David thus inadvertently affirms his God-like status or, at the least, affirms his certainty of his identity. In the context of working with this particular ensemble he does have a highly privileged status as both non-disabled and director, which is how many commentators see Bruce Gladwin's position within the power relationships of the Back to Back ensemble. Moreover David never actually answers Scott's challenge that he is manipulating them, he merely 'validates' Scott's having got something off his chest. This is a form of deflecting Scott's concerns by patronizingly validating him, something that he goes on to do even more profusely in praising Scott, Simon, Brian and later Mark for their 'special' and unique contributions. Even as David Woods delivers this praise, though, it is very easy to read his character's underlying resentment and frustration. The performers, particularly Scott, receive the praise with a kind of sullenness, indicative of their not being sure whether he is actually praising them

or making them feel bad about themselves because of how overly 'understanding' and supportive he is being to them. In David Woods' portrayal of the director aggression and brutality are never far beneath the surface of his sentimental patronization of the performers. As Helena Grehan observes:

His parody of a theatre 'director' as someone we could encounter in a community theatre context where 'empowerment through the arts' may be the catch cry is both funny and disturbing. (203)

David Woods' characterization of the director's relationship with the intellectually disabled performers as well as being a parody of certain commentators' and critics' perception of Bruce Gladwin's relationship with Back to Back performers (a parody which, of course, Bruce Gladwin has been instrumental in constructing) is also a kind of dark, problematic version of Aldo Gennaro and his relationship with the residents of the Lorna Hodgkinson Sunshine Home.

David offers the most fulsome praise of Mark's 'presence':

OK he's getting himself together out there and I've told him that his presence in the room is of such a beautiful, focused quality it allows us all to flourish and that what he's doing out there is amazing, in here. (181)

This praise is rendered highly ironic as immediately prior to this we have heard him offstage trying to persuade Mark to come out of the toilet and to come onstage. He goes into great, humiliating detail as to what Mark needs to do: wipe his bum, pull his trousers up, flush the toilet, while at the same time stating that Mark's non-compliance with David's request 'is humiliating for me.' His comments about Mark's 'presence' bear a strong resemblance to Bruce Gladwin's

own comments about Simon Laherty in the process of rehearsing *small metal objects* cited by Hargrave in 'Pure Products Go Crazy:

There was something so amazing about watching Simon standing. No matter what else was going on in the rehearsal I would be drawn back to Simon. When he did stuff, I'd say, no, just stand. Don't move. (46)

The presence of Mark Deans that David Woods' director makes a show of valuing is immediately questioned in terms which invalidate it in the next scene in which Scott bluntly states that 'Mark should be removed.' Scott offers the following justification:

SCOTT: You look at it. Mark's mind is probably, OK like, working like a goldfish.

Later in the discussion David significantly reformulates Scott's judgment:

DAVID(to Scott): I think I can answer your quibbles with the help of Mark. Mark, do you think of yourself as having the mind of a goldfish? (182)

While the spoken text is only one element among many in what Richard Gough has characterized as 'the instability of representation' in *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* I think it is significant the precise way in which David the director mishears and mistranslates the rather oblique, obtuse and distinctive way in which Scott has expressed his view of 'Mark's mind.'

SCOTT: You look at it. Mark's mind is probably, OK like, working like a goldfish.

BRIAN: A goldfish? Does anyone ever call you a dumb arse?

SCOTT: I didn't say it literally

BRIAN: What if someone said you had the mind of an earthworm?

As Scott points out, he was not being 'literal', and he is correct, he used a simile which neither Brian's earthworm response nor David's reinterpretation of the goldfish comment do, they both leap straight to the metaphor which more directly equates Mark's mind with a supposedly lower life-form. To be pedantic, if Mark's mind is like or working like a goldfish (*not* the mind of a goldfish) what could that possibly mean in a 'non-literal' sense? Does it move rapidly like a goldfish, does it look as if it is gulping to take everything in?

When Scott tries to clarify to Simon what he means, his phrasing is similarly obtuse and oblique:

SCOTT: Simon, you think about it all right, his mental capacity is probably like, going like somewhere else.

BRIAN: Where would that be?

SCOTT: I don't know . . . cyber-space? (182)

Even though Scott is calling for Mark's removal from the stage – the first reason he gives is that 'Like he doesn't understand what is fiction and what is not'. Scott implies that Mark has an over-active imagination or an ability to invest in fiction as if it were real, something which even David points out is highly desirable in a performer.

David's use of language is different. He has a habit of asking questions which tend to foreclose answers, or to foreclose any answer other than the one he wants to hear: 'Do you feel you are being manipulated?' is a question that becomes loaded when asked by somebody accused of doing the manipulating to somebody allegedly being manipulated. 'Do you think of yourself as having the mind of a goldfish?' is a different kind of foreclosed question, David's answer to

which : 'I can answer your quibbles with the help of Mark', prioritizes David's agency and reduces Mark's involvement to the level of an afterthought.

Mark's onstage response to David's mistranslation of Scott's comment is subject to variation in performance. In the script published in *We're People Who Do Shows*, the response is recorded as verbal: 'Goldfish, whale, penguin, octopus, seal, whale, shark, Sea World' but in the performance I saw in the Malthouse Theatre his response was gestural rather than verbalized: he opened and closed his mouth in mimicry of a goldfish and moved his hands in mimicry of a fish swimming, then looked at the audience to take them in and smiled as the audience laughed. In either version Mark's presence remains humorous. Is Mark, however, performing, 'just being himself' or presenting a particular persona? I wish to consider what may be at stake in his very particular presence by looking at the concluding sections of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*.

In the rehearsal narrative David Woods's director finally has enough of Scott's objections, his repeated abusive denigration of David's direction and the play they are producing and this erupts into violence after Scott's recalcitrance or refusal to perform 'playing dead' to David's satisfaction:

SCOTT: Can't we just fake it?

DAVID: Yeah, we are faking it;. But we're faking it well, we're not faking it
Stupid. (191)

This leads to a repetitive standoff in which David's attempts to 'direct' Scott encounter Scott's resistance until he finally snaps at David: 'Go get fucked, cunt!' David's reaction at first is a highly restrained show of 'reasonableness' 'Why am I a cunt, Scott?' Is it because you want to fuck me like a cunt?.' Scott responds to David's underlying aggression by starting to repeat 'No No No' as a kind of

whimpering repetitive sound that might be associated with both fear and autistic stereotypy. These noises are then underscored by a repeated musical phrase, the first time that the play's 'rehearsal narrative' has incorporated non-diegetic music (unlike the mythical Ganesh narrative which is rarely without it.) The musical phrase is a pattern of four notes repeated like a warning signal. Brian attempts to intervene: 'He's not dealing with the stress' to which David replies: 'It's fine. He's just fucking faking it.' (191)

There is a complex dynamic at play here. The rising intensity of the sounds Scott is producing and the music contrasts with the simmering, restrained anger of David to create an intense antagonism. Scott is either faking his anxiety, in which case there is nothing for the audience to worry about, but equally no dramatic charge to the scene, or he is not faking it, in which case there is something for the audience to worry about, an autistic young man is in distress in front of them, and the scene as a piece of theatre collapses - or Scott is both faking it as David suggests but in the faking of it works himself into a state of actual distress.

None of these options is particularly comfortable for an audience to observe and as the music increases in intensity and volume as David runs at Scott and grabs him and the others pull him off and Scott drops wailing and whimpering to the ground there is a powerful, affective charge to this sequence in this 'story about power.' The intensity of the driving music, the recurring outbursts of anger from David, the sounds of distress from Scott, the attempts by Brian, Simon and Mark to restrain David all go on for what feels like a long time. The crucial difference between this scene of simulated violence to those in *Food Court* is that this time it is a 'non-disabled' character/actor meting out violence

on a 'disabled' character/actor. The scene achieves a high degree of 'faking it well' but perhaps it gains in affective power by referencing a recurring history of physical abuse of people with intellectual disabilities by carers and others in authority.

This scene is immediately followed by a shift back to the last scene in the mythic narrative in which Brian as Ganesh finally confronts Simon as Hitler to retrieve the swastika. This he does, but when he removes his red armband with the Nazi swastika and gives it to Ganesh there is another identical armband underneath. Hitler's final words are 'Es wird immer mein sein' (This will always be my sign). (193) This scene is realized 'theatrically' in a spotlight that gives an ominous focus and intimacy, underscored by music. The scene that immediately follows this is played out in open lights revealing the whole stage, set for the rehearsal setting, a setting that deconstructs the previous scene's mechanisms of theatricality. David comes back on as Mengele, Simon as Levi his Jewish assistant and Brian as 'Ganesh' or rather Ganesh-becoming-Brian or Brian-becoming-Ganesh so that when this character roars at David's character we are not sure if it is Ganesh roaring at Mengele or Brian roaring at David. The roar is amplified and reverberated through the sound desk and overpowers David's character. In a neat twist David portrays Mengele's death by mimicking the absurdly stagey 'playing dead' which he so objected to in Scott's misperformance in the previous scene. This gesture and his unengaged manner of playing this scene suggests David's having given up on his 'role' both as Mengele and as a non-disabled director attempting to create theatre with performers with intellectual disabilities.

The fully lit stage is then empty of all but David, still lying on his back in the Mengele costume and Mark who is sitting upstage right at a rehearsal table on top of which, at one end, is the Ganesh elephant head. The paraphernalia of Mark's packed lunch are on the table and his backpack on the floor at the other end. David takes off his costume downstage right and changes into his own clothes and tells Mark that it is not yet time for him to go. David speaks of how he is not working here anymore, of how the show didn't work and that all he wanted was:

a believable moment – where one person connected with another person
(194)

During this monologue Mark has come downstage, he makes a play of 'hiding' from and revealing himself to David behind a rolled up curtain, then goes over to David and hugs him. David reciprocates. During this exchange, left face to face with Mark, David says: 'It was good working with you, Mark. You were a great Hitler.'

In this short sequence David's character's desire for one person connecting with another is rendered ironic by David's lying to and patronizing Mark: praising a performance of Hitler that was never achieved. David continues to express his need to leave and for Mark to stay. In a final ploy to achieve what he wants – to leave - David's character suggests they play a game: 'let's play hide and seek.' The game, associated with children, highlights the infantilization of Mark. David then exploits an element of the game that depends upon a display of 'bad faith' on the part of the adult-figure. The adult may pretend not to be able to find the child in order to increase the child's pleasure at playing the game well, a power play of supposed incapacity performed by the

adult to give the child a sense of power. In this case David's bad faith, his pretending not to find Mark, is particularly bad faith because Mark is hiding in plain sight under the upstage table and David's motivation is to abandon Mark. David as director is seeking to wash his hands of a failed collaboration and to abandon Mark. Paradoxically of course, by abandoning Mark he leaves him in the prominent and theatrically privileged position of being alone onstage, the last person the audience sees.

David calls out a childish chant 'Come out, come out wherever you Marky Marky Deansy Weansy' (194) and leaves the stage. Mark lies on his back under the table. At first he knocks on it from below, ostensibly still in the game of hide and seek, giving David a clue as to his whereabouts. As there is no other sound and the stage is empty we become aware of Mark's wheezing, asthmatic breathing.

Helena Grehan refers to this sequence with David and Mark in the following terms, which I cite at length:

we are again thrust back into the ambivalent role of the judging spectator – or at least the spectator who is empathically engaged to a degree that we want to help Mark. . .

we are left alone in the space with Mark who performs as if he does not fully comprehend what is happening . . .

We do not want to see him (real or not) hiding under a table waiting to be found. But this is exactly where Back to Back wants Mark to be. He is there performing and despite our attempts to move beyond the frame that has been revealed by the performance to be so limiting we seem

stuck because of our emotional relationship with Mark and because we care about him. (206-7)

her response captures some of the spectatorial ambivalence that the sequence and the various framings of Mark may provoke but there are other possible elements at play in the affective power of this sequence. After the amplification of Mark's asthmatic breathing, an indicator certainly of vulnerability or of the untrained body, the second and final use of non-diegetic music in the rehearsal narrative (if that is where we now are) occurs. This music fades up supplementing and then superseding the sound of Mark's breathing. The initial phrase has a 'warmth' of sound characteristic of the cello, and a dynamic range which is suggestive of an Indian provenance. A musical phrase is repeated and, to my ears at least, suggests Philip Glass's repetitive Indian-influenced compositions. Amidst a number of small gestures, including a waving to the audience, Mark changes his position to lie on his right side, leaning on his right arm bent at the elbow, and he lifts his extended left leg up and down. He then changes position, going onto all fours in a pose suggestive of the yoga position 'the cat.' Then he reverts to the previous position lying on his side, his head supported by his right arm bent at the elbow and lifting his left leg up and down.

