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More than a lucky break: disability, ambition, and a shifting theatre climate

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ABSTRACT

Shifting diversity strategy has prompted new urgency to increase engagement with disabled people in the theatre industry and added to complexity in seeking and measuring authenticity in theatre practice. Drawing on an interpretative phenomenological analysis study with actors who self-define as disabled people, this article expands on how intrapersonal and interpersonal experiences in theatre influence personal ambitions within, and for, the industry. It considers how actors interpret their career position and future, while also weighing authenticity in practice and whether progress made in removing disabling barriers in theatre can be trusted as long-term. This article also questions if a pause in business during the COVID-19 pandemic only added to precarity in the industry or modelled a necessary opportunity for increased disability engagement. The UK Disability Arts Alliance and its national #WeShallNotBeRemoved campaign are acknowledged as valuable and actors' lived experiences are shared as a route to more nuanced understanding of what is needed to move towards the sector's equitable future.

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Introduction: a shifting theatre climate

On 16th March 2020 the live entertainment industry closed, a week before the first national lockdown, and with that arose recognition that the COVID-19 pandemic's impacts on livelihoods, health, social care, and creativity were magnified for disabled people. Concerns specific to theatre included how moving to online delivery might widen the digital divide, how new policies, vaccine passports, and social distancing measures might exclude disabled audiences, and if the voice of disabled people was being heard in key conversations about reopening (Miles-Wilden and Thorne 2020). It was clear that the unprecedented progress made in recent years to increase the representation of disabled people in the workforce, both on and off stage, was at risk of stepping back.

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Recognising this threat, the UK Disability Arts Alliance emerged in April 2020 with its national #WeShallNotBeRemoved campaign. Over one thousand people joined the campaign in the first few weeks representing every role across the creative industries. It promoted the voices of cultural practitioners, and disabled-led and inclusive organisations through the pandemic, and advocated for a more inclusive recovery by the creative industries. The Alliance's efforts to promote engagement with disability included an open letter to UK Cultures Ministers, social media campaigns, the representation of disabled people on key industry and parliamentary platforms, a survey report in the cultural sector, and the publication of *Working Safely through Covid-19 - Seven Inclusive Principles for Arts & Cultural Organisations* (UK Disability Arts Alliance 2024), which is relevant and discussed later in this article. Arts Council England (ACE) provided emergency funding to support this and related disability-focused initiatives.

Remarking on what was discovered through the #WeShallNotBeRemoved campaign, its co-founder Andrew Miller said it revealed:

> the full fragility of disabled people's place in the cultural sector following the pandemic […]. The impacts on disabled freelancers and disability arts organisations are significant and will require additional targeted support from funders and a rebuilding of trust with the wider sector (quoted in UK Disability Arts Alliance 2024).

The campaign acknowledged the COVID-19 pandemic had added pressure to a longer-term struggle for progress and depleted efforts towards a coming together of disability arts and 'mainstream' arts practice. It recognised complexities in theatre including a divide between what might be considered 'disability arts' and what is often termed 'mainstream' sectors, and a continuous redefining of where these categories should separate or interlink. The campaign also recognised an ongoing struggle for disabled-led theatre organisations, and individual performers and practitioners, to access work, resources, and collaboration across the sector (UK Disability Arts Alliance 2024).

Drawing on a wealth of cultural disability studies, the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) study informing this article also acknowledged factors of precarity in theatre including those maginified by the COVID-19 pandemic, and detailed lived experiences of theatre practice and disability among professionals working in the sector (Worthington 2021). My IPA study acknowledged a 'fundamental shift' in ACE's diversity strategy as a unique moment in theatre history (Bazalgette 2014, 1); recognising that responsibility for diversity was not shared equally across its funded organisations, ACE began publishing annual workforce data of all its National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) in 2015, including data on disability. For the first time, major theatres were held accountable for the position disabled people hold in their workforce. Theatre critic Lyn Gardner described this shift as, 'a long way from the kind of box ticking we've seen in the past' (Gardner 2015). ACE's disability workforce figures have increased from a baseline of only four percent (ACE 2016) to eight percent (ACE 2023). This sign of change not only reflects a new urgency for theatres to increase engagement with disability but supports the long-term calls of disability scholars and activists for theatre to be reimagined in ways that extend beyond the impacts of the pandemic (Fraser 2017).

