Hands like starfish/Feet like moons: Disabled Women's Theatre Collectives

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Recommended Citation
Lewis, Victoria and Lewis, Victoria, "Hands like starfish/Feet like moons: Disabled Women's Theatre Collectives" (2016). Our House Book Chapters and Sections. 49.
https://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_chapters/49

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Beginning in the 1950s, triggered by the rejection of bodily variation on stage, a “democratizing impulse” moved through American theatre: a reconfiguration of who gets to be on stage and whose stories will be told. That impulse is visible, among other places, in the migration of women from mixed-sex, alternative companies in the 1960s and 1970s to form women’s collectives. This essay tracks a related movement: the appearance on the West Coast of three theatre companies of disabled women: Other Voices (Los Angeles, 1982); Wry Crips (Berkeley, 1985); and AXIS Dance Company (Oakland, 1987).

While the democratizing impulse might begin in a shared negative status, first steps involve reforming representation through collective process. As Carolyn Myers, an early member of Lilith, a Women’s Theater, tells it, the task was to find a different story, one that countered the dominant cultural message that women were naturally inferior and that powerful women were doomed to ostracism:

We [women] had all been lied to […] we were detached from understanding what was really going on. […] We had to learn to trust ourselves and to trust
each other [...] to listen to other people tell true stories about their lives
and have those moments of recognition and realization.  

Feminist theatre practice provided the template for disabled artists Peni Hall, Patty Overland, Judy Smith, Cheryl Marie Wade, and myself, as we made our journey to a disabled women’s practice. We too had an “ah-ha” moment, recognizing that our identity has been “shaped by lies”: negative representations deeply embedded in public policy and institutions. We shared our experiences, pushed through the old stereotypes, and reimagined disability.

Many disability scholars propose an out-of-the-rib-of relationship between feminist theory and disability studies. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson paved the way in her groundbreaking *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997), insisting that “femininity and disability are inextricably entangled in patriarchal culture.” Citing Aristotle’s definition of a woman as a “deformed” or “mutilated” male, Garland-Thomson traced a persistent interweaving of femaleness and disability in Western culture, with “normal” defined as able-bodied, male and, over time, white. Some 16 years later, in her breakout text, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Alison Kafer asserted that “feminism has given me the theoretical tools to think critically about disability, the stigmatization of bodily variation, and various modes and strategies of resistance, dissent, and collective action.”

All three companies built upon and collaborated with organizations and individuals from the late twentieth-century women’s performance scene, mirroring a feminist theatre practice characterized by critic Moira Roth as “related to women’s personal experience, to women’s collective past, and to exploring the strategies of specific feminist activism.” Nonetheless, a separate, disabled-women-only practice emerged. Why?

In seeking an answer, I hope to locate disability within the democratizing impulse in the American theatre, and to denaturalize the cultural category of disability as a negative state and irredeemably “other.” At the same time as the social construction of disability is exposed, the distinct experience of disability becomes visible. Elements of that experience resist assimilation into current definitions of equality and universal rights. Moving between these two poles of social construction and irreducible difference, I aim to trouble liberal definitions of equality and justice that remain embedded in theatre collective practice, expanding the discourses that inhabit our theatrical landscape.
Why a Separate Practice?

Before the passage of disability rights legislation beginning in 1977, disabled people never got past the cultural gatekeepers. Age-old perceptions of disability as a negative category, coupled with lack of access to cultural participation, training, or employment, virtually eliminated any significant disabled presence in American cultural life prior to the 1970s. Of the founding and early members of the companies discussed here, only three had previous training: Peni Hall (Wry Crips), Bonnie Lewkowicz (AXIS Dance), and myself (Other Voices). Lewkowicz and Hall had formal training in theatre and dance before they acquired their disabilities. I was denied professional training, but had learned my trade on the job in two theatre companies with alternative and feminist practices. The majority of women in these companies were never even applicants for membership in the performing arts. But they were susceptible to the democratizing impulse abroad in the land and intuited the potential of performance to rehabilitate the cultural category of disability.