To return to Grehan's specific comments that 'we want to help Mark' I am not sure I share this desire, or solely this desire. I think that a number of Mark's strategies, or the strategies of a stage persona that Mark has developed since first working with Back to Back in 1990 are consciously employed. Mark's approach to David in the final scene, the hugging, the 'disingenuous' waves and turns to audience all fit the stereotype of the sincere, emotionally open, and therefore vulnerable, person with Down's Syndrome. My contention is that Mark

is choosing to deploy this aspect of his stage persona in this sequence with David. As to Grehan's comments that 'he performs as if he does not fully comprehend what is happening' this statement already contains an implication of an awareness on Mark's part – 'performs as if' that contradicts the rest of the sentence. I think that this ambivalence is acknowledged by Grehan, but whatever questioning of Mark's agency she implies, hinges on the phrase 'fully comprehend' by which I presume she means understanding, in the sense of cognitive understanding. How much does any actor in the moment of performance 'fully comprehend what is happening?' There is another meaning of 'fully comprehend' which means 'to take everything in' and I believe that Mark as a performer in a co-presence with the audience is in a position, or *has been left in* a position to do this in the last minutes of the performance.

I would seek to supplement Grehan's emotional response - 'we do not want to see him (real or not) hiding under a table waiting to be found' with other possible responses. At one level the actions he performs continue one of the theatrical narratives of the piece. He has been left by David to wait for his mother to collect him at 4.00pm. Left with some 'free' time, like a good professional, he takes the opportunity to keep fit, to stay in shape, or, simply, to keep performing something. At another level he is presenting a version of 'the cat,' the yoga position. The movements he performs when lying on his side suggest the swimming of some sea creature: 'Goldfish, whale, penguin, octopus, seal, whale, shark, Sea World'. There is an elephant head placed on the table directly above his head. He is at once potentially Ganesh, a cat deity the nirvana Buddha reclining on his side, a goldfish, the embodiment of his goldfish mind. He is also just a person with Down's Syndrome left under the table, swept under

the table of classifications and categorizations. Seeing him under the table, left in the place of the child or the domestic animal what do we experience, does his presence enact a call to respond to the other in the sense outlined by Emmanuel Levinas as any one who 'calls' me? Are we 'stuck with an emotional and caring reaction' to Mark – or is that just another chimera or obstacle to seeing Mark, to finding other ways to react to, and interact with Mark? As the music repeats its phrase and swells and as he repeats his movement loop, going in and out of circuits of signification and affect, he calls us and moves away from us.

'He is there performing' as Grehan acknowledges. What is he performing? David in the character of the director has just said 'I'm not working here anymore' and 'It didn't work.' Given that the play *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* still carries on after David's abandoning of the play within the play there may be a strange kind of self-reflexivity to the sentence 'I'm not working here any more', the surface meaning of: I quit, I choose to leave this job, this project, may carry another potential meaning 'I'm not working here anymore', I am no longer functioning here, my function has been superseded, disabled or incapacitated – and with it the whole project of theatre. A theatre where you can get what you want to get, where moments of 'real connection' can be shown or willed into being by a process of 'faking well' is being incapacitated before our eyes. What is left after this theatrical abandonment of the processes of theatre? Mark. Mark is still performing and still working. Are these last moments of performance on Mark's terms? No, but they have never been so. He goes through his exercises, and as he does so, spectators can read mythological figures, tropes and metaphors into his movements, into his position, framed under the table. He is working under the table, he is playing under the table, he has turned the tables

on David's director who in the end, despite seeing him, pretended not to see him. Despite Mark's visibility, do the spectators ever really see him, or do they see the myths, the emotional affect and 'care' that become obstacles in the way of seeing him as a person with intellectual disabilities.

At the end of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*, to adapt Nicholas Ridout's phrase, sparks of representational theatre are still being generated before they become extinguished. In their place the potential opens up for different kinds of connection. Seeing Mark's intellectual disability becomes an obstacle to seeing Mark as a performer or a performance artist or to seeing and accepting his right to presence in aesthetic and social spheres. What becomes possible if spectators become aware of this obstacle? Is Mark becoming Ganesh, the Remover of Obstacles? - only in performance, and only at the end of performance

At the end of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* Mark is located in a liminal space between a form of representational theatre which has incapacitated itself before our eyes and a form of performance in which it seems his mere presence becomes theatrically engaging. This liminal theatrical space of performance aligns with the turn to the Reality Trend or Citizen Theatre of contemporary postdramatic or even post-theatrical theatre. This liminal theatrical space is both negotiated and rendered problematic by the next performance to be considered in this thesis: Jerome Bel and Theater HORA's *Disabled Theater*.

Disabled Theater

At the end of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* a non-disabled director leaves an actor with intellectual disabilities alone in the theatre space in front of an audience. At the start of *Disabled Theater* Jérôme Bel a non-disabled choreographer and director leaves the eleven members of Theater HORA, an ensemble of actors with intellectual disabilities alone for one minute each in front of an audience. An analysis of the similarities and differences between these two strategies of both incapacitating theatricality and theatricalizing incapacity reveals much about the debates surrounding the current place of people with intellectual disabilities in contemporary theatrical performance.

Just as the fictional director David Woods abandons the attempt to construct conventional theatre and dramatic narrative with an ensemble of performers with intellectual disabilities, so Jérôme Bel, disillusioned with conventional theatricality, makes a decision, in his case a carefully considered, artistic choice, to abandon attempts to create a 'conventional' theatrical dance piece and to work with Theater HORA, a group of actors with intellectual disabilities. He makes a decision to let the audition process or the early exercises of the devising process become the performance itself and thus he too leaves the performers to their own devices, to the extent of letting them choose their own music and choreography with no input from him.

Bel himself has sought to construct and promote, and, in some instances, to protect, particular narratives of the genesis of the project. This continuing fascination with the processes by which theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities is constructed is part of a suspicion of theatricality present in both theatre and performance studies and in certain contemporary

theatre audiences. There is an expectation of this form of theatre that what people with intellectual disabilities bring to theatrical performance is a refreshing, non-theatrical, authentic presence or Lehmann's 'irruption of the real' (99) into the mechanisms of theatrical representation. Anything that renders this authenticity suspect, specifically the presumed 'manipulation' and exploitation of non-disabled directors and the *techne* of theatre is viewed with suspicion. This expectation, however, condemns the performers with intellectual disabilities to being essentialized as Other: as enabling presences or discomfiting disruptors of smooth processes of representation. Conversely there is the viewpoint that what theatrical performance should bring to people with intellectual disabilities is a medium of expression, empowerment and emancipation. This viewpoint posits a mechanistic and unproblematic model of the efficacy of theatrical performance that does not address the complexities of the entrance into symbolic orders of those with impaired access to communication nor the complexities of what happens to performers in performance and to spectators in the experience of the reception of performance.

In the clash of these expectations of efficacy, *Disabled Theater* has generated a great deal of debate amongst audiences, critics and commentators over whether the performers have been patronized or empowered, whether they or the audience are being exploited, or whether this experimental performance exposes the various exploitations implicit in all (theatrical) representation. These questions could be summarized as: who or what is being 'disabled' in *Disabled Theater*? In order to answer this question I need to provide some context for the production.

Jérôme Bel is a choreographer of what has been termed 'non-dance'; he is a conceptual choreographer, often working in ways that are anti-theatrical and anti-choreographical to stage and choreograph movement and dance. His work seeks to develop that of choreographers who have influenced him such as Pina Bausch and Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker but with his own particular twist of attempting to deconstruct what he views as the narcissism of virtuosity. His work has been described as an ongoing project of fundamentally and conceptually challenging 'theatrical norms and convention in contemporary dance.' This is apparent from his first work *Nom donné par l'auteur* (1994) in which he uses eleven objects (including a book, a football, a roller skate, a vacuum cleaner) which are choreographed in the space by two dancers who themselves appear as objects in an attempt to expose the temporal and spatial structures of choreography. In the self-titled *Jérôme Bel* (1995) he stripped performance technique down to a single light bulb and two naked dancers, one of whom hums Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* as a musical accompaniment for the movement. In *Shirtology* (1997) a single performer takes off a series of t-shirts and a narrative was created from the sequence of slogans on the t-shirts. André Lepecki in *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* analyzes how Bel's 'critique of the representational' (45) and 'uncovering of how choreography specifically participates in and is an accomplice of representation's "submission of subjectivity" under modern structures of power' (46) is explored in *The Last Performance* (1998) during which:

four dancers continuously exchange names, characters, subjectivities: a body that is not Jérôme Bel opens the piece by announcing to the audience, deadpan, alone centre stage, by the standing microphone,

Je suis Jérôme Bel (I am Jérôme Bel). After standing still for a minute (measured by his wristwatch) (he) exits the stage. (47)

It is interesting to compare the opening of this piece with the opening sequence of *Disabled Theater* in which the HORA performers stand in front of the audience for one minute and a later sequence in which they say their name, profession and age. This context indicates Bel's recurring and reiterated concerns with representation and subjectivity. For many critics and commentators, these concerns become much more complicated and problematic by his choice to involve actors with intellectual disabilities in *Disabled Theater*.

The 2001 piece *The Show Must Go On* has been performed by companies of professional dancers, by groups of non-professionals and by 'mixed ability groups' and thus connects in some ways to *Disabled Theater*. Scott Wallin in "Come Together: Discomfort and Longing in Jérôme Bel's *Disabled Theater*" in Umathum and Wihstutz's collection *Disabled Theater* seeks to make a direct comparison between the two, stating that *The Show Must Go On* 'sets aside virtuosity and showcases the untrained dancer in order to celebrate the beauty and joy of unprofessional dancing.' (62) In this piece a crowd of dancers respond literally to the lyrics of a number of songs: gathering together for the Beatles' 'Come Together', dancing to David Bowie's 'Let's Dance' and falling to the floor for Roberta Flack's 'Killing Me Softly.' In another sequence, 'Headphones' they listen to songs on headphones but what the audience hear is their singing along, and the singing along across the individuals and groups onstage creates a kind of democratizing of responses to popular culture within the generally elitist and virtuosic space of contemporary dance.

Kai van Eikels in “The Uncapacitated Spectator” in Umathum and Wihstutz refers to how, in the genesis of *Disabled Theater*, Theater HORA originally asked Bel for permission to stage *The Show Must Go On*, a request that he refused, but that this refusal led to the development of the collaboration that led to *Disabled Theater*. Van Eikels also cites a post-show discussion in Essen in 2013 in which Bel commented on why he had initially refused Theater HORA permission (van Eikels refers to his own transcription of the conversation):

“*The Show Must Go On* is about professional performers doing stupid things,” he said. “If they had performed the piece, it would have been stupid people doing stupid things, and that, you know, doesn’t work.”
(130)

Bel’s off the cuff - and quite likely ironic - comment does indicate some of the issues involved in seeking to open up different meanings of ‘disability’ or ‘stupidity’ and how that continues to generate controversy around the project. He did, however, later revise this opinion by including two HORA performers, Damian Bright and Remo Bruggeman, in a subsequent restaging of *The Show Must Go On* and gave permission for CanDoCo, the UK’s leading integrated dance company, to stage the show in 2015.

After *The Show Must Go On* Bel’s trajectory of challenging expectations of performance, identity and subjectivity continued with the pieces *Véronique Doisneau* (2004) a documentary and performance in which a *Sujet* of the Paris Opera - meaning a performer who can perform in the corps de ballet or as a soloist - becomes the literal subject of the documentary as narrator and performer. In *Pichet, Klunchun and Myself* (2005) Bel and a Khôn dancer from Thailand interview each other performatively about their practices and in *Cedric*

Andrieux (2009) a former dancer with Merce Cunningham's company speaks about their experience of working in the company.

Disabled Theater can thus be seen in the context of the rest of Bel's work as a development or reiteration of his concerns with how the aesthetic processes of choreography are imbricated with political processes of subjectivation. In *Disabled Theater* Bel reiterates strategies previously developed in his ongoing project of performatively deconstructing theatricality and virtuosity. Bel approaches *Disabled Theater* as a continuation of his project of the critique of representation within his own exploration of conceptual anti-choreography and anti-theatricality without reference to, or an awareness of, projects of a similarly aesthetically and politically radical nature developed in the work of Christoph Schlingensiefel and Back to Back Theatre. He has been accused of approaching the performers of Theater HORA as if he has just discovered people with intellectual disabilities and of using them as material for his own creative praxis.

Some of his comments in the collection edited by Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz, also entitled *Disabled Theater* suggest that he does not acknowledge work that had been achieved prior to his collaboration with HORA or dismisses such work as community theatre with a socially minded but aesthetically and artistically limited agenda of inclusion and integration. The various contributions in this collection exemplify different positions taken in the debate over *Disabled Theater*, its ethics and efficacy, and marks a stage in the development of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities that it is now, for better or worse, more present in academic analysis and central to concerns in performance studies and performance philosophy.

Theater HORA was established in 1993 and has since staged some fifty productions, often in collaboration with other theatre groups and artists. The company website asserts that the aim of the group is to:

promote the artistic development of people with learning difficulties . . . to a wide audience and at a professional level . . . it is the only cultural workshop for people with learning disabilities working at a professional level in Switzerland. (Theater HORA website)

The company established a theatre training programme in 2009 with a two year apprenticeship as well as a programme for children and young people and workshops which are taken into schools. In terms of the stated aims of the company the collaboration with Jérôme Bel on *Disabled Theater* could be viewed as very successful. It raised the profile of HORA to 'a wide audience' at international festivals in many different locations in Europe, the United States and Asia. It was, in addition, a financial success. The performers toured the piece to venues and countries that they had never previously visited. Julia Häusermann won the best up-and-coming actor award at the Berlin Theatertreffen in 2013 and was nominated for Outstanding Performer in the Bessie awards in New York in 2014.