Theatre and disability scholars and critics have a long history of weighing authenticity in dramatic literature and theatre practice (Barnes 1992; Garland-Thomson 1997; Fahy and King 2002; Kuppers 2003; Johnston 2016; Fox and Sandahl 2018; Bolt 2021). Theatre critic Michael Billington described how authenticity has long been considered the 'buzz word' of the industry and notes that 'most attempts at "authenticity"' are 'mere tokenism' (Billington 2004). Disability scholars have critiqued onstage portrayals of disability and casting decisions, calling for change, with a common view that 'most of what we see on our stages […] are antiquated, inaccurate, inauthentic portrayals of the lived experience of disabled people' (Bruno 2014). As creative director Tarik Elmoutawakil pointed out, there is often effort to appear diverse in theatre that does not always reflect genuine 'commitment and determination that will prove that your inclusion moves beyond tokenism' (Elmoutawakil 2018). In this way, there is added complexity in interpreting authenticity and genuine change for disabled people employed in the industry, which involves the pursuit of recognition and representation that is contrary to theatrical traditions.

The section of IPA findings explored within the scope of this article adds to such views, revealing ongoing complexity around perceptions of authentic identities, casting decisions, representation, and performance practices that is experienced by disabled people in day-to-day theatre work. In the sections that follow, verbatim quotes from actors make it possible to consider what the theatre climate was like for disabled people following ACE's shift in diversity strategy, where progress is happening, and where unresolved issues impact actors' perceptions of precarity and their ambitions within, and for, the industry. As the theatre climate continues to shift and remerge from longer term impacts of the pandemic, it is also possible to consider what is really needed to move away from precarity and towards increased engagement with disability in the sector's future.

Methods: interpretative phenomenological analysis

My IPA study aimed to: understand more about why both actors and directors, disabled and non-disabled people, are choosing to, or not to, work together; facilitate open sharing of personal experiences of theatre practice and disability; and motivate policy based on lived experiences of practice and long-term change. IPA is 'committed to the examination of how people make sense of their major life experiences' (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 1). Its idiographic, phenomenological, and hermeneutic roots opened a psychological view of experiences in theatre workplaces and how individuals interpret these. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with actors with physical impairments who self-define as disabled people, and directors who consider themselves non-disabled. All nineteen participants had been employed in ACE's most highly funded theatre organisations since 2015. An interview schedule was designed to encourage participants to talk freely about lived experiences and key issues of disability and theatre identified in a literature review. With participants' consent, interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. Ethical approval was granted by Birmingham Newman University's Research Ethics Committee and I can confirm that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

IPA allows findings to emerge from raw data, focusing on how participants attempt to make sense of their own experiences (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 79). The process, as set out by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), involved reading, listening, and notetaking. Transcripts were annotated with exploratory reflections, comments, and observations for each participant, and coded for linguistic, descriptive, and conceptual features. Emergent themes were identified, grouped together with a descriptive heading, and a table of superordinate themes was created for each participant before moving to the next case. Finally, patterns across cases were identified, recognising themes shared across participants, and a master table of superordinate themes was created to highlight connections for each participant group.

Results: trust in a shifting theatre climate

IPA findings revealed how shifts in diversity strategy are impacting both intrapersonal and interpersonal processes of engagement with disability in theatre. This gave rise to complex and entirely personal responses from both actors and directors. However, as an IPA study aims to uncover detailed accounts of real-life, the scope of this article allows for the reporting of only one subtheme from actor-participants' interviews: *Trust in a Shifting Theatre Climate.* This theme is most relevant in considering what it might mean for disabled people to build trust in the sector and ensure progress in the theatre industry does not step back. *Trust in a Shifting Theatre Climate* refers to how actors, Lydia, Pete, Sophie, Moira, James, and Neil (pseudonyms) experienced wrestling with authenticity in relation to industry-wide change. It exposes their interpretations of career position, future ambitions, and whether positive progress they witnessed in removing barriers to disabled people's participation in theatre was trusted as long-term.

