The Autistic Stage

How Cognitive Disability Changed 20th-Century Performance

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This is a book for those who have a stake in and curiosity about the relationship between autism and the stage. Performance here covers theater to therapy, film to biography, art and beyond. If you are a theater or film critic, a speech or drama therapist, a higher education specialist or special education instructor, a parent of a child on the autism spectrum or an individual with ASD interested in theatre, this book may hold unique value for you. This work is meant to cover a range of issues and reach out to audiences, critics, professionals and parents who want to know more about performance representations of autism. One message reverberates throughout the book: each autistic person illustrates different approaches to and perspectives on life. We become richer each time we come to understand these new perspectives and performance powerfully enhances our understanding of them. Autism Spectrum Disorders include alternative modes of processing information, recording images, discoursing with others, and interpreting social scenes. In this conversation, performance can function as an analytical lens, a representational space, a means of perceptual innovation, and a therapeutic tool. The definition of autism as a disorder has evolved from its first diagnosis in the 1940s to our current frame of reference with several key revisions. These three categories—interaction, communication, and perseveration—underlie any published study of those on the autism spectrum. What has shifted in recent years is an approach to disability that positions autism as a social construction rather than a medical problem.
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FOREWORD

I have a notion that what attracts people to the theater is a kind of discomfort with the limitations of life as it is lived, so we try to alter it through a model form. We present what we think is possible in society according to what is possible in the imagination. When the theater is limited to the socially possible, it is confined by the same forces which limit society. (emphasis mine)

—Joseph Chaikin, The Presence of the Actor

The El Conquistador Resort is wheelchair accessible. Lifts will be made available to guests who wish to use the pool and Jacuzzi.

—Society for Disability Studies 2009 Conference Program

[Robert] Wilson’s early productions are different from many other twentieth-century artistic representations of disability because they start in a place where disability is the norm.

—Telory Davies Arendell

On June 17, 2009, I took a seat in a darkened seminar room in the Hilton El Conquistador Golf and Tennis Resort to listen to a panel on “Neurodiversity: Autism and Disability Culture.” The occasion was the 22nd annual conference of the Society for Disability Studies. The speakers were Ari Ne’eman, founder of the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, Scott Robertson, and Telory Davies Arendell, the author of the graceful, clear-eyed and surprising book you are about to read. I was surprised that afternoon and that was unusual, as by 2009 I had been working in theatre and disability for over 25 years.

The Society for Disability Studies (SDS) conference is often surprising. Earlier that day I watched swim-suited disabled colleagues hoisted into one of several sparkling blue swimming pools via a mechanical sling. Drinks and hamburgers from the poolside grill followed. The atmosphere was more pre-Castro Cuba or the Hamptons than earnest, academic policy summit. The conference literature had described the El Conquistador Golf and Tennis Resort as “one of the premier Tucson resorts,” famed for its spectacular mountain and desert views. Of course, the choice of Tucson as a conference site had more to do with the track record of nearby University of Arizona, than the luxury setting. The university is known as one of the best campuses for disabled students, especially wheelchair athletes, in the country if not the world.

But there was no denying the carnivalesque element of the conference. Perhaps all professional conference participants dip into the liminal, into play and flow. But the SDS conference does so with particular flair. Disability Studies may be an academic field today, but it was born in the streets not many decades ago by disabled people hellbent on moving out of the shadows of medical pathology and into public...
life. To borrow from Joe Chaikin’s call for theatrical reform, those early movers and shakers were no longer content to live within the confines of what was then “socially possible.”

Of the speakers that afternoon, Ari Ne’eman had the closest connection to those rebellious origins. Ne’eman is an American autism rights activist who co-founded The Autistic Self Advocacy Network (ASAN). Later that year President Obama would nominate him to the National Council on Disability (NCD), a nomination hotly contested because of Ne’eman’s controversial positions, notably, his rejection of the medical model (autism is a disease) and his embrace of the social model (autism is a neurological difference to be embraced). In 2010 Ne’eman became the first person on the spectrum to serve on the NCD. But all that was in the future. That day Ne’eman introduced me to ASAN (an organization run by and for people on the spectrum) to the term neurodiversity; and to the particularly insidious forms of discrimination and stereotyping the medical model of autism had visited on members of his community.