The debate, criticism and controversy surrounding the piece itself also had an effect on the company. This included the pronouncement of an embargo by Jérôme Bel on staging the production ³²(which was later lifted). The company's immediate response to this embargo - due to a controversy specifically over the perceived lack of agency of the performers in the production - was to respond by developing their next project, *Freie Republik HORA*, which

³² Personal communication. Yvonne Schmidt.

was in some ways a response by means of performance to *Disabled Theater*.

Yvonne Schmidt, who worked with the company, argues that:

the piece (*Freie Republik HORA*) is a critical response to *Disabled Theater*, whose examination of the condition of disabled performers' autonomy and authorship it continues and takes one step further. (228)

She cites Michael Elber, director of Theater HORA:

the aim of *Freie Republik HORA* is to let the ensemble direct itself in order to abolish the hierarchy between a non-disabled director and the disabled performers. (228)

The immediate reaction of Theater HORA to the phenomenon of the controversy over *Disabled Theater* was, then, to develop a performance *Freie Republik HORA*.

They are currently involved in a work in progress based on the principles of creativity constrained as laid out in Lars von Trier's film *Five Obstructions* (2003).³³ Both are attempts to push the company further down the path of exploring the 'autonomy' of the actors with intellectual disabilities, they are ongoing experiments in 'democratizing' the creative process, which have subsequently proved to be highly problematic, but which indicate a radical attempt to deal with the question of the agency of the actors which arose in the performance and reception of *Disabled Theater*.

The arguments and critical discourse around the production have become quite involved and complex. They concern Bel's methodology, the presence and participation of the performers, the disconcerting or discomfiture of spectatorship and a more fundamental questioning of if and how *Disabled Theater* is political. It is a consideration of these arguments that I will now

³³ Personal communication. Yvonne Schmidt

address as they develop the discourse of the aesthetics and politics of theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities both as it has emerged to date and how it might yet emerge.

One crucial question is whether Bel's methodology in creating *Disabled Theater* emancipates and empowers the participation and agency of the HORA performers or whether it exploits and exposes them. The structure of the performance is on one level very simple. Sandra Umathum and Benjamin Wihstutz in the Prologue to *Disabled Theater* summarize it thus:

Eleven actors with cognitive disabilities appear as themselves before a mostly non-disabled audience and do nothing particularly sensational. They merely respond to six different tasks: 1) standing in front of an audience for one minute, 2) telling their name age and profession 3) identifying their disability 4) presenting a dance solo they have prepared to a song of their own choice 5) saying what they think about the piece 6) bowing to the audience. (7)

Part of Bel's skill that should be acknowledged is that such an apparently simple format has generated so much interest, controversy and debate. It could be argued that Bel merely 'curates' performers with intellectual disabilities in the exploitative manner of Gino De Dominicis' exhibition of a person with intellectual disabilities in the Venice Biennale of 1972. What Bel in fact curates is a provocation to debate. His project is akin to Duchamp's provocation with *Fountain*: a deceptively simple conceptual provocation that generates argument, irritation and admiration, and of course throws a lot of the 'work' of the work of art on to the spectator who is required to be a performative spectator. In "It's All

About Communication” an interview with Umathum and Wihstutz, Bel himself acknowledges the influence of Duchamp on this and other of his projects:

A normal dance production takes three months of rehearsals, whereas *Jérôme Bel* has been done in two weeks, *Disabled Theater* in five weeks, and *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* in four days. That’s why I have chosen the conceptual approach. It comes from Duchamp. I don’t want to repeat and improve. The idea is more important than the making, which was his strategy. The idea is more important than the craft. (171)

The counter-argument could be made that there is a difference between *Jérôme Bel* and *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* on the one hand, and *Disabled Theater* on the other, in that in the former two productions the assumption is made that the ‘idea’ is being explored with performers about whose ‘craft’ as dancers or choreographers there is no question, whereas with *Disabled Theater* Bel’s prioritizing of his idea over craft can result in a confusion over which ‘craft.’ Is it the craft of the choreographer/director or the craft of the performers? His strategy, because it involves the HORA performers, becomes more complex in its implications and opens up the possibility of a variety of different mis-readings, specifically that this elementary form of performance is all that these performers have the capacity to achieve. It could, of course, be argued that Bel seeks to provoke such a variety of mis-readings but is this done in some way at the ‘expense’ of the HORA performers? Responses to Bel’s strategy are summarized by Umathum and Wihstutz in their Prologue:

Audiences and critics either praised the stage presence of the actors and the concept of *Disabled Theater*, or they accused Jérôme Bel of holding the members of HORA up to ridicule and exposing

them as amateurs, freaks, and exotics. Representatives from inclusive theater groups and from Disability Studies voiced the majority of the criticism. (7)

The format of the piece is deceptively simple but deeply provocative: it is actually difficult to describe without invoking discourses of judgment that it seeks to problematize. In the description Umathum and Wihstutz offer almost every phrase in the first sentence is open to contention. Leaving aside any terminological issues over 'actors with cognitive disabilities', do these actors 'appear as themselves'? As is apparent from his earlier work, Bel explores the problematic notion of 'identity' ironically. *Disabled Theater* is a reiteration of Bel's investigation of the performativity of identity but it is complicated by the involvement of 'actors with cognitive disabilities.' This is because of a particular 'problem of the non-disabled': the perception by certain non-disabled spectators that performers with intellectual disabilities are only capable of self-presentation - 'These people will only play themselves.'³⁴ The evidence from an analysis of the work of Schlingensiefel, *Back to Back* and, as I hope to show, of *Disabled Theater* itself is that the situation is more complex than this and often indicates that the performers are operating at a subtle and sophisticated level of theatricality in which they consciously play themselves or their personae and *play with* the perceptions of their disabilities.

That *Disabled Theater* plays before 'a mostly non-disabled audience' is on one level an acknowledgement of the composition of most audiences, which may well not include people with disabilities due to economic restrictions and the

³⁴ 'I was told very early on in the process that these actors will only play themselves' an interview with dramaturg Bridget Foreman Cited in Hargrave "Pure Products Go Crazy"(48)

physically and socially inaccessible configurations of many theatre spaces. The danger is that, in terms of audience response, criticism or commentary, the non-disabled voice is the only one that is heard or valued. Positing a binary of 'non-disabled' and 'disabled' voices is also, of course, part of the problem, as this reinforces the essentialization of each 'state' in which binary one is privileged over the other. The simple point is that a greater diversity of responses could be taken into account.

Another attempt to deconstruct the problem of the 'non-disabled audience' is to reconfigure the audience themselves as in some ways disabled or incapacitated - either in their ability to perceive people with intellectual disabilities or in the processes of perception of theatre and spectacle per se. A number of critics in their analyses of the work of Schlingensief, Back to Back and Jérôme Bel in *Disabled Theater* make use of terms such as disability or disabling. The use of disability as a metaphor for the processes of spectatorship of post-theatrical theatre or for the social construction of the subject under late capitalism, while appearing to offer a level playing field or democratic approach to the breaking down of the dis/abled binary is also fraught with the dangers of equating a more conceptual notion of disability with an embodied lived experience of impairment. The danger of the use of this metaphor is that it elides specific differences and diversity. In terms of the wider academic context this use of 'disability' and 'disabled' has exposed divisions in the responses to the production by theatre and performance studies scholars on the one hand and disability studies scholars and disability culture artists and activists on the other.

The structure of Bel's project appears so simple that it is easily possible to misperceive it. Umathum and Wihstutz list 'six different tasks' whereas there are

in fact seven, as Andre Lepecki points out in his article. This addition is because task 4) is the presentation of a dance solo by seven of the eleven performers as chosen by Bel. Between what Umathum and Wihstutz list as 5) and 6) comes another task in which Bel decides to include the dance solos of those four who were initially excluded.

The simplicity of the format is the result of Bel's careful conceptualization of the piece, which is as much about what has been excluded as what has been selected for inclusion. Whatever seemingly simple elements have been included take on a high degree of significance. For some commentators this care in the conceptualization of the piece was not matched by the same care in Bel's approach to the performers' participation. What some see as his careful Duchamp-like curation of just enough elements or dispositifs of theatrical performance to question the expectations of theatrical performance, others see as an abnegation of the responsibilities of the role of director and choreographer in collaborating with the HORA performers. Some see Bel disabling the theatricality of theatre, some see him disabling the normative expectations of the spectators' perception of disabled performers, others see him disabling the performers.

In order to investigate this constellation of possible interpretations of the project it is instructive to look at various accounts of the development of the work. In the case of *Disabled Theater* it could be argued that the process became the performance. Scott Wallin describes how Marcel Bugiel of HORA approached Bel with a proposal to create a show that was declined, but that Bel did ask for some dvds of the company's work. Bel later referred to his reaction to these dvds as one reason for reconsidering his initial refusal:

I was crying watching them perform. I couldn't explain this emotion to myself, so I needed to work with them to try to understand this totally unexpected reaction. (65)

This is Bel's own account in which he creates a myth of the point of origin of his involvement as an artist with performers with intellectual disabilities, just as Robert Wilson did with his own involvement with Raymond Andrews and Christopher Knowles. Wallin then continues this account of the project's genesis with reference to the specific periods of time in which Bel sought to meet and get to know the HORA performers:

The next time he was in Zurich, Bel asked to meet with the company for three hours. After that, he requested five days. Bel reports that *Disabled Theater* is the result and reconstruction of that week when he attempted to get to know the cast. (65)

In Bel's own account it was, in fact, more than five days:

Most of what you see in the piece was made in five days. But unfortunately, I still had four more weeks for rehearsals. So what I tried in the following three weeks was to turn the piece around. Instead of the performers choosing their own music and working on their own choreography, I made them listen to my taste of music and watch dance pieces that I like. (165)

In Bel's account his process becomes a veering between losing or relinquishing control and regaining or reasserting of control. The initial loss of control in the response to the HORA dvds led to a desire to 'work with them' but this desire was parceled out in relatively short time spans. When the time span of this working process expands Bel again finds himself incapacitated in this

process both by his adherence to a particular version of the performance principle and by trying to impose his own methodology and ‘tastes’ on the performers:

I just could not get rid of the thought that I had to produce something; after all this was what I was being paid for. So they were watching Pina Bausch and Trisha Brown performances on my computer, and they were listening to contemporary classical music or to Gustav Mahler’s “O Mensch! Gib acht!” (166)

In effect Bel at this point was replicating Aldo Gennaro’s method of working with the Sunshine Home residents. Bel, however, went on to recognize the incapacitation of the performers in this process of imposing his tastes:

And suddenly I felt that I was alienating them just the way they are alienated in everyday life when people make them do things they don’t want to do. (166)

In this respect Bel’s realization is akin to Robert Wilson’s realization that the O.D. Heck school was diminishing the potential of Christopher Knowles by rejecting his way of expressing himself and disciplining him. Wilson then adopted a process of ‘negative capability’ with regard to Christopher Knowles. Jérôme Bel, adopted a similar process:

I just had to accept that my job was to stand back, not to bring them anywhere else but back to what they are, to the way that is not accepted by society. I remember clearly that one night in Zurich, I told myself, OK, that’s it, that is your job, Jérôme, *not* to work. (166)

Bel's first five days of contact with Theater HORA resembles Levi Strauss's 'first impressions' of the anthropologist³⁵. There is a kind of Romanticism in Bel's seeking to restage or reenact this initial encounter with the HORA performers, an attempt to get back to the simplicity of the encounter in this period before there was time for his own tastes and ways of working to inflect the process.

How did Bel recast this process of the first five days as theatrical performance? On one level he did it very transparently. Each section of the performance is introduced by and framed by an announcement made by a translator/assistant seated in front of a microphone behind a desk on the downstage right, first in English and then translated into German. The exact wording of the announcements is taken from a video provided to me by Theater Hora of a performance on 3rd November 2012 in the HAU1 in Berlin:

- 1: The first thing Jérôme asked the actors was to enter the stage one by one and to stay in front of the audience for one minute.
- 2: Then, Jérôme asked the actors to enter the stage one by one and to introduce themselves by giving their name, age and profession.
- 3: Then, Jérôme asked the actors to name their handicap.
- 4: After that, Jérôme asked the actors to prepare a dance solo. Each actor chose his own music and made his own choreography. Jérôme chose seven out of them.
- 5: Then, Jérôme asked the actors what they think about this piece.
- 6: After that, Jérôme finally decided to show the four solos he didn't choose.
- 7: Now, Jérôme would like the actors to bow for the audience.

