

“LOOK AT ME!” PERFORMING THE BODY AND SELF ON STAGE

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Abstract: The paper aims to explore some exemplary pieces of dramatic literature from antiquity and the Renaissance and especially from modern and postmodern works such as *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman and *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* by Adrienne Kennedy through the lens of body, disability and gender studies. While the paper mainly focuses on these three plays, it is not restricted to them. The pieces illustrate how the stage representation of physically or mentally challenged characters has changed and the process through which disabled performance has transferred into performative acts.

Keywords: performance, performative acts, disability, race, feminist theatre, social roles, subversion

Introduction

In the world of theatre, it is difficult to define exactly what qualifies as disability or disability theatre. What criteria, for example, qualify a piece as disability theatre? Are there specific plot points or protagonist characteristics that qualify it? Furthermore, it is debatable whether authors both with and without personal disabilities should be included in the field. The question is also complicated by the fact that the non-disabled theatre world is also full of images of characters with certain disabilities. Victoria Ann Lewis points out that “It is not that the nondisabled theatre world knows nothing about disability and is waiting to be enlightened. On the contrary, the depiction of disability is over-represented in dramatic literature (93).”

For our purposes, I have included examples from antiquity and from Renaissance and nineteenth century dramatic literature as well as the modern playwrights Tennessee Williams,

Marsha Norman and Adrienne Kennedy, in order to represent a range of avenues into the interdisciplinary field of disability studies and to explore how it fits into the wider theatrical discourse, for example its connections to feminist theatre, its links with racial issues, and how its theories of subject can be constructed through performative acts. Disability theatre lies at the intersection of such disciplines as body studies, feminist theatre and gender and disability studies. The last-mentioned field is the newest area of study, dating back to the 1980s and with roots in the disability rights movement, which started in the mid 1950s.

The theory of performativity developed by Enikő Bollobás, which describes a social phenomenon that constructs new subjectivities through performative acts (activities that go against socially ascribed normative gender, racial and class behaviours (*They Aren't, Until I Call Them*, 10)), is also applicable to individuals with disabilities. As explained by the Brechtian technique, because theatre is community-based—and thus an educational social phenomenon—it is able to trigger political activism. Therefore, like feminist theatre, disability theatre also advocates the rights of a particular marginalized group via the performing arts. Feminist theatre, being material, Marxist and political, is defined by Fox and Lipkin as seeking to “effect social change through questioning the traditional apparatus of theatrical representation, and by extension, calling attention to the social construction of identities upon which privilege is based. (80)” As the theatre critic and feminist scholar Jill Dolan writes:

[f]eminist theatre is concerned with more than just the artifact of representation—the play, film, painting, or dance. It considers the entire apparatus that frames and creates these images and their connection not just to social roles but also to the structure of culture and its divisions of power. (47)

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams, *Night Mother* by Marsha Norman and *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* by Adrienne Kennedy all portray physical and/or mentally challenged people: Laura Wingfield, Jessie and Clara respectively. These female figures all have a common feature: their behaviour transgresses the stereotypes that are based on normative gender, class and racial (as well as physical) condition.

The Emergence of Disability Theatre

Communities such as organizations for the blind and the deaf and the mobility-impaired citizens' movement provided the infrastructure and confidence for disabled groups to successfully lobby for new legislation. The Rehabilitation Act Amendments of 1973

provided equal rights in federally funded programs. In 1980, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibited discrimination and provided civil rights protection for the largest minority group in the USA and, as Marsha Sexton writes, also helped to:

... bring about a profound change in the collective self-image of an estimated 45 million Americans.

Today, many disabled people view themselves as part of a distinct minority and reject the pervasive stereotypes of disabled people as defective, burdensome, and unattractive. (105)

For centuries, however, physical and mental disabilities were, at best, politely overlooked, and people with disabilities were left uncared for or eliminated. Mentally handicapped people were often treated as criminals, and it is common knowledge that many of the women who were burnt during witch hunts in the late medieval and Renaissance period in Europe and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in America were mentally or physically challenged.

Society has had an ambivalent attitude towards its members with physical or mental handicaps, as the elimination or forced invisibility of these people stands in sharp contrast to the popularity of freak shows during the nineteenth century. These were largely based on gazing at bodily defects, such as abnormally large and fat or skeleton-like human bodies, dwarfs, or even indigenous people from exotic places. As Rosemary Garland Thomson points out, this is due to the fact that “[s]crupulously described, interpreted, and displayed, the bodies of the severely congenitally disabled have always functioned as icons upon which people discharge their anxieties, convictions, and fantasies (56).”

