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## **Exploring Autoethnography in My Year with Teenage Dick**

by Winter Phong

### **Abstract**

This study explores my year-long journey to investigate the effectiveness of inclusivity signals by theatre companies that incorporate disability narratives into their regular programming. Utilizing an autoethnographic narrative approach, this research examines personal experiences through participant observation, journaling, artifact analysis, description, and storytelling to investigate how these inclusivity signals shape the creation of welcoming spaces for disabled audiences. The findings reveal that while there has been progress in integrating disability narratives into mainstream programming, significant barriers remain. These hinder the development of truly welcoming environments that address the needs and experiences of all audience members, regardless of disability. The study highlights a disconnect between the rhetoric of accessibility and the reality of audience experiences, suggesting that despite efforts to create inclusive spaces, technical failures and other obstacles can render these spaces unwelcoming. This author wrestles with the want to congratulate access efforts and disability representation while remaining critical of ineffective access practices. The research underscores the potential of autoethnography to provide deep insights into audience perceptions and the

complexities of engagement, advocating for continued commitment, collaboration, and advocacy to foster more belonging in the performing arts.

## **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a significant shift in the theatre landscape, intensifying conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. As theatres worked to address systemic inequities, accessibility emerged as a critical component of these broader efforts. While historically framed as an issue of compliance rather than artistic or cultural inclusion, accessibility became increasingly recognized as integral to theatre's commitment to fostering more equitable spaces. To signal this shift, theatres began adopting new approaches to accessibility, expanding audience access and support. Moving beyond a patron-only focus, some companies began featuring disabled stories and actors on their stages.

I sought to examine these evolving accessibility practices by assessing companies that positioned themselves as allies in disability inclusion. Specifically, by examining those incorporating disability narratives into their regular season programming rather than those limiting efforts to designated “accessible performances” with emphasis on audience only. In the context of the 2021–2022 theatre season, I adopted an autoethnographic approach to explore the intersection of accessibility and representation in professional theatre productions featuring disability narratives and disabled actors. Relying on my expertise in theatre management practices and my own personal experience with disability, I aimed to investigate how these signals of inclusivity translated into the actual audience experience for disabled patrons. My research considers the full spectrum of audience engagement, from ticket purchasing to post-performance interactions, analyzing not only the advertised accessibility measures but also their effectiveness in practice.

Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick* provides a compelling case study for examining these issues. As a contemporary reimagining of William Shakespeare's *Richard III* set in a high school, Lew's play engages directly with disability as an inherent aspect of its protagonist's identity, rather than a metaphorical device or narrative obstacle. Unlike earlier works that have framed disability as a symbolic marker of moral corruption or as a challenge to be overcome, *Teenage Dick* foregrounds the disabled experience as a central narrative lens. While some modern productions of *Richard III* tackle more current understandings of disability, the original narrative was not created in this way. By featuring disabled actors and explicitly engaging with disability politics through a disability-centered narrative, productions of *Teenage Dick* offer an opportunity to assess how theatres navigate both onstage representation and accessibility for disabled audiences. This study considers whether these productions extended their commitments to disability inclusion beyond season selection to promote meaningful stage productions and audience experiences.

## Background

Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick* was commissioned by actor and playwright Gregg Mozgala as an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* recontextualized in a high school setting.<sup>1</sup> Mozgala, who describes himself as a "Triple Threat: 'Actor, Writer, Cripple,'" founded the New York-based theatre company Apothetae in 2012. The company's mission is to produce works that explore and illuminate the disabled experience.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Paul, producer, "Mike Lew on *Teenage Dick*," *Shakespeare Unlimited*, episode 174 (Folger Shakespeare Library, September 10, 2021), <https://www.folger.edu/podcasts/shakespeare-unlimited/teenage-dick-mike-lew/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gregg Mozgala, "Broadway Actor Organizes Festival Celebrating Deaf/Disabled Artists," *The Theatre Times*, May 14, 2022, <https://thetheatretimes.com/gregg-mozgala-broadway-actor-organizes-festival-celebrating-deaf-disabled-artists/>.

*Teenage Dick* premiered at The Public Theater in 2016 with a subsequent production in 2018 in association with Ma-Yi Theater Company.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the work was slated for production in Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company's 2019-2020 season, but was postponed because of the COVID-19 Pandemic.<sup>4</sup> When professional theatre companies reopened, Woolly partnered with Huntington Theatre Company in Boston and Pasadena Playhouse in California to co-produce *Teenage Dick* as a cost-saving measure and to pool resources.<sup>5</sup> Seattle Repertory Theatre also staged *Teenage Dick* during the 2021–2022 season but mounted a separate production with an entirely different creative team. All four theatre companies advertised several access measures to be made available during their productions and included them in their regular season schedule.

### **Beleaguered Bedfellows: Theatre and Disability**

Western culture's definitions of disability and depictions in theatre have moved across moral, medical, and social models, each imposing limitations on disabled people's autonomy. Ancient Greek theatre frequently engaged with disability, physical impairments, and mental states, often framing them through moral, medical, or supernatural lenses. Late fourth and fifth centuries BCE, Greek works offer a mix of these models to symbolize divine punishment, tragic fate, or comic grotesquery, reflecting broader cultural beliefs about bodily difference. Tragedies like Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, Euripides' *Hippolytus*, and Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* feature physical limitations to impart moralistic examination.<sup>6</sup> Aristophanes' comedies at this time used

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<sup>3</sup> "Just Announced: Two-Year Residency with the Apothetae," *Public Theatre*, 2023, <https://publictheater.org/news-items/2024/the-apoethetaes-residency/>.

<sup>4</sup> Daniella Ignacio, "On the Road with 'Teenage Dick,'" *American Theatre*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2021/10/27/on-the-road-with-teenage-dick/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ignacio, "On the Road."

<sup>6</sup> Sophocles' *Philoctetes* (Phillips, 2003) portrays a wounded warrior abandoned due to his festering wound, reflecting the intersection of physical disability and social marginalization until his value in warfare is rediscovered. Euripides' *Hippolytus* (Gurd, 2012) presents a physically incapacitated protagonist whose suffering serves as divine retribution, reinforcing classical associations between bodily impairment and moral downfall. Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, as included in *Seven Famous Greek Plays* (Oates, 1950), dramatizes Prometheus' enforced

bodily difference as humor devices to challenge societal norms while reinforcing ableist stereotypes.<sup>7</sup>

Though this period predates the term ‘disability,’ these early depictions reveal a distinct separation from society based on physical limitations. While these plays offer some reflection on disability during that time period, the dominant culture is still assigning value based on physical prowess and resultant meaningfulness to society. Other plays of this time rely on how the act of maiming as retribution ultimately brings about divine reflection and/or wisdom.

In *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Snyder and Mitchell describe the pre-enlightenment moral model as one in which religious institutions assumed custodial roles over disabled individuals, often portraying disability as a divine test or punishment.<sup>8</sup> However, this model was not monolithic; sectarian differences led to variations in attitudes with some religious traditions framing disability as an opportunity for charitable good works while others opposed an interference with divine will.

Over the Medieval Period to the European Renaissance, works reflect the moral model, portraying disability as a divine test, punishment, or symbol of moral failing. Some works also frame charity toward disabled people as a means of religious virtue. Miracle and mystery plays and religious dramas portray physical impairment as punishment for sin or as an opportunity for miraculous healing. Some of these depictions include Christ healing a blind man (i.e. a condition

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immobility as both a punishment and a symbol of defiant endurance, linking disability to resistance against unjust authority.