³⁵ See *Tristes Tropiques*

In 'What Difference Does It Make?: From Difference to In-Difference *Disabled Theater* in the Context of Jérôme Bel's Work' in Umathum and Wihstutz, Gerald Siegmund refers to the stereotyped, ritualistic 'commands' of Bel as 'demands clearly marked as performative utterances, which by virtue of being articulated aloud, actually create the scene they speak of.' (21) If these commands or demands are performative utterances, however, then they are performative utterances of a particular kind. There is a split between the utterer and the performer. Bel utters – or uttered originally in the rehearsal process – and now reiterates this utterance through the translator - and the actors perform. Lepecki in Umathum and Wihstutz notes that in the French of Bel's original the show of politeness implied in 'Jérôme asked' would have been rendered 'Jérôme Bel a demandé':

The ambiguity of the verb "demander" in French, meaning both request and demand, announces already the commanding tension implicit in the choreographic utterance. (Footnote 25 152)

The announcement is also a command from one in authority to one subject to that authority - unless it can be established that it is the assemblage of *Disabled Theater* that is speaking and 'Jérôme asked' or 'Jérôme a demandé' is a kind of 'Simon says' to which everyone has agreed to comply. This is possible, but, as Siegmund also notes, the translator is not only speaking to the actors to cue their first action in the performance they are also speaking to the audience and thereby positioning the actors as subject to these announcements. Even if Jérôme Bel is being ironic in using his name and persona, 'Jérôme', as an exalted version of a choreographer/director whose word is the actors' command –

which in the context of his previous work is highly likely – how is that irony affected by being applied across the bodies of the actors of Theater HORA?

Siegmund does acknowledge that the command, demand or request is part of a wider acknowledgment in the piece of the power relations between a non-disabled director and performers with disabilities:

The production, I would like to argue, does not hide the issue of power.

Rather it addresses it by making it a part of the performance itself. It

literally plays with the power relations inherent in the performance, thus making them negotiable. (20)

Is it possible by playing with power relations to materially affect them or to render them negotiable, even within performance? Robert Wilson, in a kind of attempt to be ‘stupid before the Other’ tasked his actors with mirroring the actions, movements, gestures and speech of disabled young men. Does playing with power relations ever materially affect them or does it merely reinforce them? This question is of crucial concern to theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities and connects to questions that have been formulated within other critical discourses: in terms of post-colonialism: can the subaltern speak? or in Judith Butler’s previously cited questions:

How does the unspeakable population speak and make its claims? What

kind of disruption is this in the field of power? (Butler “Performativity”

xiii)

In all of these instances the question is left open, suggesting that the question is heuristic and needs to be explored reiteratively.

Siegmund reads the first action Jérôme demands that the actors perform in the following way:

Before we learn who they are and what they do (namely acting), the members of the audience are confronted with their gaze that looks back at them confronting them with their own gaze and its implicit prejudices of how we perceive disabled people. (19)

If I read this correctly the first 'their' in 'their gaze' is the gaze of the actors (as it aligns grammatically with the 'they' of 'who they are' and 'what they do') but that subsequently the 'they' understood in 'looks back at *them* confronting *them* with *their* own gaze' is each time referring to the audience. Later on Siegmund appears to contradict this assertion of the return of the gaze of the actors:

When they appear one after the other, it very quickly becomes apparent that not all of them can bear to stand in front of the audience for a full minute. Some have their eyes closed, some look down, others stare the audience out. (20-21)

I think Siegmund's analysis indicates a confusion over the *agency* of the actors – and this may well be a confusion that Bel's various strategies of presentation of the performers encourages. Elsewhere Siegmund states:

The actors are asked to perform certain actions, e.g. to stand in front of the audience for one minute, but the way in which they perform them is *completely up to them* (my emphasis) (20)

My understanding of what he means by this phrase is that in response to Bel's first instruction it is up to the actors to choose who comes out when. It is also up to the actors to interpret 'one minute' as a notional amount of time and up to them how they choose to enter and leave the space and *how* they choose to stay in front of the audience. To suggest, however, that it is 'completely up to them' how they perform these actions, unless this is a rhetorical suggestion, involves

ascribing a lot more agency to the actors than the constraints of Bel's instruction and the context allows.

Within the dispositional framework of the piece: the presence onstage of the announcer, the chairs, the microphones, the spotlight and Bel's announcements, the actors have not been given any conventional, directorial instructions as to what to do in this one minute sequence. In that sense it has been left up to them what to do with what is actually a very difficult instruction. Are they meant to 'act' in this minute or to 'be' in this minute or some combination of the two? One of Stanislavski's early exercises for trainee actors demonstrates the impossibility of succeeding at this task of being in front of an audience without having objectives and performing actions by which the actor earns the right to be in front of the audience. This then raises the question of who or what Bel is setting up to fail or incapacitating in this opening minute? Is it the actors, or the audience, or the mechanisms of theatricality, or perceptions of intellectual disability?

Scott Wallin, with a background in disability studies as well as performance studies, gives a different reading of these 'one minute' sequences in the performance. He does not see the return of the gaze but rather a gaze at isolated individual specimens, what he terms Foucault's medical gaze:

Instead of the actors proffering ideas or intentional actions, the scene established a unilateral act of looking at isolated people who were to be silently regarded. (66)

Rather than Bel's offering disability as potential or even as 'commotion' Wallin argues that the piece:

wrangles disability into a struggling or submissive object of the normative gaze in order for Bel and his audience to comprehend it. (67)

What becomes clear in the difference between Siegmund's and Wallin's reading of these one minute sequences is that there is no consensus as to what an audience thinks it is seeing and how it judges the HORA performers' compliance with Bel's instruction to stand in front of the audience. This is *not* a strategy that Bel has employed previously in his work with non-disabled performers or even non-disabled, non-trained performers. There is an attempt to open the performance with some kind of bare minimum or degree zero of theatricality that connects with a kind of democratic space or level playing field in which people without disabilities (which is the assumed composition of the audience) get a chance to be face to face with people with intellectual disabilities. The opening of the performance is also about the *impossibility* of that happening because the theatrical space and formations (the announcement, the arrangement of chairs, microphones, lights) however minimal are still mediating the encounter between audience and performer theatrically.

The process of viewing the 'one minute' sequences is also influenced by the atomization of the structure in which the audience sees each of the eleven HORA performers one after the other, and by the fact that this process takes some eighteen minutes. As André Lepecki points out:

...in the opening section, each one minute facing the audience oscillates unpredictably, from twenty seconds to three and half minutes. In the case of actor Peter Keller, his very long one minute, has to be politely interrupted by the assistant/ translator: "Thank you, Peter", we hear him say, way into the fourth minute. (154)

Scott Wallin reads a possible trajectory of response from the audience that begins with a perception of Peter Keller's incapacity that leads to a threat of the breakdown of the theatrical contract, which threat is resolved in a kind of dialectic of incapacity and theatricality:

When the first scene instructs each actor to stand onstage for one minute, Keller enters and then stands there far beyond his allotted time. Once the audience realizes that he should have left by then, a moment of uncertainty arises in the theater. The audience must ask itself, Can he tell time? If not, what's going to happen with the performance? Keller continues to remain onstage until, after three and a half minutes, the translator gently says, "Danke, Peter." Keller then amiably exits. He therefore does not truly disrupt the production, but Bel's simple structure allows Keller's cognitive difference to begin to gently push against traditional theater expectations. (77)

Benjamin Wihstutz in "... 'And I Am an Actor': On Emancipation in *Disabled Theater*" in Umathum and Wihstutz reads these same moments in Keller's performance as evidence that the performance is working, and that Peter Keller is working, because this apparent derailment of the performance works the same for each performance, it is reiterable:

when Peter Keller is prompted to look into the audience for one minute and loses his sense of time every evening—(he is) simply doing (his) job. (37)

This reading both asserts Keller's agency and capacity in the performance of the overlong one minute but at the same time problematizes that agency or capacity by referring to his 'losing his sense of time.' Yvonne Schmidt's account, that she

states is taken from ‘the descriptions of those involved in the production’, indicates that this misperformance was controlled by Bel. According to Schmidt, at the beginning of the rehearsal process:

Keller actually remained on the stage far too long, only to walk off after almost exactly one minute at the next rehearsal. But Bel chose to keep the first version. Keller was supposed to stand and wait until he was prompted to exit. Thus, the audience has the impression that Keller is incapable of correctly estimating the duration of one minute. (233)

What the references to Peter Keller’s distinctive contributions to the one minute sequences does indicate is a process of negotiation in *Disabled Theater*, of what Siegmund describes as ‘constant doing and undoing of form, of control, the loss and regaining of control’ which because the production involves performers with intellectual disability becomes quite complex in terms of the ascription of agency. It should be remembered that Jérôme Bel is not working with people with intellectual disabilities with no experience of the requirements of performance but with members of Theater HORA, and, as Sandra Umathum in “Actors nonetheless” points out:

...the performers of *Disabled Theater* are real actors with a two-year basic training and several years of stage experience. (106)

This further complicates the issue of the participation of these performers in *Disabled Theater*: are they being presented as people with intellectual disabilities or as actors with intellectual disabilities? Given the positioning of the piece itself as a performative deconstruction of theatricality what kind of ‘acting’ is it that they are performing?

How the HORA actors are presented on stage is at the crux of much of the criticism of *Disabled Theater* and it is important to investigate this criticism and also how Bel's responses to this criticism serves to locate the play of expectations or lack of expectations in Bel's encounter with the actors.

Umathum also refers to 'panel and stay-late discussions' in which the accusation was made that:

Jérôme Bel had not properly worked with the HORA performers, failing therefore to bring their acting potential to fruition. "They are capable of much more", ran the criticism that was voiced by those making theatre with disabled persons. (103)

Umathum mentions specific criticisms from Gisela Höhne, head of the integrative theatre group RambaZamba from Berlin who was 'dissatisfied with the "state of dramatic art" that *Disabled Theater* presented, situating the piece in the context of previous and ongoing performance involving people with intellectual disabilities in Germany:

In this respect, theatre with disabled persons in Germany is already a few steps ahead. (103)

To many people familiar with working in theatre with people with intellectual disabilities, at first sight *Disabled Theater* resembles the audition process or early devising period of a piece of community theatre work. Umathum, in response to Hohne's accusation, defends Bel's practice and methodology by comparing it to the work of Christoph Schlingensief:

Bel's and Schlingensief's approaches are comparable in that they abstain from subjecting their disabled performers' performances to the regime of mastery and sophistication, or from holding them to the ideal of perfect

repetition of what has been rehearsed. If *properly working* is understood as a practice session or rehearsal that uses these criteria as benchmarks, then both Bel and Schlingensief can be accused of neglecting their jobs as choreographer and director, respectively. (103)

Umatham contrasts both Bel's and Schlingensief's processes with 'the regime of mastery and sophistication' and 'an ideal of perfect repetition of what has been rehearsed.' that she equates with Gisele Hühne's methodology:

For Gisela Hühne, for example, working on a production is "a continuous process of artistic—and also of artistic-technical—qualification," enabling actors "to 'freeze' what has been rehearsed, and have it down pat." (105)

Jérôme Bel seems to have a similar view of 'integrated or inclusive theatre':

They say the disabled actors could do better than this. Yes, but what I have seen from these companies did not impress me. They are just reproducing the normal theater that I don't like. I actually don't give a shit about it. (171)

His view of those longstanding practitioners of disability theatre who criticized *Disabled Theater* is exemplified in the comment:

The directors of these companies may be artists, but they are also social workers. (170)

Both Umatham and Bel seek to justify Bel's process on *Disabled Theater* by setting up in opposition a kind of earnest, do-gooding form of inclusive or integrative theatre that is more social work than art. This view does not take into account the layered, anti-theatrical and deconstructive work of Back to Back and a number of other companies.

It is somewhat unclear whether Bel regarded the HORA performers as performers or people with intellectual disabilities:

And when people now say about *Disabled Theater*, they can do much better, I have to say I have never been interested in this. I am interested in what you *are* with your vulnerabilities or incapacities (171)

This recalls his comment, cited earlier, that:

I just had to accept that my job was to stand back, not to bring them (the HORA performers) anywhere else but *back to what they are* (my emphasis) (166)

Both of these comments imply a returning of the performers to a kind of essential non-performed presence that Bel is attempting to achieve by deconstructing the mechanisms of representation of theatricality and choreography. In this sense he sees his job as standing back to reveal this presence, but does his 'not working' as a choreographer and director have the same implications if he is working by 'not working' with a group of trained dancers as it is with a group of actors with intellectual disabilities? He equates his deliberate 'not working' with the HORA performers on *Disabled Theater* with his process of deliberately not choreographing members of the Lyon Opera Ballet in *The Show Must Go On*, dancers whom he describes as having the capacity to 'dance anything.' Is there a difference between Bel asking the members of the Lyon Opera Ballet not to dance and his asking the performers of Theater HORA not to act? Perhaps this is a difference in audience perception. How many people who saw *Disabled Theater* were aware that this was a group of trained and experienced actors? Given what the production asked the performers to do, the

confusion between the person and performer with disabilities was likely to persist.