On and off the stage, disability as metaphor has served liberal and conservative agendas alike. At first glance, conservatives appear to own the trope: the determined individual who fights her disability and achieves success against horrific odds becomes the poster child for bootstrap individualism. Yet the left cultural establishment seems as trapped by prevailing myths as the right. Hence, the abundance of pitiable disabled victims of war and capitalism, as well as what critic Una Chaudhuri pithily identifies as “pseudo-tragic” heroic suicide, in such dramas and films as Brian Clark’s Whose Life Is It Anyway? and Paul Haggis’s Million Dollar Baby. Since the mid-1970s, disabled activists, scholars, and artists have rejected the “medical model” of disability—the disabled person as sick and dependent, or as a heroic overcomer who is effectively “cured.” Today, disabled activists and artists situate disability in a discourse of socially constructed, historically defined class: the “social model,” a paradigm that provides insights into the personal and the political, making collective action possible.

Theatre and disability historians offer clues to the puzzling liberal resistance to an emancipatory concept of disability. Though this essay plunges in medias res to the moment when disabled women’s practice emerges alongside feminist theatre, a democratizing impulse in Western theatre reaches back to revolutionary France—the same period in which the revolutionary characterization of the aristocracy as “effeminated by nature,
born halt and blind” first appears. This trope will shape much radical theatre practice over the next two centuries, privileging masculine strength and autonomy. Disability historian Douglas Baynton has explored the role of disability tropes in the “great citizenship debates of the 19th and early 20th centuries: women’s suffrage, African American freedom and civil rights, and the restriction of immigration.” As Baynton discovered, discrimination was routinely justified by identifying these three groups as disabled, and emancipation as disabling. Medical doctors asserted that “the need to submit to a master was built into the bodies of African Americans”: proof could be found in the “genu flexit,” a built-in predisposition of the knee of the African American to bend in submission. As to emancipation, it had brought the African American “a beautiful harvest of mental and physical degeneration.” Similarly doctors insisted that the education of women caused reproductive organs to become “dwarfed, deformed, weakened, and diseased.” Immigrants from southern and eastern Europe were judged weak and defective, threatening to taint the Anglo-American gene pool. It is hardly surprising that disenfranchised groups, fighting for equality, put as much distance between themselves and the “halt, lame and blind” as possible. Shedding the stigmatizing cloak of disability, insisting on their virility, independence, and intactness, provided these disenfranchised others their ticket to first-class citizenship.

STIGMA MANAGEMENT: “A POOL OF SAFETY”

When I began the Other Voices project (1982–2002) in 1982 as a disabled women-only workshop, I was a veteran (1978–1981) of Lilith, a Women’s Theater. I borrowed physical theatre exercises and “personal is political” storytelling from Lilith’s playbook. The particularity of the stories told, the surprising reversals and recognitions that emerged from the lived experience of disabled women, resonated beyond the rehearsal room of the Mark Taper Forum, resulting in 1984 in a television special, Tell Them I’m a Mermaid, produced by liberal stalwart Norman Lear and introduced by activist/artist Jane Fonda.

Behind that success was a collective performance process that laid the ground for new narratives. Barbara Waxman attributed her ability to break through physical inhibitions to shared stigma: “Moving my arms and hands is always a risk for me. I’m so conspicuous. And so is everyone else [in this workshop].” The physical freedom of the group, and the riveting stories that followed, resulted from the suspension of “stigma management,” a
term introduced by sociologist Erving Goffman, in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963). In the experience of a disabled person, “stigma management” describes the social manipulations undertaken to be perceived as “normal.” As critic Garland-Thomson explains, this “minstrelsy,” the performance of normality, is the price of admission to mainstream society.

When burn survivor Barbara Kammara described the workshop as a “soft and safe place” which created “a wonderful freedom to play and yet be meaningful,” she is in part describing the effect of the suspension of stigma management. The same language appears in accounts of the collective practice of Wry Crips, poet/playwright Cheryl Marie Wade noting the “pool of safety that you can float in while you figure out what the hell it is you feel, even, what you want to express about the experience of disability.” Peni Hall characterized the Wry Crips collective process as: “a spigot comes out and you are able to talk and feel more,” adding, “for a lot of women that safety goes away when men are in the room.” Like other progressive movements of the time, the disability rights movement had its share of male domination and sexist bias (Fig. 19.1).