<sup>7</sup> Aristophanes' comedies often use disability, physical frailty, and bodily exaggeration for satirical effect. In *Lysistrata*, physical weakness is played for humor, reinforcing gendered assumptions about male strength and control (Aristophanes & Rogers, 1924). *The Acharnians* features grotesque injury and bodily suffering as sources of ridicule, aligning with comedic traditions that mock physical limitation. *The Birds* extends this satire to social and political disability, exaggerating physical and intellectual incompetence to critique leadership and the absurdity of utopian ideals.

<sup>8</sup> Sharon L. Snyder and David T. Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability*, 1st ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2006): 35-43, <https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226767307>.

to be cured) and *Le Miracle de Théophile* (bodily suffering for atonement; Rutebeuf c. 1260).<sup>9</sup>

Additional works over this time lean into disability narratives to address moral concerns related to medical conditions. This includes the popular play *Everyman* (c. 1515, anonymous), works by William Shakespeare, *Richard III* (c.1592), *Hamlet* (c. 1600), and *King Lear* (c. 1606), Thomas Middleton and William Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622), and Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836).<sup>10</sup> All continue to be taught in U.S. theatre education courses and performed on contemporary stages.

The emergence of new modes of scientific inquiry in the 19th century refocus disability as a societal burden, and in some instances tying it to national progress. This period saw the rise of institutionalization, eugenics, and the framing of disability as a threat to social order. Snyder and Mitchell argue that under this model, disability was no longer viewed as a communal responsibility but as a deviation to be corrected or removed.<sup>11</sup> Victoria Ann Lewis describes how this shift influenced theatrical representations, reinforcing tropes of body and mind transformation through sheer willpower as a dramatic device.<sup>12</sup>

This medical model shift also emerges through physical observations, those embedded in new modern scientific practices like psychology. Theatre produced by the dominant culture at this time is rife with depictions of the inner lives of characters, the similar focus of medical

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<sup>9</sup> Axton, Richard, and John Stevens. *Medieval French Plays*. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971. Print. *Christ Healing a Blind Man* depicts blindness as a condition to be cured through divine intervention. Rutebeuf's *Le Miracle de Théophile* (c. 1260) presents bodily suffering as a means of atonement and redemption.

<sup>10</sup> *Everyman* (c. 1515) personifies moral concepts to convey a Christian message about salvation, equating bodily frailty with the inevitable decline of the human condition. Shakespeare's *Richard III* (c. 1592) links the title character's physical deformity to ambition and villainy, reinforcing ableist associations between bodily difference and corruption. *Hamlet* (c. 1600) explores psychological distress and existential suffering through the protagonist's feigned or actual madness. *King Lear* (c. 1606) portrays both madness and blindness, with Gloucester's blinding serving as a metaphor for moral and intellectual insight. Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling* (1622) uses bodily difference to signify corruption, particularly in the characters of De Flores and Lollio. Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1836) presents mental deterioration as a product of class oppression and medical experimentation, marking an early critique of institutional mistreatment of disabled individuals.

<sup>11</sup> Snyder and Mitchell, *Cultural Locations of Disability*

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Ann Lewis, "The Dramaturgy of Disability," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 37, no. 3 (1998).

science at this time with the emergence of modern psychology.<sup>13</sup> Victoria Benedictsson's *The Enchantment* (1887) offered a critique of female identity in marriage and gender roles. August Strindberg explores themes of psychology in *Miss Julie* (1888) and *The Father* (1887). In 1891, *Hedda Gabler* by Henrik Ibsen is produced, a prominent work of psychological realism examining repression. The American Psychological Association was founded in 1892. In this same period, symbolism, inspired by psychology and mysticism, centers on the investigation of the subconscious, dreams, and emotions and includes Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening* (1891) and Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896).

This period progresses into inner turmoil articulated in expressionist theatre such as in Ernst Toller's *Man and the Masses* (1921), Eugene O'Neill's *The Hairy Ape* (1922), Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), subconscious and unconscious explored in Surrealism such as in Djuna Barnes' *The Dove* (1923), Antonin Artaud's *The Theatre and Its Double* (1938), Anaïs Nin's *House of Incest* (1947), and in identity, crises, and dread through existential and psychological drama such as in Luigi Pirandello's *Henry IV* (1922), Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. As such, theatre before the mid-20th century increasingly reflected psychological complexity, moving from external conflicts to internal struggles, subconscious drives, and identity crises. Movements like psychological realism, expressionism, and surrealism directly engaged with emerging theories in psychology, influencing theatrical structure, character development, and audience perception.

Against the backdrop of evolving theatrical movements and the shifting definitions of disability, theatre produced and canonized work over these periods that reinforces the dominant cultural perspective and psychological framework: moral and medicalized depictions of

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<sup>13</sup> Later works of this movement include Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1934) and Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour* (1934).

psychological realities position disability as a condition to be interpreted, diagnosed, or overcome rather than an identity with agency. Petra Kuppers critiques how psychological stereotypes have shaped common representations of disability, particularly the assumption that disabled individuals desire “normalcy.” These patterns contributed to exclusionary casting practices and a lack of authentic disabled narratives on stage.<sup>14</sup> Without the centering of the disabled voice, characterizations frequently prioritize societal anxieties over authentic perspectives, perpetuating a psychological lens that centers disability as a symbolic, tragic, or deviant state rather than a complex lived reality.

In *Issues and Approaches to Art for Students with Special Needs*, Lucy Andrus cites the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as the first significant legislation prohibiting discrimination against disabled persons.<sup>15</sup> This law prompted cultural institutions to improve accessibility and, in anticipation, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) held special sessions on disability access. The law required publicly funded institutions to implement physical accommodations, reinforcing the legal mandate for inclusion.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, most cultural institutions in the United States are non-profit organizations, designated as 501(c)(3) tax-exempt entities under a 1969 amendment to the IRS tax code. Providing public good is a legal requirement; to maintain this designation and financial benefit, organizations cannot exclude any member of the public from the unique benefits offered by the organization. These tax benefit government funds require non-profit organizations to serve everyone, including disabled people. The 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) further extended protections, ensuring disabled people’s participation in

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<sup>14</sup> Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Lucy Andrus, *Opening the Doors: Museums, Accessibility, and Individuals with Special Needs*, *Issues and Approaches to Art for Students with Special Needs* (National Art Education Association, 1999): 65.

<sup>16</sup> Andrus, 65-66.; National Endowment for the Arts, “Accessibility,” <https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/accessibility>.



public life. At this time, Americans with disabilities gained guaranteed inclusion and protected status in schools, the workforce, and other public spaces.<sup>17</sup> In this time, there is a shift from caretaker mentality to creating avenues for autonomous engagement within general society. This can be understood as the development of a social model of disability, where the community has gained some right to define themselves. However, despite these legal advances, significant barriers to engagement in theatre persist.

The shifting definition of disability over time, shaped in the last thirty years by evolving legal frameworks and policy complexities, has directly influenced the agency of disabled individuals. Carrie Sandahl identifies three core issues with the ADA: the fallacy of majority power, the “accommodation” model of inclusion, and the misplacement of responsibility onto disabled individuals. Sandahl critiques the idea of the “mainstream” as an exclusionary construct and highlights how the “undue burden” (also described as “undue hardship”) clause allows organizations to justify opting out of accessibility measures. She argues that by placing the onus on disabled individuals to navigate inaccessible spaces rather than mandating systemic change, the ADA perpetuates exclusion.<sup>18</sup>

The undue burden clause is central to discussions on accessibility and organizational responsibility. Sandahl critiques the clause as a legal mechanism that allows organizations to sidestep accessibility requirements by claiming financial or logistical infeasibility, fundamentally weakening the ADA’s effectiveness. Organizations can claim that providing accommodations, such as architectural modifications, assistive technologies, or staffing for accessibility services, would be prohibitively expensive. This disproportionately affects nonprofit arts and culture

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<sup>17</sup> "What is the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)?" *ADA National Network*, August 29, 2019, <https://adata.org/learn-about-ada>.