Bel himself has stated that at the same time his project on *Disabled Theater* was to 'take power away from theatre until the point where it resists' and:

the big success of *Disabled Theater* can be explained by the fact that on stage these performers are not disabled at all. Theatrically speaking, they are super-strong. On stage their presence is phenomenal. Thus, *Disabled Theater* is in fact a very *abled theater*, because the strength of theater is to be in the present, to perform. (172)

When questioned on what this being in the present or presence is, Bel's response was to refer to the HORA actors in the following terms:

They walk on stage and if there is a different shadow because of a projector or something else, they look at it. If there were a technician backstage, they would look at him, too. A professional dancer would never do that, because he would try to stay focused on what the director wants him to do. But being in the present is the best thing that can happen to theater. (172)

This freedom on stage of the actors seems to resemble the unselfconsciousness of Kleist's marionette, a lack of self-consciousness, which is present 'in the puppet and in the god.' Bel seems to be referring to the kind of presence that performance art seeks to generate as opposed to representational theatre. As Lepecki, points out, though, in "Yes Now It's Good Theater," in Umathum and Wihstutz, 'presence' can be a problematic term when applied to performers with intellectual disabilities:

Thus, discourses on *Disabled Theater* seem to end up rotating around the still-disturbing spectacle of alterity with which the actors and their *handicaps* interpellate the audiences' ableism simply by *being present*.

(144)

Bel makes repeated reference to the particular quality of presence that he finds in the HORA actors. The problem is that the term 'presence' applied to people with intellectual disabilities in the context of theatre conflates the kind of auratic presence of the performer with an essentializing authenticity of the presence of 'disability.' Lepecki reconfigures this idea of presence by referring to the tension between the actors' supposed aptitude for presence in the *present* (the ongoing mutable, the continuously variable) with their ability to re-present this presence night after night and that this tension can only be resolved by acknowledging the actors' *work*. Umathum in "Actors Nonetheless" similarly acknowledges that the actors have skills beyond their presence as people with intellectual disabilities but hers is an acknowledgement couched with a number of reservations as to what kind of 'acting' is going on in this ability to repeat:

Their acting skills and professionalism come into play all the same, as becomes evident from the precision with which they repeat their answers to Bel's six requests evening after evening. They are capable of giving their outbursts of euphoria, sadness or even tears such a convincing impression of spontaneity at identical points each night that one wonders whether these emotional outbreaks are the effect of a successful self-enactment that displays itself anew every time, or whether the scenes themselves are responsible for provoking the same sudden emotional reactions in every new performance. (107)

Umatham both acknowledges that the performers have ‘acting skills’ but also questions if these ‘acting skills’ are not ‘self-enactment that displays itself’ or the ‘scenes themselves’ both of which interpretations seem to deny the agency of the performers in the process. Lepecki’s analysis seeks to ascribe an agency to the performers through their work and lifts them out of their subjectivation either as representatives of ‘intellectual disability’ or merely as metaphors of our own sense of incapacity or as representing limit-humans who need to be included again in the fold of humanity, in need of an eternally recurring salvation we are not capable of providing:

we have to move away from the *habitus* of investing identity exceptionalities as the main force driving *Disabled Theater*. We have to move away from redemptive descriptions of mentally handicapped individuals accessing *presence* and the *present*. (147)

The ‘presence’ of the disabled performers is for Lepecki better redefined as the *work* of the performers and their working against or reworking of some of the customary mechanisms of theatrical representation:

It is not at all then a question of presence or of being in the present, but one of short-circuiting the times and terms of representation and the times and terms of presence. (152)

It is in this process of the incapacitating of the times and terms of representation and presence that something emerges akin to what Féral terms ‘theatricality.’ It is this, rather than any explicit activist or inclusive agenda, that reveals the political potential of *Disabled Theater*. As Rancière states in Thesis Three of “Ten Theses on Politics”:

...politics does not simply presuppose the rupture of the 'normal' distribution of positions between the one who exercises power and the one who is subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions 'proper' to such classifications. (30)

This fundamental reconfiguring of power-relations emerges in the assemblage of discourses that comprises the performance of, the reception of and the criticism of *Disabled Theater*. This assemblage is a kind of unruly assembly: its characteristic feature is dissensus. This dissensus is evident in the many critical accounts of what might be termed the discomfiture of the audience, or the disruption of the notion of the audience as a consensus of an ethical and aesthetic community. The question then arises: what emerges from this dissensus?

Disabled Theater throws much of the burden of performance on the audience. The audience is required to be performative: to make their own sense or judgment of the performance and to be aware of their processes of perception of both 'theatre' and 'disability.' For a number of critics the audience, which includes the critic, is found wanting, or is reduced to an incapacitated audience. In Scott Wallin's view the distancing mechanisms that Bel applies – the use of the translator, the announcements, the atomization of each performer in the dance solos while the rest of the ensemble sit in the background, themselves a kind of onstage incapacitated audience, tapping their feet or playing with their hands – leaves the audience wanting to, but unable to connect. His reading of audience response particularly problematizes the audience's applause, a critique taken up in different ways by a number of commentators:

Because the audience is not allowed to express its own pleasures and idiosyncrasies and thereby a sense of collectivity with the actors, it is reduced to communicating its interest and valuation of the actors through applause that felt to me at best like paternalistic approbation and at worst patronization. (73)

Wallin's specific reference to the applause of *Disabled Theater* is in the context of his comparison between *The Show Must Go On* and *Disabled Theater*. He notes how in *The Show Must Go On* during the 'Let the Sun Shine In' sequence the house lights come up and:

the dancers become spectators while the audience looks around at itself.

In the show I attended, many people at that point got up and began to dance, erasing the difference between stage and house. (72)

He notes the contrast to the staging of the dance solos of the HORA performers:

While the dance solos in *Disabled Theater* also encourage empathy, no one dances, even though some audience members, including myself, reported such a desire. (73)

He reads this as a strategy of *Disabled Theater* to maintain barriers or distance between performers and audience and hence between people with and without disabilities. While the comparison is interesting it in effect essentializes the HORA performers as representatives of the disabled. His comments that Bel isolates each performer never allowing them to dance with each other, while having some validity, also reinforces this essentializing of the HORA performers:

by depriving the cast of the chance to dance together or engage in any joint choreography that would suggest a collectivity of goals, values, and

shared perceptions, Bel reinforces the idea that disability is not only marginalized but also lacks its own culture and group identity. (73)

In this reading 'the cast' syntactically becomes equated with 'disability.'

When he refers to audience response to Lorraine Meier's solo to 'Dancing Queen' he raises an interesting question:

As Meier finished her dance and sat down, quite winded, in her seat, I looked over to my right to find two audience members wiping tears from their eyes as they smiled and applauded. What politics and emotions were at work to produce such an affective response? (75)

This is a question that opens up a number of possibilities of reading the encounter between performers and audience and people with and without disabilities but his answer to it is in the following quite restrictive terms:

It seems to me that those in the audience who have had as little exposure to disability as Bel might receive Meier's dance as a touching moment of liberation from their own discomfort. (75)

This response reiterates the criticism of Bel for spending so little time with the HORA performers and includes certain members of the audience in this criticism, but the encounter between director and performers becomes recast as 'exposure to disability' in which again the HORA performers serve to represent or essentialize disability. In addition Wallin adjudges the audience response to be a kind of self-satisfied short circuit characteristic of a dilettante experience of disability. He passes a kind of damning moral judgment of the project of *Disabled Theater's* ability to provoke audience sentimentality in the following description:

Neurotypical audiences who desperately want to connect with disabled people but don't know how end up settling for rather mawkish

sentiments, which they erroneously understand as deriving from a significant, honest encounter with disability. (74)

I think that Wallin's analysis conflates the theatrical encounter with other forms of encounter. This confusion is evident from his reading of the house lights coming on in *The Show Must Go On* as erasing the difference between 'stage and house.' It could equally be argued that the houselights coming on *apparently* erases the difference and at the same time *reinforces* the difference in that this is a temporary reversal of the performer-audience configuration sanctioned as part of the dramaturgy of the production. It is also deployed as a reference to the early stagings of *Hair* and might imply how this strategy has subsequently become a cliché of the promise of audience interaction.

Wallin's reference to 'little exposure to disability' is also problematic as it suggests a kind of hierarchy of disability awareness or sensitivity in which those with a little exposure will be a lot less aware of the problem of perception of disability than those who have had longer exposure. What the comment really implies is that there is the 'right' kind of exposure to people with disabilities and the 'wrong' kind. The begged question in this, in terms of both Wallin's judgment of Bel and the audience, is how this exposure and encounter with disability – meaning specific performers with disabilities – is affected in theatrical performance. Wallin's comment about 'neurotypical audiences' confusing mawkish sentimentality with an 'honest, significant encounter with disability' totalizes the HORA performers as disabled people or disability rather than allowing for their diversities as performers and people with disabilities. Wallin's judgment negates the HORA performers' work as performers just as it accuses Jérôme Bel of doing the same thing.

Wallin does certainly identify and attest to the discomfiture of the audience and he connects this uncomfortableness to the audience's incapacity to deal with the affective charge experienced in the encounter with the performers, (Bel's crying on seeing the HORA dvds, the two women crying after Lorraine Meier's solo.) He seeks to ascribe a specific explanation for this discomfiture:

the audience remains unable to address the true causes of their discomfort: society's devaluation and fear of cognitive difference and our general lack of experience and knowledge of how one should or may intimately and fully interact with mentally disabled people. (68)

While this observation may capture part of the 'politics and emotions at work' in the audience's discomfiture with *Disabled Theater*, other analyses suggest a wider constellation of concerns.

Benjamin Wihstutz articulates how theatre practitioners and critics are currently reconfiguring the aesthetic space of the stage inflected by the 'reappearance of social questions, a re-entry of the social' in the Reality Trend or Citizen Theatre genre of performance in which:

people with disabilities, unemployed or homeless people, asylum seekers, delinquents, and terminally ill people, are no longer represented by actors, but *act themselves*. (36)

In this context, he argues, 'reviewers relate to the events on stage as a purely social encounter' and he cites as one example of this the closing lines of Siobhan Burke's review of *Disabled Theater* in the *New York Times*:

After 90 minutes with the cast members, you almost wish you could go with them. (37)

Scott Wallin also cites Burke's comment as well, but his response:

But such longing is unnecessary and ultimately unproductive because those with whom we desire to connect are living right in our own communities. (80)

could be paraphrased as Susan Burke should get out more, both out of the theatre and out into the community to encounter people with disabilities. I think her comment could be read either as a desire for theatre to be more 'social' or more 'real' or it could be judged as a kind of dilettante expression of desire to know or hang out with people with disabilities more. 'You *almost* wish you could go with them' is still on one level a kind of Aristotelian identification with the performance: engaged but ultimately knowing when to 'switch off' identification. Both Wihstutz and Wallin discern a kind of 'social romanticism' or sentimentality in her response that is similar to the two women weeping after Lorraine Meier's solo.

Disabled Theater seems to provoke discomfort in critics over how to deal with the affective responses of others around them, reiterating Wallin's question 'What politics and emotions are at work?' The politics and emotions need to be considered dialectically to explore what might be at stake in the affective charge of such performance and the politics that emerges from this. This kind of performance provokes an investigation of both affective politics and what has been termed 'political affects.'

In "The Incapacitated Spectator," in Umathum and Wihstutz, Kai van Eikels pursues this kind of investigation but in the process comes up against various impasses and aporia. His analysis of *Disabled Theater* opens in a kind of dialectics of discomfort. He describes how usually when he is in an audience observing dance on stage he experiences a desire to dance that persists despite,

or perhaps because of, the restriction on doing so of the 'theatrical regime.' For him, though, in the case of *Disabled Theater* he does not experience this desire: his body 'acquiesces in its deactivation':

I let the dances pass before my eyes, laughing along, more often than not, with the crowd, clapping hands mechanically whenever there is applause. I notice, oddly conscious of it, to what degree my behavior imitates the behavior of other spectators. (117)

His disengagement unites him mechanically with the rest of the audience but at the same time he feels neither part of the performance nor of the audience:

My responsiveness fails to conceive of the occurrences as a coherent whole asking me to be part of it; neither do I manage to lean back and feel my shoulders rubbing against the collective-singular body of *the audience*. (117)

He then locates the source of his discomfort with the performance and the audience:

And if I dare inquire into the reasons for this handicap, the answer is: disabled people. (117)

Van Eikels is made aware of his 'handicap' from the outset. In the context of the rest of his argument 'disabled people' refers not only to the performers on stage but also to those in the audience who have, like him, been disabled in their responses, and, possibly, to those others in the audience who have had their critical faculties 'disabled' in favour of an emotional or sentimental response to the performers.