“Softness” and “safety” were not qualities associated with alternative theatre of the 1960s and 1970s. Socialist interpretations of “the people,” inherited by radical alternative companies, emphasized virile strength and physical courage. Eric Hobsbawm notes the “masculinization” of the iconography of the people in socialist movements manifest in the shift from early nineteenth-century bare-breasted images of *Liberté* to hard-muscled masculine forms. In Germany in the 1920s and 1930s the enormously popular Socialist workers’ choruses permitted women to join the classical mixed choruses, but excluded them from the political repertoire of progressive songs; women’s voices were considered too high and thin to express radical sentiments.

On the road to legitimation, many second-wave feminists privileged physical strength and financial and emotional independence. T-shirts imprinted with slogans like “a woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle,” the appearance of female action heroines with extraordinary martial arts skills (“action babes”), and a fitness craze that promised women “buns of steel,” together signaled a cultural turn away from depictions of women as innately weak and dependent second-class citizens relegated to supporting roles in life and in art.
The terms independence, interdependence, and dependence have played a critical role in the development of the Disability Rights Movement, so much so that the movement is synonymous in both legal and grassroots discourses with the “Independent Living Movement.” The first activist
pioneers, aware of the perils of being perceived as dependent, repurposed
the term “independence” to mean not autonomy but agency and signaled
a revolt against the hierarchical control of the medical establishment and
the isolation of an inaccessible public environment.

This concept of independence as agency not autonomy is clear in sto-
ries told in Other Voices. Instead of the “I will walk again!” miraculous-
cure scenarios of popular media, many women with limited upper-body
strength spoke of the liberation of replacing their manual wheelchairs
with a power wheelchair. Now they could move on their own volition.
In this group, the wheelchair was not a symbol of dependence but of
independence.

Such stories, disabled artists insisted, could only come from within the
disabled experience. Actress Italia Dito’s story is a case in point. Dito con-
tracted polio at two in Ecuador. When the family migrated to the States,
Italia was placed in a hospital where she remained from the age of two
until age 12. According to Dito, her non-English-speaking parents “kept
signing release papers for operations with no idea of what was being done
to me.” By the time Dito was eight, she spoke English and

started asking a lot of questions about all my surgeries. I saw the doctors
really didn’t know what they were doing. They were just practicing new
procedures on me. Yes, I wanted to walk, I wanted to be a quote “normal”
person. [...] When I woke up from [...] the last surgery, my father was
standing beside me and I told him, “Poppi, no more surgeries, please. I’m
not going to walk, but it’s OK. I just want a life outside these hospital walls
and I’ll make it the best life I can.”

Dito’s story is new. Cure and overcoming, the standard dramatic climaxes
for stories about disability, are sources of danger in this story. The heroine,
a 12-year-old girl, sees what no one else around her can: that indepen-
dence is about agency not autonomy and that racist and classist practices
can hide behind the facade presented by advanced medical science.

Historian of the welfare state Deborah Stone observed, “Two centuries
of myth-making about rugged individualism will not yield easily to the
painful fact that dependence is the human condition.” Disability drama-
turgy, one can argue, makes visible “our culture’s excessive emphasis on
independence.” Recently, disabled scholars and activists have gravitated
toward the term “interdependence” in place of “independence” to more
accurately describe the lived experience not of disabled people but of all
humans, and the danger a definition of equality based on autonomy and strength poses to the collective good.