<sup>18</sup> Sandahl, “Disability Art and Culture,” 85.

spaces, which often operate with limited budgets and may invoke financial hardship as a reason to avoid accessibility measures. Sandahl's analysis challenges the arts sector to position access as foundational rather than conditional.

Despite legal mandates, Rowena Macaulay and Paul Crayford observe that serious engagement by disabled individuals in professional theatre remains limited. In nonprofit arts spaces, the concept of a "mainstream" within the audience or participant base inherently excludes disabled individuals. This reinforces the perception that accessibility is an add-on rather than a fundamental right. Typically, accessibility features and programs are only added when demanded or externally funded, positioning accessibility as not a core strategy to successful productions. While some theatres have created audience accommodations, they often fail to address employment disparities.<sup>19</sup> The NEA and the National Arts and Disability Center provide accessibility resources, yet systemic barriers persist. Over three decades after the ADA, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that disabled artists remain underrepresented in the workforce relative to their population size.<sup>20</sup>

Theatre has historically had a fraught relationship with disability, simultaneously excluding disabled artists while featuring disabled characters as narrative spectacles. In calls from the disabled community, authentic representation has been desired within theatre. Kirsty Johnston situates disability theatre within a broader international disability arts movement that seeks to challenge entrenched ableist narratives.<sup>21</sup> Theatre is inherently social which makes the art form a powerful vehicle for change; yet its structures often reinforce historical patterns of

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<sup>19</sup> Rowena Macaulay and Paul Crayford, "The National Centre for Disability Arts and Social Inclusion," *Access by Design* 120 (2009): 21–24.

<sup>20</sup> Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Persons with a Disability: Labor Force Characteristics – 2017*. 2018.; National Endowment for the Arts, "Accessibility," <https://www.arts.gov/artistic-fields/accessibility>.

<sup>21</sup> Kirsty Johnston, *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism*, 1st ed. 2016.

exclusion. Johnston advocates for embedding the social model of disability into theatre policy, shifting from a reactive approach to one that proactively centers disabled perspectives. This requires ongoing dialogue between disabled artists, audiences, and institutions.

In *Inclusion, Disability, and Culture*, Santoshi Halder and Lori Czop Assaf identify attitudinal and environmental barriers as key factors in theatre's failure to engage disabled communities.<sup>22</sup> Institutional inertia rooted in "the way things have always been done" continues to hinder meaningful inclusion. Many companies that claim to champion disability narratives still operate within frameworks that exclude disabled artists and administrators. This disconnect highlights the need for a fundamental shift in leadership and production models to ensure equitable participation.

Building to these current demands, disabled performers were often relegated to freak shows or sentimentalized portrayals reinforcing ableist ideologies. This tension continues today as non-disabled actors are frequently cast in disabled roles, garnering praise for "transformative" performances while disabled artists struggle for equitable employment. Sandahl asserts that genuine inclusion requires moving beyond mere representation to structural changes in casting, employment, and leadership.<sup>23</sup> This act of inclusion signals to the disability community that they are not an afterthought, but instead an autonomous identity to be explored on stage alongside others that represent our complex communities.

Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director of Graeae, asserts that accessibility begins long before an actor steps on stage—it must be integrated into employment, design, play selection, and casting. She argues that only when these elements shift will audiences experience meaningful cultural change. Woolly Mammoth Artistic Director Maria Manuela Goyanes echoes this sentiment,

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<sup>22</sup> Halder and Assaf, *Inclusion, Disability and Culture*.

<sup>23</sup> Sandahl, "Disability Art and Culture."

framing *Teenage Dick* as an opportunity to challenge prevailing narratives about disability. “This hysterical and riveting reimagining of *Richard III* showcases the self-loathing that comes from social rejection, especially for disabled youth. This show demands that all of us reevaluate our rhetoric surrounding the disabled experience.”<sup>24</sup> Theatre’s ability to shape cultural perceptions makes it a critical site for examining disability narratives. However, as Johnston highlights in her discussion of an imagining of the first production *Endgame*, disabled characters represented without meaningful accessibility for disabled audiences or actors are inherently exclusionary and reinforce supremacy of ableist depictions of disability.<sup>25</sup> This contradiction underscores the persistent gaps between representation and access and the need for productions like *Teenage Dick* in modern theatre seasons.

### **Disability and *Richard III***

Shakespeare’s *Richard III* carries with it the baggage of historical and literary manipulation. As disabled voices become better centered and in light of new revelations of Richard III’s life and death, Shakespeare’s account of him reveals a stronger understanding of disability and its portrayal not only in his play but at this time in history. The work’s place in the Western canon is secure not only because of Shakespeare’s authorship but also its propagandist role in continuing to reinforce the legitimacy of the Tudor dynasty.<sup>26</sup> Richard III, the last Plantagenet king, was overthrown by Henry Tudor, whose reign marked the beginning of the

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<sup>24</sup> Naomi Longshore, “Woolly Mammoth Returns to In-Person Performances with *Teenage Dick*,” (Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, 2021): 1, <https://www.woollymammoth.net/app/uploads/2024/06/WOOLLY-MAMMOTH-RETURNS-TO-IN-PERSON-PERFORMANCES-WITH-TEENAGE-DICK.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> Johnston, *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama*.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Hicks notes Shakespeare’s *Richard III* reinforces the legitimacy of the Tudor dynasty by portraying Richard as a villain whose downfall marks the necessary rise of Henry VII. Tudor-era histories, such as those by Thomas More and Polydore Vergil, shaped this perception, with More’s work influencing Shakespeare’s dramatization. Gabriela Schmidt argues that Tudor historiography employed propagandist methods, depicting Richard’s defeat as an inevitable moment of divine providence, Henry VII’s reign as divinely ordained, further shaping the play’s narrative structure.

Tudor line. Shakespeare's portrayal of Richard as physically deformed and morally corrupt likely served as Tudor propaganda, justifying war efforts to assert his rightful claim to the throne. The historical Richard III, removed from Shakespeare by over a century, has been described in grotesque terms to reinforce the righteousness of his defeat. Shakespeare's text constructs Richard's disability as both a physical marker of his villainy and a self-fulfilling prophecy of evil. The opening soliloquy famously declares the following:

Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,  
Deformed, unfinished, sent before my time  
Into this breathing world scarce half made up,  
And that so lamely and unfashionable  
That dogs bark at me as I halt by them<sup>27</sup>

From the play's outset, Richard defines himself by his disability, linking his perceived social rejection to his moral depravity and villainous ambitions. His declaration, "I am determined to prove a villain," directly connects his physical difference to his moral corruption.

Throughout the play, other characters reinforce this association, using Richard's body as proof of his treachery. Richard's corrupt actions and non-normative figure are repeatedly linked. "But the plain devil and dissembling looks? And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!"<sup>28</sup> "And will she yet abase her eyes on me."<sup>29</sup> After Richard has manipulated Anne to marry him, part of a plot to instate himself as ruler of England, Queen Margaret, Richard's mother, calls him the following:

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<sup>27</sup> *Richard III*, 1.1.19-23.

<sup>28</sup> *Richard III*, 1.2.257-258.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, 1.2.267.