Like Wallin, van Eikels is uncomfortable with the responses of some in the audience around him. He also refers to two females and their behaviour at the end of the performance:

Two ladies in the row before me explode into frantic ovations, whispering into each other's ears, stroking arms and shoulders as though looking for excuses to fill up the kinesphere between them with tokens of having been touched. On our way out after the show I overhear them saying, "They had a *matchless* energy!"—"Yes, matchless!" (119)

Van Eikels distinguishes these reactions from the enthusiastic response of theatre-goers at any theatrical performance as he equates their particular enthusiasm with feelings of guilt, 'which forces them to name a *more*, an affluence that compensates for what they may perceive as a deficiency in the dance performance.' Van Eikels also refers to another type of response, not citing any specific source, emerging in the post-show mingling during which he observed the two enthusiastic females:

Others, less sensitive or better versed at explaining away misdemeanor, laugh heartily about the dance solos' crude choreographies, the clumsy execution, the corny music. (119)

As one of the announcements in the performance makes clear, Bel left the choice of music and the choreography up to the individual HORA performers. Should the audience, therefore, be judging the performers' choreography or Bel's strategy in delegating the choreography to them?

Both of the audience responses van Eikels mentions suggest that *Disabled Theater* offers a troubling of both ethical and aesthetic community. There is a split between the kind of 'ethical' response of the two females who praise the

matchless energy of the performers and the negative response to the aesthetics of the piece of those who laughed at the crude choreography. His analysis exposes how *Disabled Theater* reveals the incapacity of ethical or aesthetic community as a 'communauté désœuvrée,' a community that no longer works.

This deconstruction of ethical and aesthetic community brings with it a sneaking suspicion that Bel is dishonouring what van Eikels terms the 'theatrical pact.' Benjamin Wihstutz captures something of this suspicion that still underlies many responses to Bel's Duchamp-like strategy:

Using the disabilities of performers for the sake of shaking up paradigms of skill and the fundamental principles of judgment is highly cynical; and, yet, it is brilliant at the same time inasmuch as something is achieved here that triggers an interminable process of reflection and judgment. What appears objectionable and debatable from an ethical or social point of view might, on the level of aesthetic judgment, be highly effective in political terms. (50)

Van Eikels reiterates this accusation of cynicism in Bel's strategy, and implies that Bel's artwork or experiment may not have succeeded:

The *stability* of the aesthetic regime enabled artistic practice to question the frames, the scope, and the very nature of art. Bel's work acknowledges a situation where, on the contrary, the aesthetic mode has become extremely unstable. And in *Disabled Theater* he goes to great lengths to reconstruct it under unlikely conditions, succeeding, if he does, thanks to a deliberately cynical horse-trade with the audience's inability to take a disabled *performer* for anything but a *disabled* performer—a horse-trade that surreptitiously re-establishes the theatrical pact. (135)

Van Eikels seems to be suggesting that Bel takes a group of performers (who happen to be disabled) and dis-ables them in performance that deconstructs expectations of performance in terms of what is generally perceived as virtuosity. The HORA performers are required to go through the motions of a series of instructions to perform on stage what appear to be very simple actions, although not, as in the case of standing on the stage for one minute, very easy to achieve.

The part of the performance that appears to make the most demands of the performers, the dance solos, is where their training as actors is not needed: when called upon to name their profession they all say 'And I am an actor' not 'and I am a dancer or choreographer.' In the dance solos they are both dis-abled as performers because this is not what they are trained to do or experienced in doing and, at the same time, they are dis-abled in that Bel, a renowned choreographer and dancer, gives them no assistance or guidance. This section, though, is the part of the performance that presumably feels the most like performance to the HORA performers and the audience alike (which 're-establishes the theatrical pact') but it is in the performance of this section that it is most likely the HORA performers appear as *disabled* performers, performers whose incapacities mark them as disabled. Gerald Siegmund refers to specific moments of incapacity in the performance of the dance solos:

When Lorraine Meier amidst the never-ending swirls of spiraling strings in "Dancing Queen" has to stop momentarily to catch her breath, or when Julia Häusermann cannot connect her Michael Jackson crotch-grip pose to her next move, the actors put their performance at risk. (27)

Whose or *what* performance are they putting at risk? They are not putting their own performance of their own choreography at risk because they are in control of that and who is to say that these fits and starts are not part of their choreography? They are not putting Jérôme Bel's performance at risk because he has delegated the choreography and choice of music to the performers, let happen what may. The only performance being put at risk is an audience's expectation of performance, the idea of dance performance of the audience, an idea that assumes that the choreography will be seamless and operate according to certain aesthetic rules.

Siegmund uses this example to support his argument that *Disabled Theater* explores the tension between what Christoph Menke in *Die Kraft der Kunst* has termed *Kraft*, 'force,' the state of undoing that produces transformations and *Vermögen*, 'power,' the capacity of humans to learn or become experts. The moments of incapacity in Lorraine Meier's and Julia Häusermann's solos become for Siegmund:

the ongoing and relentless force behind the power to master the form that becomes paramount. (27)

He also characterizes the whole project of *Disabled Theater* as one which:

shifts away from the regulation mechanisms that produce difference (training, repetition, the power of the director or choreographer) to a state where difference does not matter and *jouissance* sets in . . .
jouissance is a surplus of meaning, a state beyond meaning where meaning collapses. . . *Jouissance* is a highly ambivalent response that is produced by, and answers to, the ambiguity of the performance *undoing* itself. (27)

This is Siegmund's attempt to think beyond judgments or evaluations of the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in *Disabled Theater*. He characterizes as *jouissance* an ambivalence of response that is both 'a perverse enjoyment' and is 'unpleasant and disturbing.' This would then account for both the ambivalence and the polarization of response across different sections of the audience and within individual members of the audience, Wallin and van Eikels' responses being examples of the latter.

I think it is instructive at this point to make a direct comparison between *Disabled Theater* and *FreakStars 3000*. Wihstutz, cited above, refers to the former in the following terms:

What appears objectionable and debatable from an ethical or social point of view might, on the level of aesthetic judgment, be highly effective in political terms. (50)

and this might equally well apply to the latter. I think, though, that there is one marked and crucial difference between the two projects that materially affects the discomfiture of the audience. In terms of Siegmund's citation of Menke's concepts of 'force' and 'power' the residents of Thieler Winckler Haus may not be trained singers (they do not have that 'power') but they have a compelling energy and sense of fun, a 'force' if you like that is enabled in the fun that Schlingensiefel is so obviously also having in his deconstruction of the 'power' of the television documentary and talent quest formations. The 'force' that the HORA performers apply to Jérôme Bel's deconstruction of the 'power' of the formations of theatricality and virtuosic choreography is no less engaged but they seem less enabled in terms of, quite simply, having fun. Audiences are sensitive to this and I would contend, unlike van Eikels, that part of the reason of

the discomfiture of the audience is a desire to compensate for this affective 'short changing' with responses that are either over-enthusiastic, sentimental or cynical.

Jérôme Bel in an interview with Marcel Bugiel states:

It is precisely the intertwining of handicap and theatre that interests me, this couple handicap/theatre. How theatre is modified when it is practised by actors with intellectual disabilities, and what theatre produces for actors with intellectual disabilities. My artistic project is the theatre, to try to understand its structure, its functioning, its power) (My translation)

and in the same interview he goes on to say:

these actors, who are depreciated, are capable of enriching experimental theater, that their singularity is filled with promises for theater and dance – as should be their humanity for society in general. (transl. Christoph Nothlings)

In the first quotation the pairing of handicap and theatre is reflexive in that theatrical representation is in some way a handicap, and so by combining this handicapped form with people who are handicapped a kind of negation of negation or critique of critique occurs that leads to a different experience of performance. All of this might be said to occur within the frame of the theatre, or of theatre incapacitated in its encounter with performance that Féral has termed 'theatricality'. At the same time 'handicap', 'disability' and 'disabled' are terms that are obviously and oppressively in operation outside the theatre. To reframe Bel's words, what does *Disabled Theater* produce for actors who are

people with intellectual disabilities and how does it affect the perception of the 'promises', or potential and capacity, of their humanity for society in general?

In 'The Incapacitated Spectator' van Eikels reconfigures this couple of handicap/theatre into dialectical play. For van Eikels for theatre to function as a work of art the spectator needs to be reduced to the level of idiocy or dumbness:

For a performance, be it acting or dancing, to become theatrical art, the situation must disable interaction. (127)

Van Eikels goes to the extent of creating metaphors that equate spectatorship of theatre with paraplegia:

In the case of theater it means that, physically, I mutate into a creature whose legs have gone limp as though severed or palsied from paraplegia. Arms won't escape paralysis either, except for the applause. My tongue's been anaesthetized as well for the hours I spend in the audience: I may utter brief, compact sounds that testify to my being affected, but not articulate ones. (124)

Leaving aside his fairly outrageous metaphorization of disability, this is provocative in other ways: *Disabled Theater* makes us aware of the dis-abled audience for conventional theatre and a lot of avant-garde theatre. Van Eikels contends that Bel's strategy is both conservative and radical. Bel reduces the actions of performance to such a minimum: walking across the stage, speaking into a microphone, dancing a self-devised solo, yet by doing this:

Thanks to this reduction (and regression) the performers are aglow with an aura. (135)

In van Eikels' view this aura is generated by spectators who are stupefied both by the incapacitation of the configuration of audience to performance in a

conventional theatre space and by the simplicity of the performance they are viewing. How is this stupefaction affected, though, by the presence of performers with intellectual disability? Van Eikels contends that Bel does not offer up the performers for aesthetic contemplation because:

...he never takes the aesthetic credibility of (the) work for granted. (135)

In yet another twist Bel thus emerges as an incapacitated artist, incapacitated to the extent that he is not making a claim that *Disabled Theater* is art or theatre because it is, of course, dis-abled. He has put his name on it, like Duchamp on the urinal, and his name and words are referred to in the performance but it is up to the spectators to judge if this is art or theatre. Van Eikels' argument is that they are likely to judge it as art or theatre because they and others, critics and scholars, have put so much work into it.

Van Eikels offers this figure of the incapacitated spectator as a provocative corrective to Rancière's formulation of the emancipated spectator and he refers to a specific and much cited passage in *The Emancipated Spectator* in which Rancière questions the assumed passivity of the audience faced with the activity of the performance. Rancière's argument is that the audience relationship to the performance does not need to be reconfigured by audience participation or narrative didacticism because in the audience engagement in the aesthetic experience of theatre:

The spectator is active, just like the student or the scientist: He observes, he selects, he compares, he interprets. He connects what he observes with many other things he has observed on other stages, in other kinds of spaces. He makes his poem with the poem that is performed in front of him. (Rancière Artforum 277)

Van Eikels finds this idea of the poem of the subject of aesthetic experience incompatible with Rancière's definition of the subject of aesthetic experience as:

not the population in its entirety, the intermingling of all classes, but a subject without particular identity, whose name is 'anybody.' (124)

Van Eikels draws from this anyboddiness a kind of assumption of a dumbness or idiocy of the aesthetic subject ('In the aesthetic state then Man is null') a kind of suspension of intellect and intelligence. To let the artwork or the theatre-work operate on the subject in the exceptional – and economically - non-productive ways it does – it requires a kind of stupidity before the other:

What is commonly referred to as aesthetic experience denotes a moment of identification between me and mankind in a state of unknowing apprehension, where form, the object of aesthetic pleasure, is different from any recognizable shape because I am too much of a total idiot to have any particular recognition of it. (127)

Unlike Van Eikels I do not see incompatibility between Rancière's 'poem' and his formulation of the 'exceptional dumbness' of the spectator in the face of theatre that induces 'a response more inarticulate, more mushy, more distorted, in short, more idiotic than a reaction.' What van Eikels is referring to is an affective response, which at some level is what is in operation in Rancière's metaphor of the 'poem' as a response. I take the meaning of Rancière's 'poem' that the spectator makes to be a use of language that plays with the distribution of space and time, that does not necessarily follow the linearity of narrative, that has about it something of the arresting or suspending of time in the contemplation of an artwork, which operates by parataxis rather than hypotaxis.

This 'poem' however does not need to be expressed in verbal or written language only.

In the case of *Disabled Theater* the spectator creates their poem of response out of an assemblage that might include Bel's arrogance/idiocy before the other of the HORA performers, the performers' resistance or re-evaluation of Bel's commands, demands and instructions, the performers' work in recreating the expected moments of interaction in response to audible and affective response from the audience. The poem includes moments of acknowledging incapacity: self-doubt, self-questioning as well as the questioning of the whole theatrical project and related social and aesthetic projects of integration and inclusion. This questioning may remain with the spectator long after the exit from the theatre. The variety and polarization of response to *Disabled Theater* indicate that ultimately the performance and the phenomena of the critical discourse and commentary generated around the performance hits various spots – sore spots, blind spots - in what might be termed the politics of the aesthetic experience of theatrical performance.