Anyone who has experienced any kind of drama training will be aware that trust is considered key to effective practice. It is likely they can recall well known exercises used in building trust between actors and director in a rehearsal room, such as the classic warm-up of taking it in turns to fall back into your partner's arms or being passed around a circle of people with your eyes closed. In considering actors' lived experiences of the theatre industry, I was reminded of observing a drama workshop with D/deaf participants in which the director decided to take the role centre-circle playing this trust game. Not heeding the advice from a British Sign Language interpreter that one participant also had a mobility impairment, the director insisted 'don't worry I've done this many times before'. The workshop ended abruptly when, with his eyes closed, the director launched himself towards the participant, knocking her flat to the floor. This is my experience, an alarming picture lodged in my memory, yet it may also serve as a metaphor for what it might mean for disabled people engaged in theatre work to trust progress in the industry as authentic, long-term change. In this scenario, funding was made available to a regional theatre to expand engagement with the D/deaf and disabled communities. There was a director, enthusiastic but lacking disability experience, and a hesitancy to take advice or to move away from familiar ways of working.

The pre-pandemic theatre climate posed considerable day-to-day challenges for individual actors. They identified signs of progress in removing barriers to disabled

people's participation in theatre that were positively impacting their day-to-day experience in the workplace. However, there were specific aspects of practice that made it difficult for individuals to trust shifts in attitudes, structures, and environments. Approaches to practice, particularly in work with directors with limited disability knowledge or experience, seemed far from idyllic and added significant pressure to the routine demands of their jobs. The trust game scenario I described links with Pete's observation that directors 'know all the notes but sometimes haven't quite learnt the tune' (9); his comment resonated across the actor-participant group, highlighting how directors' levels of disability experience and understanding impacted actors' experiences in rehearsals. There were ongoing issues with the collection of diversity data, suspicion of box-ticking, and a common preference among actor-participants to disassociate the term 'disabled' from their professional identity. Actors described difficulty and skill in navigating inappropriate access, language, representation, and dealing with the discomfort of non-disabled directors they work with (Worthington and Sextou, 2024). They also exposed personal disquiet about professional recognition, authenticity in casting, and roles performed onstage. All these issues experienced in day-to-day theatre work seemed unresolved for actors in my study, adding to conditions of precarity in the industry and limiting their ability to envisage the future. Nevertheless, perspectives on overall progress in the industry were generally positive.

There was shared opinion among actor-participants that approaches to working with disabled people in theatre were shifting. Referring to the National Theatre, Moira noted, 'it's growing […] the amount of disabled people that have been put onstage […] there is a shift happening in that building' (16). Moira appeared to connect decisions made in this major theatre organisation with a wider shift in representation in the UK. Sophie commented, 'I do think people are judged more on their merits and their ability, more than they were a few years ago' (29). She praised Ramps on the Moon's (ROTM) influence on progress, describing this ACE funded initiative as 'definitely affecting everyone in the industry and especially disabled actors because they are being represented […] in a way that they never have' (22). ROTM launched in 2015 as a collaborative partnership of six National Portfolio Organisation theatres led by the New Wolsey Theatre, Ipswich and strategic partner Graeae Theatre Company. ROTM remains committed to 'elevating the presence of deaf and disabled people both on and off stage' (ROTM 2024). ACE's statistics show slow progress in the number of disabled people employed in NPOs since its shift in strategy; yet actors in my study perceived substantial change in conversation, casting, and the visibility of disabled people, both on and off stage. This was seen as recent progress and unprecedented. ACE's efforts, including ROTM, and Graeae's work as a disabled-led theatre company that continues to 'champion the next generation of Deaf, disabled and neurodivergent artists' were viewed as accelerating this (Graeae n.d.).

Progress was observed at a distance and experienced first-hand. James, for example, commented broadly on a shift in dialogue around disability and casting, saying 'it's really getting somewhere […] there's been some huge milestones […] and the right people are starting to listen' (12-13). Regarding his own practice, James noted how sizable roles are increasingly open to him, explaining, 'I have played a couple of parts that felt very much in the forefront […] I think it's

happening more and more that people are… are trusting' (26). He perceived a change in directors' level of comfort working with him, which lessened his own discomfort in rehearsals, saying, 'that seems to be happening more and more, so, I feel very comfortable in the room a lot of the time' (James 17). James experienced positive change in casting and rehearsals, saying 'it's a sign of where the industry is going […] yeah, gradually starting to feel […] less and less like a tick box, which is good' (11). His repeated use of phrasing 'more and more' (17) and 'less and less' (11) pointed to this shift as a continuing process and emphasised the extent of change he witnessed. However, after describing this positive change, he also made the remark, 'but, as I said earlier as well, you never know what's going on behind the scenes as well. So, who knows, maybe it's getting worse and I'm just not seeing it *(laughs)*' (James 13). It is likely this aside was intended in jest, however, for James this also reflected his difficulty interpreting directors' motivations in casting. This and similar throwaway remarks from other actor-participants add detail to what should be considered as being 'the full fragility of disabled people's place in the cultural sector' in regard to current theatre (UK Disability Arts Alliance 2024).