Thou elvish-marked, abortive, rooting hog,  
Thou that wast sealed in thy nativity  
The slave of nature and the son of hell,  
Thou slander of thy heavy mother's womb,  
Thou loathed issue of thy father's loins,  
Thou rag of honor, thou detested<sup>30</sup>

“Bottled spider” and “bunch-backed toad.”<sup>31</sup> In this moment, Queen Margaret describes the disabled Richard as both innately a burden and a threat to the family, both ableist myths that remain common to this day. Anne's astonishment at Richard's success in wooing her highlights the play's equation of disability with both manipulation and unnatural influence. Margaret later condemns him. These lines encapsulate the persistent ableist tropes in *Richard III*: disability as divine punishment, as an omen of evil, and as an innate justification for exclusion.

As Richard's downfall approaches, his final soliloquy, “And every tale condemns me for a villain,” cements his place as a figure condemned both by history and by the dramatic tradition that frames his disability as a monstrous and mythologized, a crippled devil. Richard's rival for the throne, Richmond (Henry Tudor, the Earl of Richmond), points to divine support, “God, and our good cause, fight upon our side...One that hath ever been God's enemy,”<sup>32</sup> and the belief that Richard's own men are against him, “Had rather have us win than him they follow.”<sup>33</sup> This divine and populous position leads him to an easy victory against Richard. Stanley, one of the aforementioned fair-weather noblemen, stands over Richard's body, removes the crown to give

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 1.3.19-239-244.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 1.3.19-256; 260-61.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 5.3.254, 267.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 5.3.258.

to Richmond in victory, describing Richard as the “bloody dog...bloody wretch.”<sup>34</sup> This is all so Richmond, a Tudor, can heal the “mad and scarred”<sup>35</sup> England and bring “this fair land’s peace,”<sup>36</sup> so “That she [England] may long live here, God say amen.”<sup>37</sup> All is right with the world in this telling. Richard, the “hideous hunchback” no longer “limps his evil” across England. Instead, the noble and divinely backed Richmond now takes on stewardship of England to bring it into a new era of beauty and faith. This contrast between Richard’s “twisted” body and Richmond’s moral righteousness reflects the broader association of disability with political and personal deviance.

While there has been debate around the life, death, and portrayal of Richard III throughout history, it was not until recently with the uncovering of his body that more could be discovered. Finding Richard’s body under a parking lot, several tests were conducted. One was a three-dimensional reconstruction from computed tomography (CT) scan.<sup>38</sup> From this scan, researchers uncovered a spiral in his spine rather than an arc, indicating that he was not hunched over as described in Shakespeare’s work. The lack of abnormalities suggested he acquired scoliosis toward the end of his growth, around age 10, rather than from birth.<sup>39</sup> Along with these findings, researchers speculate that Richard’s disfigurement was likely minimal, presenting with only a slight raising of the right shoulder—a feature easily covered with help from a skilled tailor.<sup>40</sup> This assumption is further supported by John Rous’s depiction of Richard III, completed

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 5.5.2-5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 5.5.23.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 5.5.39.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, 5.5.41.

<sup>38</sup> Jo Appleby et al., “The Scoliosis of Richard III, Last Plantagenet King of England: Diagnosis and Clinical Significance,” *The Lancet* (British Edition) 383, no. 9932 (2014): 1944, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(14\)60762-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(14)60762-5).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

in the years before his death.<sup>41</sup> The image reveals an upright figure in full armor. Although Rous might have been inclined to create a more flattering depiction, the following hundred years likely offered either equally biased or more extreme portrayals under Tudor rule.<sup>42</sup> In addition to the spinal assessments, the team completed a full-body scan and found well-formed leg bones, inconsistent with a limp.<sup>43</sup>

The description of the state in which Richard's body was found, it was revealed that he was more than stripped of his crown. "None of the skull injuries could have been inflicted on someone wearing a helmet... two [additional] wounds ...unlikely to have been inflicted on someone wearing armor. These, along with two wounds to the face, may be 'humiliation injuries' delivered after death."<sup>44</sup> This final act may have revealed Richard's shoulder tilt and more if his body was fully nude or manipulated to make his disability more pronounced, possibly leading to overblown descriptions of his body and subsequent portrayal. Wherever the source, both the fact and the exaggeration of his disability were used to heighten the portrayal of inhumanity, reflecting attitudes toward disability at that time.

Over centuries, stage interpretations of *Richard III* have reinforced these ableist tropes. Productions frequently exaggerate Richard's limp, hunchback, or physical contortions, reinforcing a narrative of monstrous disability. Only in recent years, as disability studies and inclusive casting practices have gained traction, have productions begun reinterpreting Richard through a disability-informed lens. Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick* represents a crucial intervention in this tradition. By reimagining Richard III's story through a contemporary disabled protagonist,

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<sup>41</sup> John Rous, *British Library Archive, 1483-1485*. <https://imagesonline.bl.uk/asset/143271/>.

<sup>42</sup> George E. Friedlaender and Lillian K. Friedlaender, "Art in Science: King Richard III-Revisited," *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research* 476, no. 8 (August 2018): 1581–1584, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6259728/#R7>.

<sup>43</sup> Appleby et al., "The Scoliosis of Richard III," 1944.

<sup>44</sup> Richard Buckley et al., "'The King in the Car Park': New Light on the Death and Burial of Richard III in the Grey Friars Church, Leicester, in 1485," *Antiquity* 87, no. 336 (2013): 536, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00049103>.



Lew's adaptation challenges the historical equation of disability with evil and offers a nuanced portrayal of disabled identity that extends beyond Shakespeare's caricature.

### **Autoethnography as Method**

Autoethnography offers a critical means of exploring accessibility in theatre by centering personal experience as a form of research. As a disabled theatregoer and arts administrator, I employ autoethnography to examine the interplay between institutional accessibility claims and the lived reality of disabled audience members. This approach allows for an embodied, first-person perspective that challenges abstract or compliance-based assessments of accessibility.

Autoethnography has evolved as a field of inquiry over the past 50 years as “an autobiographical genre of academic writing that draws on and analyzes or interprets the lived experience of the author and connects researcher insights...writing about the self in contact with others to illuminate the many layers of human social, emotional, theoretical, political, and cultural praxis.”<sup>45</sup> It is a distinctive qualitative research method that integrates personal narrative with cultural critique, offering a multifaceted approach to understanding and representing human experiences. Deeply personal, it incorporates self-disclosure and analysis to center the researcher as a native or insider.<sup>46</sup> Autoethnography encourages researchers to adopt a “hyper-reflexive stance” involving both “self-disclosure and analysis” for a “reflection inward and observation outward” that enriches their insights.<sup>47</sup> This method contrasts with traditional ethnography, which, as Couser points out, commonly focuses on studying the “Other.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Christopher N. Poulos, *Essentials of Autoethnography* (American Psychological Association, 2021); Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Left Coast Press, 2008); Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (Routledge, 2016).

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Steve Kempster and James Stewart, "Becoming a Leader: A Co-Produced Autoethnographic Exploration of Situated Learning of Leadership Practice," *Management Learning* 41, no. 2 (2010): 205, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350507609355496>

<sup>48</sup> G. Thomas Couser, "Disability and (Auto)Ethnography: Riding (and Writing) the Bus with My Sister," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 34, no. 2 (2005): 122, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604272089>.