In 1834, P. T. Barnum founded one of the first circuses in the United States in New York City, in an area which is today known as Madison Square Garden. He called his circus Barnum’s Grand Scientific and Musical Theatre and often used it to promote human curiosities such as the smallest man on Earth, General Tom Thumb, and the half-mammal, half-fish creature, the Feejee Mermaid. Such spectacles were based on the assumptions of eighteenth and nineteenth century eugenics, which had created the myth of the perfect, idealized human body: the corporeality of the everyman. As Lennard J. Davis argues, the aim of eugenics--to standardise human bodies--is in and of itself a paradox, as the phenomena, like the human body, will “always conform to a bell curve. So norming the non-normal is an activity as problematic as untying the Gordian knot (6).” Such activities were, however, the reason for the great, though dubious, success of Sarah Baartman, better known as the

“Hottentot Venus”. This girl, who originated from South Africa, was exhibited in England and France and became a symbol of colonial imperialism, along with other women such as Tono Vlara, the “Latin Venus”. The performance of these women, as Thomson writes, “testified to an inherent female sexual deviance, indolence, carnality, and appetite tempered only by Western civilisation (56).” These performances functioned on two levels. Spectators not only experienced curiosity, fascination and astonishment at the same time, but, as Thomson points out, “[p]ersonifying cultural and sexual aberration did not only confirm the Englishman’s sense of physical self-mastery, but also provided a cautionary tale of the natural female appetite, unmanaged by social sanctions (57).”

As we have seen, the public space of theatre has often made the deformed and the disabled seen. However, it took a long time for the bodies that were shown as spectacles and the objects of gazing to become a subject, with agency, and for their performances to become performativity, i.e., performative acts. The terms “performance” and “performativity” refer to the social phenomenon through which the subject is constructed by the acquisition of certain socially and culturally determined roles, as well as the overwriting of such pre-fabricated positions. This phenomenon includes normalizing strategies, such as the learning of gender, racial and class-based acts, as ascribed by society. There is a difference, however, between the subject’s constitution via performance and its construction through performativity. According to Enikő Bollobás, the subject comes into being through the acts of *performance* and *performativity* (21). These notions are derived from Austin’s Speech Act Theory, but in performance theory the concept of performativity is definitely an expanded and more abstract phenomenon, underlying both social and linguistic discourses. *Performance*, according to Bollobás, is a “particular mode of performativity, characterized by a mimetic replaying of norms and the replaying of ruling ideologies when constructing the subject” (21), whereas “performative acts allow people to construct themselves” (10). She argues that “subjects are created performatively in the speaking and the doing.” (10). Performative acts have “ontological force” (10) because they create new discourses which “allow for new subjectivities.” In the case of characters with disabilities this means that the character goes beyond his or her boundaries which are created by his or her environment that marks him or her out as abnormal.

Theatrical representations have often contributed to the widespread belief that bodily disorders are signs of moral deficiency. Disability as an issue has been presented in the past twenty centuries of dramatic history by featuring various physically challenged characters. It

is enough to think of the blind Oedipus Rex of Greek tragedy or the numerous mentally or physically handicapped characters in Shakespeare's oeuvre, such as the hunchback Richard III or the mute Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. Many of these characters bear the physical markers of some kind of bodily deformity or disability as a visible symptom of their moral corruption (as in the case of Richard III, the play's chief villain), or as a result of some kind of punishment for their purposefully or unknowingly committed sins. Oedipus, for instance, blinds himself for the murder of his own father and his incestuous relationship with his own mother. In his case, the act of self-blinding at the end of the play is indeed an allegory for the sins that Oedipus cannot bear to see. In Shakespeare's oeuvre most of the blinded, muted or mentally disabled characters are emblems of this kind, and thus they do not set up the discourse of disability. Richard III, however, is a peculiar example. Being the main villain, he embodies the characteristics of the medieval morality play. On the other hand, it is his physical deformity that leads up to his self-fashioning as an evil character:

But I, that am not shaped for sportive tricks,
Nor made to court an amorous looking-glass;
I, that am rudely stamp'd, and want love's majesty
To strut before a wanton ambling nymph;
I, that am curtail'd of this fair proportion,
Cheated of feature by dissembling nature,
Deformed, unfinish'd, 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;
Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,
Have no delight to pass away the time,
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun
And descant on mine own deformity:
And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
I am determined to prove a villain (*Richard III*. 1. 1. 14-30.)