**Wry Crips: The Body and Sexuality**

(to the tune of the 1958 Chordettes’ song “Lollipop”)

Body Parts, body parts
Ooh, body, body parts (X2)
I’ve got hands like starfish/I’ve got feet like moons
I’ve got ears like itty bitty roses in bloom.25

Cheryl Marie Wade’s celebratory parody of the pop song “Lollipop” emerged from her artistic coming-of-age in the disabled-women-only Wry Crips. Wade, the “It Girl” of disability culture in the 1980s and 1990s, whose Sassy Girl solo show earned her an NEA solo artist grant, didn’t come to the company sassy. To the contrary: “No matter how political I was, I wasn’t okay about my body.” Wry Crips was the turning point in Wade’s development as a performer and writer:

What was fabulous about [Wry Crips] was the feeling of being free to have a voice as a crippled woman. […] I had no thoughts of saying anything about it until I joined them. […] I found my voice in Wry Crips.26

Founders Patty Overland, Laura Rifkin, and Judith Smith, who came together in Oakland in 1985, met playing wheelchair sports. Overland attributes the founding of the collective to a romance. “I was seeing an actor from Mothertongue [Feminist Collective],” she recalled, “I wanted to be wherever she was.” When her partner took her to a performance of the Fat Lip Collective (against fat oppression), Overland got the idea for Wry Crips.27

Like their progenitor, Mothertongue, Wry Crips rejected all hierarchy. There were no auditions, no separate titles for director/writer/actor.28 If you wanted to perform, you were in. They included all types of disabilities and experiences and believed in the power of the revelation of personal truths in a disabled women’s community.29 Everyone created material—poetry, monologues, and sketches—and everyone performed. Peni Hall, who provided dramaturgical and administrative leadership in the early years, describes a casting and script-editing process that ensured
“everybody got ‘shine time,’ a chance to stand out and look good.”

The privileging of “better” readers was frowned on. No one was to be “left in the corner.”

Wry Crips, like many collectives of the day, had a laborious, sometimes contentious company process, parsing ideology. But there was one issue, according to Patty Overland, that everyone agreed on: presenting themselves as sexual beings. “Straight and gay, we wanted to get across the idea we were celebratory about our sexuality because people are [always saying] ‘those people, they’re sexual?’”

Literary critic Lennard Davis argues that disabled people are viewed as “de-eroticized.” Early statistical evidence reinforced Davis’s contention with particular consequences for women. Disabled women were much less likely to be married and more likely to be divorced than nondisabled women. Married disabled women were more likely than married disabled men to have been divorced or separated at the onset of disability. Disabled women were denied the very roles nondisabled women at the time were so anxious to shed: mother and wife. Lack of access to women’s traditional roles led some disabled feminists to describe themselves as “social nomads,” with no place in society to call their own.

Wry Crips became known for its celebration of sexuality and the disabled woman’s body. Probably no one performer was more responsible for that direction than Cheryl Marie Wade. Wade had juvenile rheumatoid arthritis, a progressive condition. Her hands caused her particular distress. She remembered: “for years I would always carry a shawl or big purse that I could slide my hands under so that people wouldn’t be uncomfortable and I would not feel humiliated by people staring.”

When Wade began performing with the company, she covered herself from neck to toe in oversized, form-hiding shirts. Her voice was always there—mesmerizing and musical, at once a soft seductive rasp and a mocking challenge. But as her performing confidence grew, “the layers came off.” She donned skirts so she could flip them up as she voiced her lover’s observation that “the scars on your knee come together like lips, smiling.” The scars were real; so was the muted can-can. In a love poem, “Deformity Tuxedo,” two new lovers, drinking wine, talking of Kierkegaard and watching the cat’s tail move, wait for night to fall. The poem concludes:

When the sky turns midnight blue
And you swear and I believe
My curled paws
are sequined slivers of the moon.\textsuperscript{36}

Nonetheless, Wade took issue with one strand of the disability political stance: that if societal discrimination and prejudice were removed, the disabled person would be an equal participant in public life. For Wade such a position denied the “body’s power” to determine what we can and cannot do in our lives. Pain was denied because “it doesn’t fit with the image we are trying to present, which is that we are powerful.”\textsuperscript{37} She concludes: “You can be powerful and broken. You can feel strong and have extraordinary pain and suffering.”\textsuperscript{38} Claiming difference, not equality, Wade’s body of work suggests, distinguishes art from politics.