The methods and techniques employed in autoethnography are diverse and adaptive, encompassing a range of qualitative tools and narrative strategies to capture and convey the complexities of personal and cultural experiences. Autoethnography “uses a researcher’s personal experience [and relationship to the subject],” rigorously combining intellect, creativity, and feeling, “to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences.”<sup>49</sup> As a blended genre approach, characterized by moving from subject to author, intersecting “native anthropology, ethnic autobiography, and autobiographical ethnography,”<sup>50</sup> autoethnography “actively and reflexively uses writing as an integral part of research and as a primary method of inquiry.”<sup>51</sup> In approach, researchers might apply a mix of qualitative practices “that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives”<sup>52</sup> and draw conclusions “through participant observation, interviews, conversational engagement, focus groups, narrative analysis, artifact analysis, archival research, journaling, field notes, thematic analysis, description, context, interpretation, and storytelling.”<sup>53</sup> To build effective, compelling narratives, autoethnographers often “take a multipronged, layered, hybrid approach” to “research social phenomena and craft compelling narratives about human social or cultural phenomena.”<sup>54</sup> Along with narrative composition, autoethnography includes analysis of observations and experiences positioning personal reflection in the “broader sociocultural context.”<sup>55</sup> In the context of disability studies, autoethnography serves as an activist methodology, countering traditional

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<sup>49</sup> Archana A. Pathak, "Opening My Voice, Claiming My Space: Theorizing the Possibilities of Postcolonial Approaches to Autoethnography," *Journal of Research Practice* 6, no. 7 (2010): 2, <https://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/download/231/191-inline=1.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social* (Berg, 1997): 2.

<sup>51</sup> Christopher N. Poulos, *Essentials of Autoethnography* (American Psychological Association, 2021): 4.

<sup>52</sup> Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 4th ed. (Sage, 2011):10.

<sup>53</sup> Poulos, *Essentials of Autoethnography*: 4.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Wall, "An Autoethnography on Learning About Autoethnography," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 2 (2006): 146–160, <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690600500205>; Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Left Coast Press, 2008): 46.

research models that have historically positioned disabled individuals as objects of study rather than authoritative voices in knowledge production. By documenting my own experiences across multiple productions of *Teenage Dick*, I aim to foreground disabled audience perspectives and interrogate the extent to which accessibility measures are effectively implemented.

In contrast, Wall describes the minimizing of self in traditional scientific research, where self is viewed “as a contaminant and attempting to transcend and deny it. The researcher ostensibly puts bias and subjectivity aside in the scientific research process by denying his or her identity.”<sup>56</sup> In centering only on the observable and measurable, longstanding objective research methodology interrogates and calls into question “even well-established qualitative research methods.”<sup>57</sup> Denzin and Lincoln contend that the “methodological struggles of the 1970s and 1980s, fights over the very existence of qualitative research while part of the distant past, are very much alive in the second decade of the new millennium”<sup>58</sup> and ostensibly today. Denzin and Lincoln contend that qualitative research is uniquely prepared to crosscut “disciplines, fields, and subject matter” building on earlier phases where genres were blurred to address an ongoing “crisis of representation.”<sup>59</sup>

Inquiry into cultural experiences creates the potential for more inclusive ways of looking beyond those that center on “objectivity, detachment, theory-building and generalization,”<sup>60</sup> especially for the breadth of disability identities. Disability being “a fundamental aspect of human diversity” given the percentage of occurrence.<sup>61</sup> Autoethnography is particularly valuable

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<sup>56</sup> Wall, “Learning About Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*: 147.

<sup>57</sup> Denzin and Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*; Wall, “Learning About Autoethnography,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*: 147.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid*, 9-10.

<sup>60</sup> Arthur P. Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, *Evocative Autoethnography: Writing Lives and Telling Stories* (Routledge, 2016): 43.

<sup>61</sup> G. Thomas Couser, “Disability and (Auto)Ethnography: Riding (and Writing) the Bus with My Sister,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 34, no. 2 (2005): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241604272089>.

in accessibility research because it captures nuances that quantitative or compliance-based evaluations often overlook. Accessibility is not merely about whether a service is provided but how it functions in practice, how it is communicated, received, and integrated into the audience experience. My methodology considers not just whether assistive technologies were available but also how they were advertised, whether front-of-house staff were adequately trained, and how these measures shaped my engagement with the production.

Thus, autoethnography offers a response to these challenges by integrating personal experience with scholarly analysis. In *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama*, Kirsty Johnston highlights the need for research that accounts for audience experience as a site of meaning-making. Theatre's engagement with accessibility cannot be understood solely through legal frameworks or best-practice guidelines; it must also be assessed through the perspectives of those navigating these systems. Autoethnography, with its emphasis on reflexivity and lived experience, enables this type of analysis by acknowledging that access is not just a logistical matter but a relational and cultural one. The benefits of autoethnography are evident in its capacity to engage both "researchers and readers" by enhancing "cultural understanding of self and others"<sup>62</sup> as a means to foster broader understanding of arts and culture inclusion and access. With its emphasis on "cultural analysis and narrative detail,"<sup>63</sup> autoethnography serves as a powerful tool for personal reflection and collective transformation. This "alternative evaluative criteria" not only challenges to consider "how to locate self," but offers methods that might "prove evocative, moral, critical, and rooted in local [native] understandings."<sup>64</sup> Autoethnography, then, is better positioned to investigate audience-production relationships,

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<sup>62</sup> Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (Left Coast Press, 2008): 52.

<sup>63</sup> Chang, *Autoethnography as Method*: 46.

<sup>64</sup> Denzin and Lincoln, *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*: 10.

“dancing between the space of subject and object, storyteller and protagonist, researcher and researched.”<sup>65</sup>

Centering on disability identity is not new for autoethnography, but limited research has been conducted. This narrow scope is likely partly a result of disability in ethnographic studies where non-native researchers subject disabled groups “to well-meaning but patronizing” explorations from medical and charitable positions “that control the terms of their integration into society as a whole.”<sup>66</sup> As Rowena Macaulay and Paul Crayford argue, the limited research on disabled audiences reflects broader systemic barriers to participation and visibility. Educational ableism plays a role in these gaps; academic and research institutions have historically excluded disabled scholars, resulting in a lack of first-person disability research in arts administration and audience studies. This is a problematic position that “involves the same issues of the asymmetry of power between those who write and those who are written about.”<sup>67</sup> In incorporating “native” perspectives through autoethnography, some of these concerns can be alleviated. Not a “monolithic community,”<sup>68</sup> but perhaps by combining identity locations, like theatregoer and arts administrator, a more nuanced understanding can build on critical analysis of narrative practice, creating room to explore what Couser calls the boundaries and values of the distinct disability communities.<sup>69</sup> The diversity of disabled experiences further complicates accessibility research; a venue’s accommodations for wheelchair users, for instance, do not necessarily address the needs Deaf or neurodivergent audience members. Centering subjective experience through autoethnography makes visible variations and contradictions in accessibility

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<sup>65</sup> Archana A. Pathak, "Opening My Voice, Claiming My Space: Theorizing the Possibilities of Postcolonial Approaches to Autoethnography," *Journal of Research Practice* 6, no. 7 (2010).  
<https://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/download/231/191-inline=1.html>.