Actors Pete and Lydia conveyed similar difficulty trusting progress witnessed in casting. Both described how insufficiencies in casting approaches where any actor is considered for any role added to this. Broadly, Pete described the outlook for disabled people in theatre as, 'promising really, I mean I think it's the most open the profession has ever been […] compared to when I started, you know, there was nothing, you wouldn't get near a main stage' (14-15). He expanded on how this progress impacted him personally, saying:

> It's giving me an opportunity to play a much greater variety of roles […] all I've done is the same role over and over again […] a cripple […] a saint […] I'm going to be seen for […] the main stage, all that sort of stuff, a lot of stuff coming in now […] so, it makes my life easier in terms of I can get work and also when I get work there's an understanding that, you know, that I… I need some level of support to sort out things like accommodation and um assistance and things like that (Pete 16).

Pete clearly identified a positive shift in the industry; what was previously denied in terms of career choice, roles, performance spaces, and logistical access was now perceived as being open to him. Progress in theatre prior to the pandemic made him rethink his beliefs and ambitions around characters he wanted to play and stages he wanted to be on. However, like James, Pete's aside was, 'it may all be a fad, it may all be, you know, a great new thing that won't last very long, but *(pause)* it feels some of the roots are in' (16). Despite describing the 'variety of roles' opening to him, at the end of his interview Pete stated, 'No, I don't think we'll ever… I don't get too many lead roles' (16; 30), highlighting how progress still seemed too fragile to trust as long-term. For Lydia, it was not only whether acting roles suited her that dictated her ambitions as an actor, but a pragmatic view of how she perceived the current state of the industry. Asked if she was only considering playing roles that specified a disabled character in the script, Lydia explained:

> I could play anyone and everyone, yeah, it's quite frustrating really, um I mean yeah *(pause)* pretty much, and I think it's less about what I think and more about the reality of it […] it is a bit upsetting, still, that… that's how it is (40).

Moira expressed a similar sense of hesitancy to trust her acceptance in the sector. Like Pete and others who were more established in their acting careers, she conveyed distinct awareness of living through a change in theatre climate. She appeared to be reconciling past discrimination with recent positive experiences, describing, 'I've always had a really difficult relationship with the mainstream stuff' (3). Moira added:

> as I made a decision to kind of move away from that stuff err it kind of ended up running around finding me again, because I think the landscape has changed a little bit and now there are mainstream directors who ask for disabled talent (34).

As a result of disappointment in the 'mainstream', Moira steered her ambitions away from the type of text-based acting work in major theatres that my study was primarily concerned with. However, this was where she now found opportunity and appeared to reevaluate her relationship with the sector as a result. Still, she also recognised how funding pressures added to precarity of this renewed ambition, saying, 'something that's deemed a risk, which a disabled actor in a lead role is at the minute, […] people are less likely to take it' (Moira 35). Moira repeatedly referred to the theatre climate as 'tenuous and uncertain' implying residing uncertainly in the future (27; 35). Whatever these actors' true ambitions were, it was clear that further progress around casting approaches is needed before they will feel able to trust that playing a range of role-types is possible and can broaden their ambitions accordingly.

The term 'lucky' was prevalent across actor-participants' interviews, yet its use implied more than a simple break in talent recognition. Lydia attributed success getting an agent, into drama school, and her first theatre job to being 'lucky' (5; 22), 'really lucky' (1), 'luckier than I think' (2). She later explained, 'I've personally been quite lucky in playing some quite chunky roles, but that might be kind of luck of the draw, I've had some really nice directors' (Lydia 37). Speaking about directors' ease or comfort in working with him, James noted, 'professionally it might be I've been quite lucky […] extraordinarily lucky in certain situations' (15). Regarding directors taking her views on accessibility onboard, Moira commented, 'I've been pretty lucky in that I've worked with, you know, good people' (13). Sophie noted, 'I've been really lucky' when speaking about having conversations with directors about role-types she can play (26). Finally, Neil referred to, 'directors who've given me a go […] and go "bloody hell, let's give it a go"', adding, 'My career has been with maverick directors who are up for challenges and yeah… and can see a bit wider than normal lens' (5).

