

# Exploring onstage portrayals of parents/carers of disabled children and adults.

## Background and aims.

The Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport's recent report, *'The Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Wellbeing'* (2020) synthesised findings from over 3,500 studies and revealed a gap in existing research around arts and social inequalities. An emergent strand of work within the Sidney De Haan Research Centre focuses on the impact of arts-based initiatives, crossing disabled and non-disabled communities, in challenging disability discrimination; accurate public narrative, expressed through the arts and based on lived experience, is crucial in countering longstanding societal misunderstandings of disability. The initial intention of this project was to take this further, recognising parents/carers of disabled people as key allies and theatre as powerful in challenging societal views. The project focused on a literature review exploring portrayals of parents/carers of disabled people in modern theatre and how these public narratives might contribute to inequalities experienced by disabled people and their families. The project was inspired by theatre reviewer Di Birkett's clear disconnection with narrative presented in Brad Fraser's play *'Kill Me Now'* and her real-life experiences as parent of someone with cerebral palsy, prompting the question 'why can't theatre imagine what it's really like to be the parent of a disabled child?' (2015)

**'Stereotypes that inform representations of disability can easily be disseminated to areas far off the source and the effects have a far-reaching consequence on the lives of both disabled and non-disabled people.'** (Worrell, 2019)

2000) - a prop to increase 'viewers sympathy for families with a similar 'burden'" with 'nothing [...] to evoke empathy with disabled people whatsoever' (Barnes, 1992). As the review moved to explore recent arts-based studies, it was clear the stereotype of 'burden' is extended to 'disabled families', 'a message all too common during the pandemic (those who can be easily written off because of their "underlying conditions")' (Wilde, 2022). It revealed gaps and complexity in guidance in portraying parents/carers; for example, government guidelines specify, 'When including characters who are carers be wary of portraying them as martyrs or angels - but don't reduce their importance' (Gov.UK, 2021); in contrast, new writing is praised for portraying caregivers as heroes (Thorne, 2021).

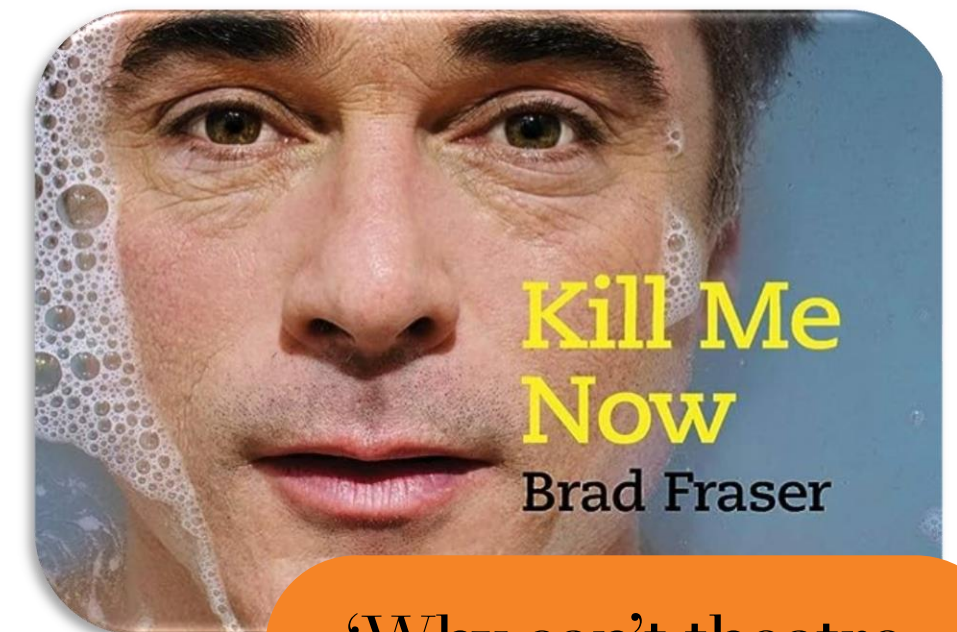
## The review.

Our electronic search strategy identified existing studies and debate utilising terms across concepts of representation, population, character/role, and disability theory. For the intern, classic disability studies provided bedrock for understanding the most common stereotypes informing in cultural representations of disability; historically parent/carer characters in theatre are used by writers as 'narrative prosthesis' (Mitchell and Synder, 2000) - a prop to increase 'viewers sympathy for families with a similar 'burden'" with 'nothing [...] to evoke empathy with disabled people whatsoever' (Barnes, 1992). As the review moved to explore recent arts-based studies, it was clear the stereotype of 'burden' is extended to 'disabled families', 'a message all too common during the pandemic (those who can be easily written off because of their "underlying conditions")' (Wilde, 2022). It revealed gaps and complexity in guidance in portraying parents/carers; for example, government guidelines specify, 'When including characters who are carers be wary of portraying them as martyrs or angels - but don't reduce their importance' (Gov.UK, 2021); in contrast, new writing is praised for portraying caregivers as heroes (Thorne, 2021).

Scoping debate surrounding productions *A Nervous Smile* (2009), *Kill Me Now* (2015), *A Prayer for Wings* (2019), *All in a Row* (2019), which sparked protests outside the theatre, suggested little sign of change in approaches to onstage portrayals of parents/carers. Stereotypes of parents/carers that might be considered common in the plays reviewed include rage, relationship breakdown, alcoholism, violence and cruelty, bitterness, guilt, pity and struggle, and escaping from caring responsibilities. Parents/carers are portrayed as saints or evil; supporting O'dell's remark about *All in a Row*, 'If they wanted to accurately capture the experiences of parents of autistic children, then they should [...] correctly show those lighter moments'. A start in overviewing relevant literature outside of the arts has also opened possibility for considering how these arts-based narratives play out in real-lives of parents/carers; similar themes are identified in assumptions of parents/carers encountered in education and healthcare settings (for example, Douglas *et al.* 2021).

## The next steps.

These beginnings of a detailed literature review may prepare the ground for participatory research that will encourage a series of conversations between theatre-makers with lived experience of disability in their families. This review points to key themes and text that could serve as a stimulus for open conversation, with scope to discover a space between dichotomies of daily challenges facing parents/carers and notions of disability gain that are prominent in the work of disability scholars. This study is a small step in developing more detailed guidance for portraying parents/carers; to enable the creation of narratives that reflect their real-lives, multidimensional characters, and to move beyond damaging stereotypes. In the end, shifting public disability narratives matters, not only for accurate representation in the arts but because they have far-reaching consequences on the health and social outcomes of disabled people and their families.



**'Why can't theatre imagine what it's really like to be the parent of a disabled child?'** (Birkett, 2015)



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