<sup>66</sup> Couser, "Disability and (Auto)Ethnography": 123.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 128.

practice. Autoethnography can serve as a means to reconcile multiple identities: theatregoer, arts administrator, and disabled person. Binary is “too simplistic for an adequate understanding of the processes of representation and power.”<sup>70</sup>

Moreover, this methodology aligns with broader disability justice movements that emphasize self-representation and narrative agency. Rather than relying on institutional reports or audience surveys that often flatten the complexity of access needs, this approach foregrounds the intersection of disability, theatre, and lived experience. Theatre’s rhetorical and semiotic features serve as effective means to better understand the way identities are structured and presented to an audience. In *Theatre, Society and the Nation*, Wilmer sets the framework to consider theatre as central to presenting a society with its perception of self. Then from this position and with a mindfulness toward disability aesthetics (work created by disabled artists to be shared with disabled audiences), the work has a means to “interrogate and invigorate disability culture...reimagined by the artists whose bodies of work in turn reshape the culture through which all our bodies exist, however they exist.”<sup>71</sup> Theatregoers then aligned with the identity represented are able to “express their approval or disapproval to the performers and to each other,” determine whether a performance is an authentic representation.<sup>72</sup> By analyzing accessibility measures across different venues and productions of *Teenage Dick*, this research contributes to ongoing conversations about how theatre can move beyond performative inclusion toward genuinely integrated access.

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<sup>70</sup> Reed-Danahay, *Auto/Ethnography*: 4.

<sup>71</sup> Ann M. Fox, "Invigorating Disability Aesthetics through Art and Performance: A Report from the Bodies of Work Festival of Disability Arts and Culture 2013," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 9, no. 3 (2015): 355.

<sup>72</sup> S. E. Wilmer, *Theatre, Society and the Nation: Staging American Identities*, 1st ed. Vol. 5, Series Number 15 (Cambridge University Press, 2002): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511486142>.

## **Methodology**

My study included attendance to multiple performances of each production. I sought out to attend at least one performance that offered enhanced features for disabled audiences, as advertised by the organization. In my observation, I examined access to the physical space in combination with additional factors impacting disabled persons enjoyment of the theatre. Based on my experience working in front-of-house and my regular engagement and conversation with my disabled community, I decided to focus on physical access and sensory sensitivities as reasons that might limit participation in the arts, as these two areas are often the focus of supports or accommodations offered by organizations. Beyond these, people with disabilities also note that time to complete activities, cost to participate, and reception to disability as major reasons that prevent attendance or participation in leisure time activities. The last factor is hard to measure, so in addition to collecting data, I collected qualitative assessments when positive or negative experiences were encountered.

For each performance I attended, I recorded public transit access, ticket expense, my location in the house, additional accessibility supports advertised by the venue, estimated percentage of patrons in the house, and general composition of the audience, such as age, visible disabilities, and perceived racial diversity. For each venue, I examined restroom facilities pre-show, noting venue and house specifications. Additionally, I recorded my own experience as a disabled patron. Along with this, I noted audible audience reception to the work and quality of accessibility supports.

During the 2021-2022 season, I traveled to Washington D.C., Boston, and Seattle, observing three productions in each city. Due to a rise in the Omicron variant, the Pasadena Playhouse canceled in-person showings. However, I viewed the production through a previously

recorded performance and maintained consistency in my review by watching the recording three times, in three different locations: my home, home office, and work office.

## **Personal Narrative**

My ears are exceptional, but my brain doesn't listen as well as one might hope. This has left me missing points of conversation and often asking "what?" in conversation. In other instances, like at conferences, weddings, or similarly loud communal gatherings, I will have extended periods where I cannot hear and, in some instances, participate because I have no clue what is happening. Amplifying the sound has no impact on my comprehension or ability to listen, so I accept there are moments in life that I will just miss. Captions are always on at home when watching television, so when embarking on my yearlong theatre journey, I was sure to note when performances offered assistive technology, like captioning for D/deaf and Hard of Hearing audiences.

As a former Director of Patron Services for an arts center, I was aware of the practices that might be included to support audience needs. When reviewing the options between the theatres slated to perform Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick*, I felt positive about what was advertised in press releases and on respective websites in the way of assistive technology. Through this, I of course noted and scheduled myself to attend performances closely related to my own disability experience and those I had most frequently experienced through my theatre work. This included captioned, signed, and audio described performances.

My very first live performance of *Teenage Dick* was meant to include Audio Description (AD). It did not. As I sat in the house, I observed two members of the audience a few rows ahead of me that were attempting to use AD. I was close enough to hear conversation with the usher and recognized the equipment provided to the couple. After nearly 15 minutes of delays in the



start of the show, with at least that amount of time trying to get the AD service to work, the house manager informed the patrons that they were not going to have access to AD. The patrons chose to leave. It is unclear what recourse, if any, was done to rectify the situation.

This account may seem shocking but is unsurprising when considered against “crip-realities.” The attitude of the organization, summed up as “well we can’t figure it out, so oh well, maybe next time,” ignores the reality that there may not be an opportunity for a next time. Worse, it is common for the excluded disabled patrons to lose trust that we will be considered in the first place. This performance had identified this feature and then did not provide the service. It is unclear why the performance did not plan to offer an alternative; typically, dress rehearsals and even tech week offer the chance for organizations to test out the functionality of equipment and set a plan for contingencies. While it is unclear if these planning efforts had been undertaken, ultimately there was a failure by the company. This is amplified when considering this feature was only offered a couple of times across several weeks of performances. The absence of functional AD was not merely an unfortunate oversight but indicative of a broader pattern in which accessibility is treated as an add-on rather than an essential aspect of theatre infrastructure.

This experience with AD is like my own experience as a temporary wheelchair user taking public transit in a moderately sized university city of 300,000 plus. I regularly encountered busses that didn’t have a chair lift or it was broken chair. This required me to switch to paratransit (transit for disabled people) which meant I would be forced to wait more than an hour to get a bus with limited-service hours or give up and attempt to wheel to my destination. Mind you, I never had a power chair. Instead, the wheelchair deemed medically appropriate was not well self-operated but instead needed to be pushed. I had very little independence at this time

and when systems are not designed with you in mind, it feels defeating. While I perceived this as a personal failure, it was not a one-time occurrence but is a common experience for disabled riders in many cities. A reality that I have encountered is friends and my own students have identified unreliable paratransit services and frequent breakdowns of accessible equipment in public spaces. When you are told that the service is for you and you are welcome, like a bus with a chair lift, only to not have that chair lift work, it's demoralizing, reinforces that access is an afterthought, and upsetting. For me as a former Director of Patron Services and disabled theatregoer, watching the patrons leave was equally as upsetting.

Moving to assessment of the provided sign services, it is important to note that my sign language vocabulary is quite limited, though my work in disability theatre, K-12 developing education, and patron services likely means that I have a higher-than-average exposure to sign language, mostly American Sign Language (ASL), at least more than your average hearing person. I, of course, cannot judge precisely, but I can get a sense of literal translation versus interpretation. Direct translation of words and grammar from English into ASL is a disingenuous practice that would be like plugging some language into Google Translate, where you might get a basic understanding, but the grammar, syntax, and meaning might be lost in the native language.

To say that I was satisfied in this area seems vulgar, as I am not fluent or a native of this language. However, I did peruse the ASL partners noted in the program and used in these instances and found them to likely be a service I would consider as a hearing person serving in a Front of House capacity. Of course, I would want to survey my audience and work with the local deaf/Deaf community to ensure that they were indeed a good selection. All this to say, while at The Huntington in Boston, I found the interpreters to be well prepared for the fast-paced

dialogue, offering a performance worth watching, even over the actors on stage. The interpreters at The Huntington demonstrated clear expressive range, maintained synchronization with the actors' pacing, and used spatial techniques to differentiate between characters, all indicators of well-executed ASL performance.

Returning to my own assistive technology desires, I also watch captioned performances across the various venues. I had issues with placement of the caption reader at Seattle Rep. Due to the extreme height of the screen, it was physically impossible to read captions while simultaneously watching the actors' performances. This placement suggests a fundamental misunderstanding of how captioning should function as an accessibility tool. Further, there were errors in the text. Had I not read the play a significant number of times, I don't know that I would have caught the errors. Yet, with the separation of the text and stage, something was still likely lost.