The passage from Richard's opening soliloquy exemplifies self-fashioning resulting from physical condition. This act is entirely performative because in his statement: "I am determined to prove a villain",--which in and of itself is the Austinian speech act--a new

subject, Richard III, comes into being. He constructs his new identity as the villain and becomes an agent.

In the nineteenth century, with its widespread belief in eugenics, its Darwinian views and the growing interest in genetics, the stage representation of the handicapped also changed. In Ibsen's plays, for example, certain physical disorders, such as blindness, are not the symbols of the given person's morality but appear as results of a genetically inherited disease, pointing to the immorality of the parents. In *The Wild Duck* (1884) the Egdal family is seen disintegrating when it turns out that the wife, Gina, once had an affair with the father of her husband's friend. Upon learning the truth, Hjalmar, the father, realizes that his daughter, his "greatest sorrow and joy", may well be the daughter of his friend's father, Håkon Werle. Hedvig (the daughter) is losing her sight. This sensory disease, interestingly, links her to both her presumed grandfather, Old Egdal, and to Werle, both of whom are also losing their sight. It is not proven directly that Hedvig's biological father is not Hjalmar, but he nevertheless comes to this conclusion, which eventually leads to the girl's suicide.

From Object to Subject: Sympathetic Staging of the Disabled

Not until the twentieth century do we see characters with either mental or physical disorders being represented with sympathy. They became central characters in the stage representation as well as in the plot. We must make a distinction, however, between this and the use of disability as a metaphor of female oppression, such as with the paraplegic character Julia in *Fefu and Her Friends* by Maria Irene Fornés, or the MaGrath sisters, who suffer from depression among other conditions, in Beth Henley's *The Crimes of the Heart*. These representations, however, as Fox and Lipkin point out: "emulate, rather than challenge" that of the iconic disabled figure of Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* (78).

In *The Glass Menagerie* the crippled daughter Laura Wingfield—standing for the memory of Rose, the author's sister—is the central figure in the stage representation. Indeed, she is the iconic figure of disability, being the metaphor of isolation, virginity and martyrdom. Her representation on stage emphasizes her "purity" and fragility. The spotlight—according to the script—falls on her and provides her character with an aura-like atmosphere. Laura is marginalized in both her micro and her macro spheres, i.e., family and society, for not being able to act out her traditional feminine performance. In other words, as a result of her physical disability, she embodies the isolated martyr; her marginalization in the family and in society

restricts her ability to perform the traditional roles of wife and mother. As a consequence, her disability, which sets her up for a particular role, paradoxically disables her from fulfilling it.

Feminist playwrights are often celebrated for their sensitivity to women's issues. One such playwright is Marsha Norman. Her play '*Night Mother*' also deals with the issue of disability--in this case, epilepsy. The play revolves around Jessie and her mother. Jessie, who is in her thirties, has suffered from epilepsy ever since her early childhood. Jessie never leaves the house. Like Laura, she is isolated from the world; it is as if we were looking at Laura and her mother some ten years after the story of *The Glass Menagerie*. While Laura's mother is eager to find a gentleman caller for her daughter, Jessie's marriage has disintegrated by the time the plot begins. Her marriage and her role as a mother both turn out to be a failure, as we learn that her son became a criminal. She is isolated and lonely and suicide seems to represent the only possible way left for her to put an end to her suffering.

Mama (beginning to break down): Maybe I fed you the wrong thing. Maybe you had a fever sometime and I didn't know it soon enough. Maybe it's a punishment.

Jessie: For what?

Mama: I don't know. Because of how I felt about your father. Because I didn't want any more children. Because I smoked too much or didn't eat right when I was carrying you. It has to be something I did.

Jessie: It does not. It's just a sickness, not a curse. Epilepsy doesn't mean anything. It just is.

Mama: I'm not talking about the fits here, Jessie! I'm talking about this killing yourself. It has to be me that's the matter here. You wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't (Norman 71).

Interestingly, at the time of her suicide Jessie has been physically well for a whole year. She claims that it is not her chronic sickness that has led her to this decision. The question remains with us at this point: why does Jessie commit suicide? The suicide is celebrated as a performative action which finally gives Jessie agency, the choice in her life (Bollobás *The History of American Literature* 765). But is such an action a true performative? In the sense of uttering the word *no* as a rejection of her life, it certainly is. But, as we will see in the next section, it is problematical to state that in her case suicide is a truly performative action.