\textbf{AXIS Dance Company and the Body Different}

\textit{Biggest contradiction for me was that we were saying that [the cast of “P.H.*reaks”] was a group and yet everyone was so completely different, more diversified than any other group [I had worked with].}\textsuperscript{39}

—choreographer Naomi Goldberg

\textit{P.H.*reaks: The Hidden History of People with Disabilities, Other Voices, New Works Festival, Mark Taper Forum, 1994}

At the age of nine, Naomi Goldberg was measured and found to have the right kind of body for Balanchine Dance, “the specific size of head, length of leg, arch of foot, weight of body.”\textsuperscript{40} An ankle injury separated her from the world of classical dance, pushing her toward an involvement with Contact Improvisation and non-traditional students. Even so, the eight member cast of \textit{P.H.*reaks} marked a new chapter for Goldberg.

The difficulty of representing a single voice has been an ongoing challenge for disability dramaturgy. Cheryl Marie Wade had a showdown with another Wry Crips member over Wade’s poem “Sassy Girl.” Modeled on a jump-rope rhyme and inspired by the bold disabled women on the streets of Berkeley, the poem celebrates “Clubfoot Annie wearing bright red shoes,” and “Blind Old Wilma reading a novel a day.” Eight women populate the poem—eight different impairments. But a company member refused to perform the poem because it did not cover \textit{all} disabilities.

Over its long history, AXIS Dance Company—one of several groups that emerged in the late 1980s fostering the integration of disabled and
nondisabled dancers\textsuperscript{41}—has grappled with key contradictions in disabled women’s collective creation: nondisabled vs. disabled leadership, amateurism vs. professionalism, serving the community vs. serving one’s art. But at its base, AXIS was/is about displaying bodies on stage that do not conform to the “ideal” body of classical dance, bodies that were previously considered taboo, fit only for the freak show and the medical display. So severe is this taboo that in 1994 \textit{New Yorker} dance critic Arlene Croce refused to attend Bill T. Jones’s “Still Here,” which incorporated people with terminal illnesses, calling it “victim art.”\textsuperscript{42} If Croce’s article was intended to deter further displays of the unfit body on the concert stage, it failed. In response, dance impresario Jeremy Alliger began a worldwide search for integrated companies and in 1997 produced the first International Festival of Wheelchair Dance in Boston. Companies came from around the world to tell each other their stories—in conversation and in movement. Alliger asked Judy Smith of AXIS to co-curate the festival, and in Boston Smith began her move away from community-based art and toward the competitive world of professional dance.

When Judy Smith, Thais Mazur, and Bonnie Lewkowicz took on the leadership of AXIS (1987),\textsuperscript{43} they were indistinguishable from any other number of community arts startups in the rich alternative Bay area scene. Smith and Mazur met at the Hand to Hand Kajukenbo martial arts school for women. When Mazur, a nondisabled occupational therapist with a dance background, invited Smith to create a dance piece, Smith “knew nothing about dance. Nothing.”\textsuperscript{44} But before her injury in a car accident during her senior year of high school, Smith had counted on a career as a competitive equestrian:

\begin{quote}
I was so intrigued by it [dance]. [For] one thing, it was a discipline […] I loved that aspect of it, having—in the same way that I had with horses—an extreme amount of self-discipline.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

AXIS, like Other Voices and Wry Crips, had an open-door policy in the early years: if you were willing to do the work, you were welcome. Excluded from mainstream performance culture because of their stigmatized bodies, talented artists found a home with AXIS. So when Smith returned to Oakland from Boston, her proposal to commission professional (read “nondisabled”) choreographers was not met with universal enthusiasm. Co-founder Thais Mazur for one objected. But Mazur’s position as a nondisabled company member was itself contradictory. After ten
years Mazur and her male partner were still running the dance workshops for the disability community, still assuming the position of expertise, still insisting that the work function as an educational tool to foster disability awareness.

Smith won the battle for company control, and collaborating with world-class choreographers such as Sonya Delwaide, Joe Goode, Margaret Jenkins, Stephen Petronio, Victoria Marks, and Bill T. Jones, the company defied the nay-sayers who rejected the idea of integrated dance.\footnote{46}

According to Smith, the collective process in the 2014 rehearsal room hasn’t changed much since the days of Thai Mazur’s direction. The bodily differences are profound, even between Smith and co-founder Bonnie Lewkowicz. Smith explains: “We move in completely different ways—we are not interchangeable.”\footnote{47} The weight and height of the nondisabled dancers figure into the complex and athletic partnering, as does the type of chair. Everybody—including world-class choreographers—is figuring out what can be done together (Fig. 19.2).