The most egregious captioning mistakes preceded this viewing, likely impacting my perception and judgement of these errors from a patron and arts administrator perspective. With a spike in COVID-19 Omicron cases, the live performances at the Pasadena Playhouse were cancelled and replaced with a recorded version of an earlier performance. It was obvious, having seen the actors twice already in the partner productions at Woolly Mammoth and The Huntington, the recording had been done early in the process with the anticipation that productions would have to get digital, as they had for many of these organizations following the major outbreak of the COVID-19 Pandemic in early 2020.

So, in my mind, this recorded video showed evidence that the companies were prepared to manage audience expectations if in-person performances needed to be canceled. They had a recorded pre-show talk-back of sorts that featured the lead, director, and playwright. Clearly

audience and theatre were on the same page, understanding that live in-person productions are not the same as recordings, Pasadena Playhouse refunded the majority of their ticket cost and allowed audiences to then view through a link over the period which the performance was initially intended to run.

I still took the time to watch the show three times, changing the viewing location in my home to get the same sense of moving around the house as I did with my other tickets when live and in-person. Ultimately, this prerecorded video would give me the most disappointment as a disabled theatregoer. In multiple instances the captions were wrong. Replacing “cool” for “cruel,” “dumber trajectory” for “downward trajectory” “that guy just peed a little” for “I think I just peed a little.”<sup>73</sup> In each of these instances, the errors changed the nature of the line, with mild confusion at a minimum and a complete reversal of the intended language in others. The nature of the errors, homophone substitutions and nonsensical phrasing, suggests that captions were either auto-generated or transcribed without adequate proofreading, reinforcing a common issue in digital accessibility where disabled audiences are treated as afterthoughts rather than equal participants. The amount of time and effort that was put into pre-recording this video to stream shows they had done preparation but then failed to fully execute in disability-centered manner.

I talk about this failure to this day. As I teach the text or discuss accessible technologies, these words and failures take up real estate. Here is where I might stand outside the native experience. I have seen the play more than a dozen times, partly thanks to Theatre Wit and their early pandemic production in Spring 2020, which, while also recorded, offered a superb talkback

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<sup>73</sup> Please see Appendix for section of script with errors in captions noted. A recorded audio description of the script segment and reading of text can be found [here](#). Passage is from Mike Lew, *Teenage Dick* (Dramatists Play Service, 2019): 8-9.

experience and remains one of the best virtual theatre experiences I engaged with during the pandemic. I have also read the play at least as many times as I have seen it. When I say my year with *Teenage Dick*, I mean my exposure was significant: twelve viewings, multiple readings, and teaching the text in a script analysis course.

I know this text well, so when mistakes are made in the captioning, I see them. They are burned into my memory and notes. These “simple” errors in captioning change the dynamic of the characters. While audiences seeing the show once might not be as influenced or even notice mistakes, the failed deployment of technology meant to serve the exact audience it was meant to attract still has the chance to alienate patrons and tarnish organizations’ reputations. How does this prerecorded and well-prepared plan considerate of closure for COVID outbreaks fail to check and review all of the language used in captions? As disabled people, we accept failures, many times because we have no choice or the system in place limits our choices. Being that these companies chose to produce this show and signal an invitation to disabled theatregoers to enjoy their presentation, access still reads as secondary. It also feels impossible to say this, because we do not want companies to stop making the effort. We also feel conflicted in calling out these issues because we recognize these companies are working to include us.

This criticism is not to say that the effort was not seen as a step in the right direction. While challenges abound, the production by Seattle Rep introduced a new layer into the show I had not seen highlighted so well before, one of mental health. The character of Clarissa up to this point had read and been portrayed as a typical type A personality, driven, focused on achievement, perfectionism, aggressively targeting timely goal completion, and in Clarissa’s case, maybe a little narcissistic. Between the director and actor portraying Clarissa, this was the first time I considered an invisible disability impacting the characters. Not presented as

psychological realism or as a dramatized persona, but small moments depicting Clarissa breathing or sharing lines with herself created a nuance of what she might be experiencing. Along with the very specific physical disabilities portrayed by Richard, someone with cerebral palsy with multiple lines emphasizing his physical experience with the disability, and Buck, who uses a wheelchair, Clarissa does not have lines to speak about her experience. Yet, the actor did well to offer a glimpse into what her character might be managing quietly and alone. While plot lines certainly point to serious mental health issues faced by young people, Seattle Rep's production asked the audience to consider what we cannot see, foregrounding how anxiety, stress-related disorders, chronic anger, and maybe even substance abuse might impact our actions toward others and choices in complex situations.

Overall, I would say that my year with *Teenage Dick* was a positive one. Yes, there were notable disappointments, but it felt good that a show that resonated with me found a home on the stages and in the houses of four major theatres in the United States. Borrowing from improvisational theatre, I want to say to, "yes, and..." Let us continue this work, continue our interrogation of historical canon. We must continue to emphasize disabled populations in order to bring the power of their experiences and histories into our conversations.

## **Analysis and Interpretation**

As I immersed myself in a year-long exploration of *Teenage Dick*, a play that boldly ventures into the realm of disability representation, I found myself grappling with a multitude of experiences and observations that shed light on the current state of accessible access considerations for theatregoers. As a disabled individual with hearing challenges, I approached each performance with a mix of anticipation and apprehension, eager to uncover how the theatre industry was addressing the needs of audiences like me.

My journey began with a keen eye for assistive technologies, particularly captioning, which had become a staple in my everyday life. Yet, my initial encounter to the promise of Audio Description service was marred by disappointment and frustration. The failure to deliver on this essential accessibility feature highlighted the persistent barriers that disabled individuals faced in accessing live theatre experiences. It underscored the importance of moving beyond mere promises of inclusivity to tangible actions that truly prioritized the needs of all audience members.

However, amidst the setbacks, there were moments of promise and progress. Sign language interpreters, proficient and poised, brought a new dimension to the performances, bridging the gap between hearing and non-hearing audiences with finesse and skill. Their presence on stage served as a powerful reminder of the transformative potential of inclusive design in fostering meaningful connections and experiences.

Yet, even as some aspects of accessibility flourished, others faltered. The placement and quality of captions varied across venues, with some implementations falling short of providing a truly integrated and seamless experience. Errors in captioning further compounded the issues, altering the intended meaning of dialogue and detracting from the overall immersion of the performance. It was a sobering reminder of the importance of meticulous attention to detail in ensuring the efficacy of assistive technologies.

The culmination of my journey came with a prerecorded performance, a casualty of the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on live theatre. While the decision to pivot to a digital format was understandable given the circumstances, the oversight in captioning accuracy was disappointing. Errors in transcription altered the nuances of dialogue, detracting from the integrity of the

performance and highlighting the continued challenges in adapting to digital platforms while maintaining accessibility standards.

Amidst the trials and tribulations, there were moments of triumph. Seattle Repertory Theatre's bold exploration of mental health within the context of disability representation served as a poignant reminder of the complexity and diversity of disabled experiences. By shining a spotlight on invisible disabilities and the struggles they entail, the production challenged conventional narratives and broadened the scope of disability representation in theatre.

As I reflect on my year with *Teenage Dick*, I am reminded of the ongoing work that lies ahead in creating truly inclusive and accessible theatre spaces. While progress has been made, there is still much to be done in dismantling barriers and fostering environments that prioritize the needs and experiences of all audience members, regardless of disability. It is a journey that requires continued commitment, collaboration, and advocacy, but one that holds the promise of a more equitable and inclusive future for all.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from my exploration of *Teenage Dick* offer valuable insights into the broader landscape of autoethnography as a methodology for understanding audience perspectives and experiences. By weaving together personal narrative, observation, and analysis, autoethnography provides a nuanced understanding of audience perceptions and interests, shedding light on the complex interactions between individuals, performances, and cultural contexts.