Subverting Bodies

Both Ann M. Fox and the feminist playwright Joan Lipkin point out the parallel between feminist and disability aesthetic through mentioning three scripts. One of these is *But What Have You Done for Me Lately?* (in the *Scyklon Z* series by the playwright Myrna Lamb). In this episode play a man experiences pregnancy:

MAN: Was I too healthy? Was that it? Did some secret-society deity
decide I should be given a handicap to even up the race?

WOMAN: Well, that is an interesting conjecture. (Lamb qtd. in Fox and Lipkin 164–5)

These plays, according to Fox and Lipkin, exemplify how we might begin to answer the questions raised above and further the exploration of the ways in which feminist and disability theatres can inform and enhance one another.

Pregnancy is the central issue in Adrienne Kennedy's play *A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White* as well. The play tackles the issue of childbearing and disability in an unusual way. As the Man character implied in Lipkin's play, pregnancy is regarded as a kind of sickness, and this work may therefore be classified among disability plays.

A Movie Star Has to Star in Black and White features Clara, a young African American woman, whose marriage is disintegrating at a time when she is pregnant and is also working on her career. The play addresses the issue of the construction of identity through, and later in opposition to, Hollywood movies. It also represents the double bind of the racial and gender oppression of African American women and of Clara in particular.

EDDIE. I have enough money for us to live well with my teaching. We could all be
so happy.

CLARA. (*From boat.*) Ever since I was twelve I have secretly dreamed of being a
writer. Everyone says it's unrealistic for a Negro to want to write. (76)

From Clara's words it is clear that race, gender and disability—as both socially and linguistically constructed categories—have similar effects on the individual's life. All these categories generate marginal positions and place the individual in a subject position which constructs a binary opposition to white, heterosexual male identity. Disability indeed comes in many forms, and we have seen a wide spectrum of such challenges represented by these characters. Apart from physical and cognitive disabilities we must also mention a third

category: social disability, which is a secondary result of the categories previously mentioned by Fox and Lipkin in *The DisAbility Project*. Social disability refers to the individual's *paralysis* regarding dealing with the micro- and macrocosmos around themselves. It may result from either an actual physical disorder, as in the case of Laura Wingfield, or a mental one, as with Jessie's depression, or simply be the outcome of a role imposed on the individual. Thus in *A Movie Star* Clara is expected to perform as a mother and a wife when in fact she wants to become a writer:

CLARA. I'm not unhappy mother.

MOTHER. Yes you are.

CLARA. I'm not unhappy. I'm very happy. I just want to be a writer. Please don't think I'm unhappy.

MOTHER. Your family's not together and you don't seem happy.

CLARA. I'm very happy mother. Very. I've just won an award and I'm going to have a play produced. I'm very happy. (Kennedy 72)

The common features of the plays discussed above is that their protagonists Laura, Jessie and Clara are all characters in a "liminal phase" (Turner 11). In Turner's understanding, liminal refers to a "life crisis", a detachment from "mundane life" and "monstrous images" (13). I am using the phrase to describe these heroines in the life circumstances described. In a way these female characters are all in a transitional phase of their lives. Laura is a young adolescent between childhood and adulthood. The plot revolves around her mother's efforts to find a gentleman caller for her, which eventually fail. Jessie is also a "liminoid subject" as she is on the threshold of life and death (the play presents her last few hours before she commits suicide.). Clara *is* pregnant throughout the plot, which is the quintessential liminal phase in Turner's theory.

The liminal phase is typically followed by a reintegration on the part of the liminoid subject (Turner 10) in which he or she acquires a new position in his or her community. In these plays, however, the protagonists do not live happily ever after their liminal phases but either continue living as liminoid subjects (Laura and Clara) or commit suicide. In Enikő Bollobás' subject theory, such acts are performative acts rather than performances, because they contradict the ascribed social scenario of these subjects.

Clara's case is the most outstanding one, as she does not suffer from an actual physical disability. Although floating anxiety and catatonia are mentioned as possible

cognitive disorders affecting her, she is not declared mentally challenged. Her only disability is pregnancy.

Pregnancy does not inevitably fall into the category of disability, if the latter is understood as an insufficiency in the sensorial or motor or even cognitive functioning of the human body. Nevertheless, the performance of pregnancy often conforms to the same mode of representation as disability. Firstly, pregnancy is stereotypically identified with mood changes, which are characteristics of depression. Impaired mobility also characterises this state of being. But, more importantly, both pregnancy and disability signify a physical condition that is altered and in some ways different from the standardized norm, i.e., it is “othered”.