Identifying luck as a factor in career position and a condition of precarity in theatre work is not in itself unusual. However, for these actors, 'luck' referred to the attitude and behaviour of non-disabled directors they encounter; this raised the question, not of what practices, structures, or funding they trust in for future opportunities, but who. Based on their comments, a lucky break was about finding directors who are affable, open to learning, comfortable engaging with disability matters, and willing to explore new territory. These are conditions of precarity in the theatre industry that not all actors have to contend with. As my study only represented actors who had been employed in major theatres in the UK, the lack of ownership of their professional achievements in the industry seems alarming. For Neil there appeared to be deep concern that without the individuals he viewed as key influencers and trusted as

allies of the disabled community progress might reverse. After describing industry progress, his aside was, 'a lot of the advances we've made have been very individual rather than organisationally […] when they leave it might go back' (Neil 10). A positive attitude or approach to engaging with disability in theatre is still not something that these actors can take for granted.

Discussion: increasing engagement with disability in theatre

The notion of building disabled people's trust in the arts sector is certainly complex, with the pandemic most likely adding another dimension these actors' questioning around whether genuine change has really taken place in theatre. The actors' comments shared in this article do not offer a definitive answer to this but highlight a dual narrative. There is an explicit story of positive progress in the industry and first-hand stories of how this has moved from external policy, beyond tokenism, to being experienced in actors' day-to-day practice; this is a story of optimism around the scope and scale of onstage representation and new employment opportunities, increased dialogue around disability matters, ease of collaboration across disabled and non-disabled communities, and deeper understanding of accessibility. There is also an implicit story of disquiet with hidden agenda, insufficiencies in casting and the relevance of impairment in performance, a lack of ownership of professional achievements, and reliance on key allies like Graeae, decision makers, and funding bodies. Hence, there is no room for complacency in terms of disabled people feeling they can pave the way to a successful acting career in professional theatre. Actors in the study perceived a precarious future that limits their professional ambitions, with shifts witnessed in practice so far only scraping the surface of what is possible for disabled people in the industry.

It is likely actors in my study chose to celebrate positive change and efforts towards progress. However, perhaps the explicit story also felt like the right thing to say, more comfortable to tell or to hear than the implicit. In her work on race and inclusion, feminist academic Sara Ahmed notes how the expectation of research, 'involves a desire to hear "happy stories of diversity"' (Ahmed 2007, 165). Instead, Ahmed values how phenomenology 'brings what is behind, what does not get seen […] to the surface'; and 'it is by showing how we are stuck, by attending to what is habitual and routine […] that we can keep open the possibility of habit changes' (Ahmed 2007, 165). In this way, as we consider the future and what it might mean to move away from precarity and towards increased disability engagement and a more equitable sector, it is the implicit story of actors that must be heard and acted upon.

We can assume the explicit story of progress made in increasing the representation and valued contribution of disabled people carried forwards as UK theatres reopened after lockdown; using Pete's phrasing, 'it feels some of the roots are in' (16). Talented disabled people continue to be represented on stage and screen, a sign that some organisations and directors remain open to casting disabled people, dialogue around disability matters, and reimaging practice. The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) opened its production of *Richard III* with Arthur Hughes, who describes himself as a 'disabled actor' who is 'limb different', in the title role; Hughes describes this as 'a big gesture from the RSC… taking disability representation seriously' (quoted in Saunders

2022). The television drama *Then Barbara Met Alan* was released in March 2022; this was based on real events in disability history, written by Jack Thorne, who has personal disability experience, and Genevieve Barr, who was 'born deaf', with a cast of disabled people who are all established TV and theatre performers (BBC 2022). Amy Trigg, 'the first wheelchair user to graduate from Mountview Theatre School' in London was performing a season at the RSC when theatres closed (Trigg n.d.). She subsequently won the Women's Prize for Playwriting for her debut play *Reasons You Should(n't) Love Me,* which was one of the first live shows to reopen in London and toured nationally (Trigg n.d.).

This may represent a return to progress made around casting and employment prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, actors' views here suggest more progress is needed for theatre to represent the full and valued contribution of the disabled community in the UK. Recent decisions in the industry also continue to prompt questions of whether theatre is stepping forward or back. For example, the 2024 casting of *Richard III* at Shakespeare's Globe in London was criticised for placing a non-disabled actor as Richard III, a character 'who in real life had scoliosis'; actor Ben Wilson describes this as a case of 'cripping up', saying he 'thought the battle for Richard III was starting to be won, but it feels like taking about 10 steps backwards' (Wiegand 2024).