Autoethnography serves as a powerful tool for studying audience perceptions by centering the researcher's lived experiences and subjective interpretations. By engaging in reflective analysis of my own encounters with *Teenage Dick*, I was able to uncover layers of



meaning and significance that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. This approach allows for a deeper exploration of the emotional, social, and cognitive dimensions of audience experiences, offering valuable insights into the ways in which individuals engage with and interpret theatrical performances.

Furthermore, autoethnography can be utilized to study audience perceptions, experiences, and interests by capturing the diversity and complexity of audience members' lived realities. Through personal narratives and reflections, researchers can uncover the multifaceted nature of audience responses, including their emotional reactions, cognitive processes, and social interactions within the theatre space. This method allows for a rich exploration of audience motivations, preferences, and identities, providing valuable insights into the factors that shape audience engagement and participation.

Moreover, autoethnography can be leveraged to support theatres in improving their understanding of audiences and bridging gaps in DEI and accessibility efforts. By centering the voices and experiences of diverse audience members, autoethnographic research can highlight the barriers and challenges faced by marginalized communities in accessing and participating in cultural events. This approach can inform theatre practices and policies, guiding the development of more inclusive programming, accessible facilities, and audience engagement strategies.

Ultimately, autoethnography offers a transformative framework for understanding audiences and fostering greater inclusivity and accessibility within theatre spaces. By centering the lived experiences of individuals, this methodology enables researchers to uncover the complexities of audience perceptions and experiences, paving the way for more equitable and enriching cultural experiences for all.

With all this said, autoethnography offers some limitations. I acknowledge that my experience with disability is my own. There is an adage: once you meet one disabled person, you have met one disabled person. I also accept that my disabled perspective gives me shorthand with my disabled community when describing or identifying conditions that are commonly experienced as less effective or ineffective. In my autoethnographic approach, I am centering my position as a disabled theatregoer to serve as the basis for my narrative. It would also be arrogant of me to not express concern when the notion of conflicting disabilities exists alongside this notion of a unique disability experience. This creates a situation where one is even further removed from someone that experiences disability singularly and even more removed from someone that does not experience disability at all.

I understand that my choice to spend a year with a production is a luxury. In my notes and assessment, I considered the costs of attendance, specifically price points for tickets. I know that it is unrealistic for me to talk about expense, when I literally flew to three cities and visited both coasts of the United States to experience theatre. None of these productions was in my home community. While I have traveled to each of these cities in the past, it is not realistic to think that the average disabled person could even embark on this trip. As a disabled person, I sit in a place of privilege, as my employment in higher ed allowed for access to funds to pay for the experience. This trip was only possible through a grant offered by my academic institution.

The essay explores the intersection of disability representation and accessibility in professional theater productions, particularly focusing on audience's experiences. It emphasizes the importance of accurate representation of disability on stage and the need for inclusive cultural spaces. The essay delves into the significance of productions like *Teenage Dick* which directly address disability narratives and center disabled actors. In my autoethnographic study, I

examined my personal experiences attending various productions of *Teenage Dick* across different cities. I observed the availability and quality of accessibility features such as captioning, sign language interpretation, and audio description more centrally. With my assessment came examples of successes and failures in providing inclusive experiences, with instances of disappointment due to accessibility services like ineffective audio description and captioning errors.

Despite challenges, there were also moments of progress, such as the nuanced exploration of mental health within disability representation by Seattle Repertory Theatre. The work is ongoing and needed to create truly inclusive and accessible theater spaces, acknowledging our limitations and privileged positions. I encourage artists and audiences to reflect on their own experiences and contributions to the ongoing dialogue surrounding disability representation and accessibility in the arts. Consider our work as we build inclusive cultural spaces for artists and audience alike, regardless of disability, and build on commitment, collaboration, and advocacy to create more equitable spaces.

## Appendix

BUCK. Um. Feared?

ELIZABETH. Care to elaborate?

BUCK. No.

ELIZABETH. *Buck* you're my TA!

BUCK. I'm a shy TA.

RICHARD. Given a choice, it is best to be feared. For man is ungrateful, fickle, and greedy, and thusly being loved is a bond they may break. Whereas being feared is sustained by a dread of punishment that won't ever fail you.

ELIZABETH. Well I'm glad at least *one* of you is soaking up Machiavellian tactics for consolidating ABSOLUTE POWER (*Echoing.*) power power power!

*No response.*

Okay did *anyone* else do the reading?

CLARISSA. I did the reading Ms. York.

ELIZABETH. Clarissa, great!

CLARISSA. And I totally disagree with this assignment, from a religious and moral standpoint.

ELIZABETH. (*General groans.*) Oh boy here we go...

CLARISSA. This book is telling me it's okay to lie and murder and steal, and all of that is really really cruel and totally goes against all of my Christian values.

ELIZABETH. Machiavelli was Christian. Machiavelli was Catholic.

CLARISSA. Whose work was banned by the Catholic Church.

ELIZABETH. Fine but *The Prince* isn't cruel, it's pragmatic. Machiavelli even speaks out against idle cruelty, because idle cruelty stirs people's hate.

RICHARD. I actually had a question about that.

ELIZABETH. Sure hon go ahead.

RICHARD. It's about that passage, on how not to be hated.

EDDIE. It's easy Dick. Talk Jess, shower more.

ELIZABETH. *Eddie.*

EDDIE. What? That's good advice! Matter of fact, I'm tweeting that.

*He tweets it.*

ELIZABETH. No phones in here. Richard, go on.

EDDIE. (*Still tweeting.*) His name isn't Richard, it's Dick

RICHARD. That's not my name.

EDDIE. What's that *Twisty Dick*?

RICHARD. I said that's not my name.

EDDIE. Richard is a nickname for Dick.

ELIZABETH. Gentlemen.

*Richard turns around, hissing to Eddie, all menace.*

RICHARD. I want you to know that this is the very best time of your life. It will *NEVER* get any better than this. The rest of your life will be spent searching in vain for this moment of former glory as your downward trajectory plunges you ever further from here.

EDDIE. I think I just peed a little.

ELIZABETH. Let's get back to the text. Richard, what was your **question?**

RICHARD. (*Shaken.*) Right... Machiavelli says cruelty is at times warranted but that over-cruelty generates hate. But what if you're hated to begin with? If cruelty is a viable tool then why *stop* being cruel if you've always been hated since birth?

ELIZABETH. Jeez, I uh-Richard where is this coming from?

*The bell rings. Everyone starts packing up.*

Uh-oh, looks like that's an answer that'll have to wait. Okay but everybody if we could just listen up for one second. Please stop packing your bags. I just wanted to mention that as some of you know I'm the faculty advisor for Class Council and that speaking of civil election, *senior elections* are coming up. You all should think about running. Or re-running! Two years in a row with Ms. York! Whaaat?! Woo-hooo party time. Untz-Untz-Untz-Untz!

*Clarissa and Eddie stare incredulously, then exit.*

BUCK. Hey buddyboy you coming to lunch?

RICHARD. In a minute.

(*Direct address as Buck exits.*) Pop quiz, friends. What's the first step of staging a populist uprising? <\_convincing the populace that they

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Figure 1. Photocopy of pages 8 and 9 from Mike Lew's *Teenage Dick*, 2024.

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