The previously quoted dialogue between Clara and her mother clearly signifies the debilitating effect of ascribed performances, according to which Clara as a *black woman* cannot even be happy outside of the traditional family framework, let alone dream of becoming a writer. Nevertheless, she puts artistic career before her traditional duties, and as her pregnancy progresses, she meticulously writes a page a day and watches her play “coming together”. (Kennedy 65)

The protagonists of these plays represent the difference between performance and performative actions. If we are to understand the performativity spectrum as having two opposite poles, one end would be performance, in line with expected social norms as prescribed by a particular social role; whereas the opposite end would be identified as performative acts against social roles. Laura’s action is performative in the sense that she does not take the job as a secretary (i.e., she does not conform to the social role typically assigned to women) and, thus, by not getting married (i.e., rejecting the familial role prescribed by society), she is rejecting the performance of prescribed social roles. The situation is made more complex, however, by the fact that the anti-performance does not result from her own free choice but rather occurs because her physical disability marginalizes her. In this sense, her acts cannot be interpreted as *real* performative actions.

Laura’s actions would usually be considered as performative because she is rejecting the social roles traditionally assigned to women. Her disability, however, re-frames her situation. Being disabled, she is assigned an isolated role in society, and this trumps the roles assigned to her as a woman. Laura is adhering to the social role assigned to the disabled; her performance defines her self in terms of this prescribed social role.

In contrast to Laura, both Jessie and Clara are given a choice over how to live their lives. It is however debatable, to say the least, whether Jessie's suicide is a truly performative act, as Enikő Bollobás argues (*The History of American Literature* 765). Killing herself does not challenge or even question the patriarchal order or any social norm. Jessie is supposed to perform a traditional feminine role, that of a care-taker of her son and mother, which she rejects when she kills herself. Dubious as it is, such a performative action transgresses the supposed performance of a female role. Considering the disability layer of depression, though, suicide is the performance of the depressed subject. Jessie is supposed to be introverted. She kills herself, which is a rejection of her role of taking care of others. So, just as Laura's performative action against feminine roles becomes a performance of disability, Jessie's performativity becomes the performing of the stereotypical disability performance.

Clara, on the other hand, becomes performative as she subverts the norms by valuing her play production over reproduction. Clara as a woman is assigned the role of wife and mother. The racial element would reinforce her exclusion from the public sphere i.e., it would deny the option of a career as a writer from her:

CLARA. (*From boat.*) Ever since I was twelve I have secretly dreamed of being a writer. Everyone says it's unrealistic for a Negro to want to write. (Kennedy 76)

The racial layer intensifies the effect of her gender. As both an African American and a woman she was not supposed to have a career. When we add the layer of pregnancy as form of disability, the effect becomes even more intense. Pregnancy would definitively exclude her from the public sphere that a career as a writer would suggest. Clara's performative action transgresses her assigned performance.

This is in contrast with Laura, who as a woman is supposed to be a wife and mother. But when we add the layer of disability, she is supposed to be isolated. Thus, Laura's seeming performative action that is her rejection of feminine performance becomes a performance of the role of disability.

As Claudia Barnett argues, Clara's "play production cannot compare in value to her reproduction" (143). However, she does not choose her family over her artistic career. She does not go back to her husband, and instead of fulfilling her traditional feminine role, she meticulously writes one page a day and sees that the play is coming together. She writes:

Eddie comes every evening right before dark. He wants to know if I'll go back to him for the sake of our son. ... Before I left New York I got my typewriter from the pawnshop. I'm terribly tired, trying to do a page a day, yet my play is coming together (Kennedy 63).

Clara thus becomes an agent through artistic creation.

Conclusion

In selecting the examples I have given, my aim has been to prove that it is not their racial, gender or physical attributes that “disable” a given person but that it is rather the socio-political/cultural environment that makes a person disabled. In the plays I have discussed, the protagonists all subvert the norms of their macro sphere--their traditional feminine role of becoming obedient daughters and nurturing mothers is not fulfilled. The reasons for this range from an actual physical disability in the case of Laura Wingfield to mental/psychological disorders and pregnancy in the cases of Jessie and Clara. The common denominator of these three characters is that it is not their actual physical condition that hinders them from performing their social roles; rather, their micro sphere (i.e. family) and macro sphere (i.e. their community) construct circumstances of life in which their performance is necessarily a performative and subverting act.

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