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Fig. 19.2  Judith Smith and Janet Das in AXIS Dance Company’s *Foregone*, choreographed by Kate Weare. Photo: Andrea Basile.
Bill T. Jones, who choreographed Schubert’s Fantasy in C for AXIS in 2000, reflected on that experience and his attempt “to find a shared movement vocabulary.” As a choreographer who uses unison movement, he “was struck by the effort synchronicity between performers of diverse ability demands. Here everyone’s arms, torso and legs obey different laws or none at all.” Jones struggled to bring “rapid locomotion (running, walking, skipping) into musical relationship—with wheelchairs, manual and/or electric.” For Jones, these differences were aesthetic possibilities not political stumbling blocks.

As Bill T. Jones explains, in an AXIS performance “each body can be described as a text,” and the “constellations” that those bodies create together, the narrative. Within AXIS’s jumble of bodies and steel are new inventions, new realities, new myths. Some critics have recognized this revolution. In his review of AXIS, New York Times critic Bruce Weber advised his readers that:

Sympathy is irrelevant. Forget what isn’t here, and pay attention to what is. Recognize the chairs for what they are and not as substitutes for what they are not. See that? […] A chair on its side, a wheel spinning in the air with a dancer laying across it, rotating slowly and elegantly, a lovely moment impossible without the chair.

The AXIS landscape with its diverse citizenry is mapped on coordinates of separateness and equality. Impaired bodies are not subsumed into some universalizing heaven, where limbs are restored and wheelchair users can run through fields. The work instead is calibrated to acknowledge and exploit the most minute of physical differences in the company members. The mobility aids used by the “damaged” bodies are integrated into virtuosic movement. Equality is found not in standardization and a guaranteed individual autonomy but in a web of interdependence. Several decades in the making, the integrated dance theatre of AXIS offers a provocative example of the artistic power to be found balancing between the poles of equality and difference.

**Conclusion**

Collective creation has been an indispensable tool in democratizing the American stage and the rewards of that process aesthetic as well as civic. And, as we have seen, the body itself is often the rallying point for theatrical
reform. Despite the ingrained prejudices in our training and employment practices, those on the margins continue to find openings in theatrical practice for new incarnations of the human.

But I do not mean to minimize damage caused by the long-held negative assumptions about the disabled figure that continue to haunt our rehearsal rooms and stages. As these brief case studies hopefully make clear, membership in the worlds of theatre and dance (conservative or liberal, feminist or mixed) is controlled by an unexamined standard of equality built on the intact body. The achievements chronicled here raise a question for the field: How much might we gain by paying attention to difference, by de-stigmatizing dependence and weakness?

The larger moral lesson is one that theatre artists rehearse every day: absolute independence is impossible. As some evolutionary biologists posit, the key to our success as a species was not “survival of the fittest,” but our coming together in our mutual dependence to make community.

NOTES


12. Ibid., 38.

13. Ibid., 33.


15. Ibid., 46–50.


25. Lyrics by Cheryl Marie Wade to the tune of the 1958 Chordettes’ song “Lollipop.”


28. Kate Brandt, ‘‘What a revelation ...’: Ten Years of Mothertongue Readers’ Theater,” Hot Wire (July 1986).

29. For an overview of Wry Crips, see Pamela Walker, Moving Over the Edge: Artists with Disabilities Take the Leap (Davis, Calif.: MH Media, 2005).

30. Hall, interview.

31. Overland, interview.


34. Ibid., 307.

35. Wade, 113.

36. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-q68N_h-6zs

37. Wade, 131.

38. Ibid.


40. Ibid.


43. Corbett O’Toole and Patty Overland along with Mazur began the work. The early struggles over disabled leadership are covered in O’Toole’s *Fading Scars: My Queer Disability History* (Autonomous Press, 2015).


45. Ibid., 36.


49. Ibid.

# Author Queries

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