André Lepecki seeks to deal with these issues of agency and efficacy by recomposing the political-compositional structure of *Disabled Theatre* not as an 'authoritarian/submissive polarization' but rather as a 'collective, impersonal and ethical surrendering to the joint task of bringing a(n) (urgently) necessary work into the world.' He goes on to say that 'As long as choreographer, actors and audience work for the work, power (potestas/pouvoir) will always be replaced by potentiality (potentia/puissance).' (153) In contrast to van Eikels' judgment that *Disabled Theater* requires both too much work from the spectator, and at the same time incapacitates the spectator, Lepecki recasts this work of the

spectator as part of a greater whole. In Lepecki's reading of the piece he assigns agency to the actors as part of a larger assemblage:

Disabled Theater . . . starts with actors immediately undoing its compositional premises. (154)

For him the binaries of non-disabled/disabled, director/choreographer, actor/audience are recomposed in an assemblage that requires the complicit work on the work to make *Disabled Theater*. For him the actors have autonomy but it is an autonomy that still avows heteronomy and which is:

ethically bound to the fact that *something must be built*, that something will be built-with the author, the assistant/translator, the audience, the chairs, the water bottles, the scores requests, the stage apparatus, the world . . . A something called *Disabled Theater*. (155)

The challenge the piece offers to what is considered theatre is so great that it can be said to 'disable' theatre and the argument is made that it lays to rest the notion that the theatre of people with disabilities need to forever strive for a replica of 'good theatre' either as adjudged to be good theatre by an aesthetic community – theatre that 'feels good' or theatre that heals rifts in the social bond – theatre that 'does good'.

Commenting on Bel's reference in 'Entretien sur Disabled Theater,' his interview with Marcel Bugiel, to 'the community which these actors represent' Lepecki reformulates this phrase as a 'paradox of community' as people with intellectual disabilities 'inevitably find themselves, despite themselves, *representing* a community – even though this community is not at all one, and even though they are not its (juridico-political) representatives.' His way

through this impasse of representation of the unrepresented (the unrepresentable) is to adapt Gilles Deleuze's concept of *minorization*:

a process of extracting becomings from historical, cultural and dogmatic conditions . . . (142)

Lepecki's analysis also attempts to move away from concepts of cause and effect in terms of directorial intention and spectatorial perception by referring to a different conceptual topology: to a reading of events taking place on *Disabled Theater's* planes of composition and planes of expression:

We have to attend to those moments when the work, even in its most structuring *dispositifs* undoes itself or disables itself from being a work defined by identity, trapped by identity politics, stifled by what Deleuze once called "the strange operation" through which minorities are captured into identities that sap all their singular force and force them to be "integrated into the majoritarian fact" as identities. . . it is in its capacity to transcend the bond *disability = intense presence* that the political work of the piece actually takes place. (147)

The reference to 'planes of composition' is from *A Thousand Plateaus*:

There are only haecceities, affects, subjectless individuations that constitute collective assemblages. [...] We call this plane, which knows only longitudes and latitudes, speeds and haecceities, the plane of consistency or composition (as opposed to a plan(e) of organization or development). (266)

Lepecki refers to the *scenic*, the *score* and the *translation* *dispositifs* that Bel has set in place. The performers have limited capacity to make their own adjustments to the scenic *dispositif*: they either operate within the layout of

chairs, water bottles, lighting and microphone or not. In terms of the score dispositif there is, however, some, limited, freedom for haecceities to emerge. One example he gives of this is Peter Keller's response to the announcement for the performers to give their name age and profession. Whereas all of the other performers say 'and I am an actor' Peter Keller instead in a six-minute sequence introduces his own discourse which includes references to Rütli, flowers, the Benissimo Lottery, yes no good theatre. Lepecki reads this as:

Before the call of identity, before the call for self-representing, rather than *saying* "actor" Keller opts for *doing acting* and making this doing quite clear to the audience. (158)

When they are 'naming their handicap' there is a wide range and diversity of responses amongst the HORA performers, some poignant, some dismissive, some apologetic but Peter Keller again takes the opportunity to take off into his own discourse of 'Yes now good theater' and Rütli and the Benissimo Lottery.

Lepecki in the concluding section of his essay returns to Peter Keller characterizing both the force and singularity of his contribution:

Keller's interventions in *Disabled Theater* are crucially important. I cannot really imagine the piece executing its critical task so well without his monologues and sense of duration. Both co-compose truly schizo lines of flight . . . We may find in each evasive detouring, not just an escape from identity-bound questions, but the path towards a weapon of choice, the actualization of potentialities and singularities where the actor appears above all, as actor, agent of actualizing events and minorizing representation. (159)

Lepecki's reference to Peter Keller's performance in *Disabled Theater* referring to Deleuze and Guattari's 'lines of flight' is particularly apposite and affords a possibility of folding the concepts of Deleuze and Guattari back into the lived experience of other people with intellectual disabilities. Deleuze and Guattari acknowledge the debt in the development of concepts such as 'lines of flight' and of the rhizome to the work of Fernand Deligny with young autistic people. These are concepts of spatiality that play across aesthetics and politics, topologies of movements of thinking and feeling. In *A Thousand Plateaus* they first make reference to the work of Deligny in the context of the contrast between the tree and the rhizome. For them the tree and the process of arborification is associated with solidified structure, hierarchy and the death of desire whereas it is by the rhizome 'that desire moves and produces':

Plug the tracings back into the map, connect the roots or trees back up with a rhizome. . . The same applies to the group map: show at what point in the rhizome there form phenomena of massification, bureaucracy, leadership, fascization etc., which lines nevertheless survive, if only underground, continuing to make rhizome in the shadows. Deligny's method: map the gestures and movements of an autistic child, combine several maps for the same child, for several different children. (14)

Deleuze and Guattari apply the concept of tree and rhizome to movements in the psyche and the socius that form 'massification, bureaucracy, leadership and fascization' topologies of totalizing power and domination that they associate with the structuration of the tree, but at root is 'rhizome' a more diverse, dynamic, centreless matrix of outgrowths. The maps that Deleuze and Guattari

are referring to are the tracings of the movements of autistic children and young people (many of them without access to spoken language) that Fernand Deligny traced in a unique living arrangement and practice of a non-dogmatic therapy in the hills of Cévennes in south eastern France. This was an attempt at a rhizomatic non-institution. Deligny's work and the work of those who came to visit or stay was to trace the movements of the autistic young people, individually and overlay tracings of one over another to delineate patterning of intensities in space and time. Deleuze and Guattari refer to some of these lines later in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Fernand Deligny transcribes the lines and paths of autistic children by means of *maps*: he carefully distinguishes "lines of drift" (*lignes d'erre*) and "customary lines" (*le coutumier*). This does not only apply to walking; he also makes maps of perceptions and maps of gestures showing customary gestures and gestures of drift. (202)

In Deligny's anti-psychiatric, anti-institutional, anti-concentration camp, he wished to live outside language, not only not naming or codifying problems but against what he termed 'le projet pensé' the thought out or thought through project. He opposed the being of reason (*raison*) with the being of the network (*reseau*) and was resistant to concepts of identity, even for himself. His project, a kind of post-therapeutic practice resembles a kind of postdramatic theatre. Alongside the mappings and the tracings, a kind of collective idiolect developed, a vocabulary of immanence, with an attempted rhizomatic syntax of agency and subjectivity. As Nietzsche said, we are trapped in the prejudice of grammar that every verb requires a subject. In an unpublished letter to Althusser written in

1976 and cited by Sandra Alvarez de Toledo in *Cartes et Lignes d'Erre/Maps and Wander Lines*, Deligny indicates a kind of Foucauldian exposure of the analyst in the face of the other, the confounding of subject and object of 'us' and 'them':

In our practice, what is the object? This or that child, a psychotic 'subject'? Certainly not. The actual subject that has to be transformed, is us, us there, close to these 'subjects' who, so to speak, are not really subjects and that is the reason why THEY are there. (5)

'They', the othered, the autistic, the intellectually disabled allow us to try to transform not them but ourselves, which resonates with Cassavetes' 'the problem is us.' The maps were at once a kind of ritual practice, not an end product. As Bertrand Ogilvie in the Afterword to *Cartes et Lignes d'Erre/Maps and Wander Lines* articulates, they were merely part of a process towards:

The constitution of a *commons* which was the great task both from an ethical and political point of view of this small *network* of resistance formed around these children who had been universally rejected. (407)

They were a way of not foreclosing in diagnosis and symptomology the non-identitarian presence of the autistic young people and of living with them and learning from them.

Within the group idiolect that developed in Cévennes *agir* 'to act' was the infinitive of the out-of-language child, of actions not the product of any intention or will and not demanding any reciprocity. *Faire* 'to do' was peculiar to the speaking subject and le projet pensé, the thought out project. (12) *Agir* was more associated with the autistic young people and was opposed to *faire*, more associated with the non-disabled adults, *agir* is potentiality, force or *Kraft* as

opposed to the definite power of *faire* or *Vermögen*. Deligny's project, a network of con-viviality or living together, serves as a paradigm that might inform the most aesthetically and politically radical ways of working to negotiate theatre involving actors with intellectual disabilities.

Conclusion

I would connect Peter Keller's lines of flight with those of Mark Deans at the end of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich*, with the sheer force and inventiveness of the residents of Thielers Winckler Haus in *FreakStars 3000* in their own devised riffing on popular culture and mediatized discourses, the distinctive appropriation of gesture and spoken and written language that was Christopher Knowles' reaction to his extraordinary education, the becoming and potentialities of Chris Dobbins and Romaine Grace in the shadows of institutions in *Stepping Out* and the lines of flight from the nativity play and the dispositif of the institutional theatrical of the uncredited children in *A Child is Waiting*.

What implications do these tracings of transversal connections have for the current situation and the potential future development of this field? The path of development of theatre involving actors with intellectual or developmental disabilities is problematic for a number of reasons. The case studies I have chosen represent a genealogy not a history because throwing "a spotlight on the subject of retardation" has been a practice that has been reiteratively reenacted over the last fifty years. During this period a variety of theatre practitioners have each in turn 'discovered' actors with intellectual disabilities meaning that a chronological 'history' of this theatre would resemble reiterated colonial accounts of the discovery of newfound, exotic Others.

How is it possible to shift this perspective away from the emphasis on the non-disabled facilitators to include the voices of, and to acknowledge and celebrate the contributions of, the actors with intellectual disabilities themselves? How is it possible to acknowledge the substantial part these actors

have played in the emergence of this form of theatre from its origins in segregated institutions to its much greater visibility and prominence in the second decade of the twenty first century? This thesis can acknowledge this contribution but as it is part of a critical discourse this thesis will inevitably be primarily addressed to a readership that is assumed not to be intellectually disabled, in the generally accepted meaning of this term.

Critical discourse can, however, make a contribution, however limited, to delineating the territory that has been explored in previous theatrical performance and in indicating the potential ground that might be covered in future exploration. Theatrical performance itself is a practice and discourse in which people with intellectual disabilities, for all the shortcomings of non-disabled facilitators, have now been meaningfully engaged for the past fifty years at least. The more recent work of Back to Back Theatre, *Disabled Theater* and to a certain extent Christoph Schlingensiefel's *FreakStars 3000* are all performances in some ways engaged with critical discourse.

The theatrical performance by the actors with intellectual disabilities in *A Child is Waiting* emerged amidst dialogue and dispute, argument and counter-argument over the treatment of the 'subject of retardation' that resonate still. This included the tension between Stanley Kramer's desire to treat the subject with a sentimental "spotlight" and John Cassavetes' desire for a more immanent approach through the chiaroscuro and POV shots of cinema vérité. In a wider historical context, the performance and presence of the children is caught between Kramer's messianic hope to redeem the falling into inhumanity of the Muselmanner of the camps and Cassavetes' self-deprecating or pessimistic acknowledgment that the problem is not retardation, the problem is "us."

Regardless of, or perhaps because of, this tension in its genesis, the performance of “the children”, however, remains arresting and affecting. Their performance arrests the flow of time of the representational cinematic narrative and disrupts the intended meta-narrative of the social issues film of a progressive journey towards inclusion. This arresting and disruptive force is achieved by a presentation of the actors with intellectual disabilities that is sensitive enough to allow their humour and their anxieties to peep through the various narrative frameworks imposed upon them: a presentation that allows for their affective presence as well as their mediated presence. Cassavetes’ film does not present the theatrical or the cinematic performance as a seamless process of representation and communication. The actors with intellectual disabilities are allowed to find theatrical performance itself at once amusing, anxiety-provoking and strange *from within the performance*. This performativity of their performance anticipates much later developments in the concept of theatricality.

The stated intention of the documentary *Stepping Out* is to chart the “birth of a theatre of the mentally handicapped” but a close analysis reveals how the performance that eventually arrives on the stage of the Sydney Opera House is implicated in a number of other social performances. These include the performance of the institution and other related organizations as being progressive and enlightened in the treatment of people with intellectual disabilities. These include the specific performance of Aldo Gennaro, the director, as an artist, therapist and outsider whose liminality qualifies him to be a facilitator of the creativity of the disadvantaged. These include the social performances of difference in the world outside the institution that are clearly meant to call attention to the documentary spectators’ own perceptions. They

also of course include the performance of the residents: as cheerful, compliant members of the institution and as self-deprecating Australians. At a deeper level than these performances of “passing,” the documentary implies another performance required of people with intellectual disabilities: the self-policing of their desire. The performances of the body in desire in the documentary include the performative veiling of that desire in drag and camp.