The *Seven Inclusive Principles for Arts & Cultural Organisations* set out by the UK Disability Arts Alliance provides an ongoing road map for equity in the arts 'through the lens of Disability' and is endorsed by leading sector bodies (2024). Such valuable guidance may have influenced continuing opportunities for disabled people and learning for theatre professionals and organisations. These principles highlight the need for: '1. Recognising the supremacy of the Equality Act'; '2. Understanding the Social Model of Disability'; '3. Consulting with disabled people to inform your decision making'; '4. Providing clear and comprehensive information' about COVID-19 measures'; '5. Mapping the Customer Journey' for disabled audiences; '6. Supporting Disabled Artists'; and '7. Protecting the disabled workforce' (UK Disability Arts Alliance 2024). These are all important policy-based, logistical, and attitudinal factors necessary in moving away from precarity towards a more equitable future. Perhaps most relevant to actors' experiences that have been shared here are principles two and three. These draw attention to a necessity for increasing understanding around disability theory, valuing the lived experiences of disabled people, and countering ableism; co-production across disabled and non-disabled communities is recognised as vital to effective organisational decision making. The implicit story of actors in this article, however, adds a further dimension to this guidance; it is likely actors in my study continue to negotiate the complex interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships and issues experienced prior to the pandemic. These conditions of precarity were not solely influenced by organisational or industry-wide responses to disability and need to be addressed on an individual basis.

One aspect of the pandemic's impact that is worth recalling in this context is the resulting pause in the business of theatre, which offered an opportunity for reflection. This may have been beneficial in reimagining 'tired, cliched, [or] at worst ignorant and […] offensive theatrical traditions and practices' (Fraser 2017). These have often

been critiqued by disability scholars, as well as disabled artists and activists, but perhaps not by those working professionally in theatre and performance outside of that sphere. Gardner acknowledged this space as beneficial in considering what a future, more equitable industry might look like, noting that 'embracing slowness would make theatre more thoughtful and inclusive', and recognising in the busyness of theatre 'we are always going to be more inclusive tomorrow' (Gardner 2021). Actors' responses shared here suggest continued pauses in routine practice may support further progress around accessibility, disability understandings, collaboration, communication, and safety that will enable disabled people to envision a future in the theatre industry. This is about creating space to deeply consider steps towards an industry where disabled people feel they can merely contend with the routine highs and lows of securing their next acting job, and for their trust in the industry to grow.

Having considered actors' experiences, existing guidance for the sector, and long-term conditions of precarity relating to disability in theatre, I want to suggest an eighth principle for equity in the arts. This principle acknowledges increasing engagement with disability in theatre as a shared, ongoing, and personal endeavour. This principle calls on organisations across the theatre industry and training to:

8. Ensure space for individuals in their workplaces to consider their own process of engagement with disability; to reflect on how their personal position in this impacts conditions of precarity for disabled people in the industry.

This is a live dynamic, shifted by policy, funding, diversity agenda and real-life experiences. This principle adds to necessity for collectively reimagining the future and moving towards personal responsibility for driving change in the sector. Distinct steps towards change and a reflective tool to support this are set out in *Stages in a Process of Engagement with Theatre Practice and Disability* (Worthington 2025). This process involves individuals across disabled and non-disabled communities in proactively reviewing their own experiences and steps towards '*Consciousness Raising*', '*Exploring New Territory*', '*Familiarity*' across disabled and non-disabled communities, and '*Shared Responsibility*' for change (ibid).

Conclusion

Findings shared in this article demonstrate how phenomenological perspectives are crucial in considering tangible steps towards the increased and valued contribution of disabled people in theatre industry. This required more than a lucky break for the actors in this study. Their lived experiences suggest targeted support from funders remains important in encouraging new work and training across disabled and non-disabled communities. Yet, increasing engagement with disability in theatre must also be understood as an intrapersonal and interpersonal process, a live dynamic for all individuals in the industry. This is an important factor in considering disabled people's continued and future access to work, resources, and collaboration in the sector. Inside this sometimes-uncomfortable, constantly shifting, industry climate is a continuing struggle to find a way forwards. It is a struggle that must be shared equally across disabled and non-disabled communities. This is an industry in which lived experiences of disability matter if we want to understand where we are stuck in a process of engagement with disability and to move away from precarity towards equitable practice as a trusted reality.

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