What remains through the various levels of performance and mediation, is the distinctive voice of Romaine Grace, the female narrator, the distinctive physical presence of Chris Dobbins, his and the others’ intense relationship with Aldo Gennaro and the joy of performance of the other residents. Although Gennaro’s methodology appears to be the most prescriptive of any directorial approach examined in this thesis the documentary makes clear that in that particular historical and geographical context his approach to, and relationships with, the residents of the Sunshine Home was of a different order emotionally to their relationship with the routines of institutionalized care in the Sunshine Home, a home away from all ‘normal’ ideas of home for the rest of their lives.

I have made a comparison between what the documentary shows of Gennaro’s theatrical and therapeutic methodology with what the archive shows of Robert Wilson’s methodology in his collaborations with Christopher Knowles and Raymond Andrews. The intention of the comparison is to highlight how the problem of the moral or ethical aporia highlighted in the analysis of *A Child is Waiting* remains unresolved in these subsequent theatrical and therapeutic practices. This aporia is, at root, an inequality in the intersubjective relationships between an ‘us’ meaning people without intellectual disabilities and a ‘them’ meaning people with intellectual disabilities.

This aporia remains whether the methodology for creating theatre is one in which people with intellectual disabilities mirror and are required to emulate the aesthetic palate and performance techniques of non-disabled facilitators or whether this mirroring or emulation is reversed so that non-disabled people seek to inhabit the movement and language of those with intellectual disabilities in order to understand or empathize with their perspectives. Both methodologies are predicated on an inequality in intersubjective relationships. While the work of both Aldo Gennaro and Robert Wilson represent interesting stages in the development of this type of theatre, the basic assumptions about these intersubjective relationships mean that the work remains caught up in the double bind of this ethical aporia. This is important to identify because these basic assumptions of inequality continue to inform much work in this area to the present time, often compromising overt intentions to empower and include.

The question then needs to be asked whether it is possible to reconfigure this intersubjective relationship or, at the least, to acknowledge this underlying aporia. I believe that *FreakStars 3000*, especially in the wider context of Christoph Schlingensiefel's work, marks a potential turning point in the reconfiguration of this aesthetic and political relationship between people with and without intellectual disabilities in theatrical performance. Schlingensiefel proceeds to negotiate relationships in which, after Rancière, equality between people with and without intellectual disabilities is already assumed as a starting point and is not something to be remediated or redeemed. This leads him to a way of working with actors with intellectual disabilities that is equivalent to how he works with any other collaborators: refugees, drug addicts, opera singers or

film and theatre actors. A fundamental principle of his artistic methodology was what he termed self-provocation, regardless of the 'self' concerned or indeed, at a deeper level, a provocation of the assumption of an autonomous self. A Nietzschean questioning of all values enabled him to afford actors with intellectual disabilities the dignity of being undignified. He had a Rancièrian suspicion of ethics in performance and the ethical treatment of publics and performers from disadvantaged sections of society. In this respect his work anticipates the discussions of the ethics of the participation of people with intellectual disabilities that has been taking place from within twenty first century theatrical performance involving people with such disabilities. Although his work often explored a fine line between provocation and exploitation and courted the risk of 'unethical' behaviour, I believe that he made a radical contribution to what is becoming possible for this form of theatre.

The possibilities that the work of Schlingensiefel opened up have been taken up by the recent work of Back to Back Theatre, a company who have developed a performance practice after many years of development within a community and therapeutic context to a point where they can now afford the luxury of working over a long period of development with a small regular ensemble of actors with intellectual disabilities. Theirs is an ongoing practice in which within in each new production they can set new challenges for particular members of the ensemble and in which productions are in dialogue with each other across their oeuvre and, with the post-show discussion, in a particular dialogue with audience responses and expectations. They are probably the group working in this area of theatre that have afforded the most developmental practice to their performers and, therefore, to the perceptions of a wider

audience of what actors with intellectual disabilities are capable of in performance.

The ongoing development of their oeuvre is crucial to consider in terms of the questions this thesis is asking. The focus of my investigation has been on close readings of three recent productions. *Small metal objects* took this form of theatre into a reconfigured public space to question assumptions of commonality between and amongst people with and without intellectual disabilities. *Food Court* opens up the possibilities of actors with intellectual disabilities enacting abuse, bullying and violence as perpetrators rather than the victims that they are assumed to be. It also develops the interrogation of the spectator's faculties of hearing and seeing that was such a feature of *small metal objects*. *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* explicitly and performatively addresses the issue of who can tell what stories and for whom, an issue that continues to haunt this form of theatre. I have in addition to attending Back to Back performances and viewing and re-viewing archive performance videos, had a continuing dialogue with members of the creative team and the performers. It is in an analysis of Back to Back's work that I feel that my own twelve years of experience of exploring theatre with actors with intellectual disabilities has been most influential. This is difficult to quantify and somewhat out of the range of the intended scope of this thesis but I need to acknowledge that this experience of practical work that provided the impetus for writing this thesis informs my reading of how Back to Back explore the questions of the agency of actors with intellectual disabilities, their dramaturgical strategies and use of the *techne* of theatre and the kind of theatricality or 'performance theatre' that they have developed in their making of theatre in spite of *and* because of their "issues with theatre."

Back to Back play with audience concerns over the perceived lack of agency of the performers with intellectual disabilities in a company directed and curated by non-disabled facilitators. I argue that at the end of *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* there is a staging of a kind of autonomy for Mark Deans in the closing minutes of the production. This is, however, a highly theatricalized autonomy, dependent upon the support of the preceding narrative, the staging of Mark within the scenography of that production continuing to generate “sparks of representation.” Jérôme Bel in *Disabled Theater* similarly flirts with the audience in terms of presenting the apparent autonomy of actors with intellectual disabilities and combines this with a kind of attempted Duchampian degree zero of performance in the highly atomized structure of what he requires the actors of Theater HORA to perform. For the purposes of the subject of this thesis, *Disabled Theater* is particularly interesting for the debate that it generates and for that debate more thoroughly entering the academy and the indication that gives of where this particular form of theatre involving people with intellectual disabilities is now located in broader debates about the politics and aesthetics of performance, in its broadest sense, and performance philosophy. The question of what contribution this theoretical discourse can make alongside and intersecting with the practical development of this form of theatre remains open and fraught with potential, perhaps the potential of incapacity, of the intellectually disabled ‘art of failure.’

The practice of this form of theatre has seen recent experiments in reconfiguring the creative autonomy of actors with intellectual disabilities of *Freie Republik HORA*, Theater HORA’s response by means of performance to *Disabled Theater*, and Theater Thikwa’s *Regie*, in which actors with intellectual

disabilities take the role of directors. For the immediate future this form of theatre will continue to be a negotiation between people with and without intellectual disabilities. Theater HORA and Thikwa's recent work and my own practical work with Different Light Theatre suggests that a notion such as "creative autonomy" for actors with intellectual disabilities needs to be tempered with the right kind of support networks and framing to give that creative autonomy any meaning and also to acknowledge the highly collaborative nature of theatrical performance and the mutual contingencies and vulnerabilities of making theatre in the latest iteration of the recurrent end times of theatre.

Coda: "A dance that draws you to the edge of your seat."

I wish to conclude this thesis with a coda that refers to some very specific moments of incapacity and theatricality in a recent production by Back to Back Theatre. These moments serve as a paradigm for the considerations of incapacity and theatricality in this thesis and what may emerge from considering and practising theatrical performance involving people with intellectual disabilities on these terms. These moments reveal an affective network in operation across all bodies present in theatrical performance, a network in which the possibilities of a politics of affect and affective politics emerge.

Sarah Mainwaring's palsy turns the task of clipping a microphone into its stand into a dance that draws you to the edge of your seat. (Blake)

This is how Jason Blake, the reviewer for the Sydney Morning Herald, describes the actions of Sarah Mainwaring as, in fits and starts of movement, she sets up a

microphone at the beginning of *Super Discount* by Back to Back Theatre, a production that I saw at the Wharf Theatre, Sydney Theatre Company in October, 2013. *Super Discount*, the production that succeeded *Ganesh versus the Third Reich* is typical of Back to Back 's narrational and dramaturgical strategy in that it is an attempt at staging the unstageable: a comic book narrative of super heroes and villains using a bare minimum of theatrical *techne*. In this work the company's investigation of the place of people with intellectual disabilities continues. *Super Discount* suggests this place is somewhere between the 'Super' that is the *wonder* of the appearance of people with intellectual disabilities on stage and the playing on the *guilt* of an assumed abled audience complicit in 'discounting' such people. This place is somewhere between wonder and guilt, and in a tension between the two, in which dialectic the possibility of a new place emerges, combining wonder and guilt and moving beyond them. This is a new place that beckons in the here and now of the encounter between people with and without intellectual disabilities.

In the hands of a stage hand the clipping of a microphone to its stand might well be an unremarkable action, a kind of 'non-matrixed performance.' (Kirby 41) In the hands of Sarah Mainwaring, however, it is different. Blake asserts that it is her 'palsy' that transforms the task into something so remarkable, at an aesthetic level 'a dance' - and compellingly theatrical - it 'draws you to the edge of your seat': a choreography in operation across the bodies of both performers and audience.

What is it about Sarah Mainwaring's 'palsy' that achieves such theatrical effect and affect? As spectators we can clearly see what she is moving towards doing: we can see and feel where the movement is intended to go. In advance of

its completion we know the function it is intended to perform. We see her attempts towards the completion of this action and the involuntary movements, which, despite herself, take her away from it. You are on the edge of your seat caught between anticipation of her completion of the action or anxiety at the possibility of her failure to complete the action. Purposive, meaningful movement is teetering on the edge of collapse, – her progression towards completing the action is threatened with its undoing: at times three steps forward two steps back, at times two steps forward three steps back. I should add that in the production the microphone is switched on, so that we also hear her struggle with the object. At the neurological level perhaps the spectator's mirror neurons may be tracing synaptic paths that are modeling the completion of the action for her: other neurons may be firing in empathy with her. The dance of her movements of incapacity and theatricality and the empathies of the audience become a choreography that is shared between performer and audience, a dance at the level of the soma and the chora.

The time she takes to perform this action is different to what might be expected. There is a durationality about it. But it is a kind of *de facto* durationality. Whose durationality is it? Presumably Sarah Mainwaring has no choice over the duration: this is how she moves. It is the dispositif of the theatrical production that chooses to invite the spectator to share this durationality. What might emerge in the act of spectatorship in the time that we are not used to waiting for such an action to be completed? The spectator might question what is at stake in the allocation of this task to Sarah Mainwaring. Is her 'embodied difference' being curated, displayed or exploited? The production, like much of Back to Back's recent work, invites this 'anxiety' as it

calls attention to the processes of perceiving, particularly the perceiving of disability.

Sarah Mainwaring's placing of the hand-held microphone in its stand also ends the production. It is both an undoing and completion of an action she performed at the beginning of the production. Her distinctive performance of these actions, therefore, frames the whole piece. The 'super hero' strand of the narrative concludes in a confrontation between Mark Deans, a performer with Down's Syndrome, as the hero, and David Woods, a performer without disabilities, as the villain. This takes place in a snow storm on top of a table, a staging that combines the spectacle of theatrical performance with the minimalist, matter-of-fact *mise-en-scène* of the production. Mark finally asserts himself as superhero and vanquishes the villain by emitting an almighty roar of power into the microphone he is holding and then stands astride the villain on the table. Grehan and Eckersall describe what follows:

As the other actors begin to strike the set around him, Mark, our superhero, can't get down from the table. He calls to another of the cast – Sarah Mainwaring - for help. The fragility of our existence is captured in these closing moments. (Grehan and Eckersall "Review")

As she offers her shaking hand to accompany his descent a shift occurs from a 'moment resplendent with theatricality and drama' of the previous snow storm scene to what feels like a different mode of performance. Sarah Mainwaring falteringly helps Mark Deans down off the table and in her distinctive way she replaces the microphone in its stand: a wavering of intended and involuntary movement that draws the audience to the edge of its seat, a

position that suggests what is being performed is both compelling and might impel the audience into action.

Incapacity is at stake in what Grehan and Eckersall locate in *Super Discount*'s multilayered investigation of acting and role-playing: 'we are on the verge of questioning the limitations of theatre itself.' Fragility is, in one sense then, the fragility of representation, the theatricality of theatre on the verge of collapse. Sarah Mainwaring's performance of the actions of clipping and unclipping a microphone to its stand calls attention to itself. This is a calling attention to both the incapacity and the theatricality of the actions. In this interplay of incapacity and theatricality Sarah Mainwaring's movements emerge not as a falling from the true of a norm of economy and elegance of movement but as remarkable and compelling in their difference. What also emerges is a fellow feeling, of mutual vulnerability and mutual interdependence, a political affect that is neither messianic nor melancholic but that responds to the precarities of the here and now. In the place that emerges in the dialectical interplay of incapacity and theatricality can be found strange, new and different beauty; strange, new and different possibilities for *acting*, braiding meanings of that term to include performance on a stage and in everyday life and implying the potential for political action.

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