The second presentation, Telory Davies Arendell’s “Thinking Spatially, Speaking Visually: Director Robert Wilson Converses with Autistic Poet Christopher Knowles,” was on the surface an odd follow-up. Her subject was Robert Wilson, the high priest of avant-garde aesthetic theatre, a man awarded with grants from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations among others, and basically knighted by the French government for his cultural contributions (Commandeur, Ordre des Arts et des Lettres). What could connect Wilson and Ne’eman? A surprising correspondence between the two speakers emerged. As a theatre artist and scholar I was first drawn in by Arendell’s argument for a disability aesthetic deep within Wilson’s work, shaped perhaps by his childhood experience as a stutterer and his therapeutic work with dancer Byrd Hoffman. And then I listened to Arendell’s nuanced reading of Wilson’s collaboration with autistic poet Christopher Knowles that stressed the equality between the two men, rather than an unequal relation of charity or exploitation. She did not romanticize Wilson. Indeed in this book’s first chapter, she makes a neat distinction characterizing the motivation behind Wilson’s collaboration with Knowles, suggesting “synchronicity [rather] than progressive thinking” had been the determining force. And yet Wilson’s version of his initial encounter with Knowles, as quoted here in a 1985 interview, was that he found Knowles institutionalized and subject to therapies to “correct” his language disorder. Wilson asserts, “What I did was to simply take him from the institution and say ‘Great! It’s fantastic what you are doing. It’s beautiful, I support it and I’d like to learn about it.’” Arguably Wilson’s actions rejected the medical model of autism and expressed an acceptance and enthusiasm for human, neuro-, diversity, whether he then or now aligned himself with disability rights politics. Arendell explores such contradictions with finesse and rigor. Take, for example, her reserved judgment of Wilson’s relationship to his collaborators. She finds that Wilson “used Knowles and other artists with disabilities as innovators, but also as contemporary spectacles.”
Peers, freaks, both? There is much more to this complex story as you will find in Chapter One.

As Arendell tells us early on in her journey, she is one of those “who seek to define autism in pluralist and inclusive ways.” Her book reflects a similar pluralist bent. Under the umbrella of performance, she “applies” autism to a variety of loosely related endeavors: high art, experimental theatre, community-service learning, film, arts therapy, and photography. It is a provocative collection, not intended, I believe, as definitive but rather as catalytic. And though not directly personal in the sense that Ari Ne’eman’s work in self-advocacy is, Arendell’s lived experience of neurological disability heightens her appreciation of and desire for alternative modes of thinking and behaving, in the world and in the theatre.

The reader, once armed with the introduction’s superb overview of past and present medical, social, political and cultural interpretations of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), may choose to jump to their particular area of interest. Theatre scholars and practitioners venturing into the issues of disability and/or autism for the first time could not ask for a more competent guide. Arendell’s command of performance theory and 20th–21st century theatre practice is evident as she deftly engages those critical tools to center disability at the animating heart of theatre studies and practice. This expertise is especially illuminating in both the Robert Wilson/Christopher Knowles discussion and Chapter Two: “Behold Chekhov Lizardbrain,” an account of Pig Iron Theatre Company’s extravagant encounter with Chekhov, brain evolution and autism. Theatre educators engaged in curricular reform will recognize the “service-learning” theatre class Arendell details in “The Wanderer.” Her honest, complex account of “staging autism” within a course in theatre for social change will hopefully encourage others to explore these issues with care and intelligence. Arendell foregrounds rather than obscures the difficult questions such endeavours raise, including representational ethics and casting (i.e., nondisabled actors playing characters with disabilities—a recurring issue in the collection). The penultimate chapter celebrates the multiple languages of theatre (verbal, spatial, kinesthetic, etc.) and the use of theatre exercises in therapy with people on the spectrum not to correct difference, but to recognize and make space for diversity. Like much of the work in this book, Arendell’s efforts to populate the interstitial space between isolated worlds (here theatre practice and ASD treatments) provides a catalyst for rethinking disciplinary boundaries. Is it time to reinvestigate the hard line between art and therapy that some disabled practitioners, myself included, have vigorously defended in an effort to be taken as artistic equals?

In the chapter on film, “Artistic Techne,” Arendell passes over dated depictions of individuals on the spectrum such as the huge hit Rain Man—starring Dustin Hoffman as a savant—about which much, perhaps enough, has been written, focusing instead on promising new films exposing social prejudice and critiquing the medical model. Popular media has traveled a distance to arrive at HBO’s Temple Grandin, a biopic based on the life of the prominent advocate of the autistic community and doctor
of animal science. Tellingly, one of Grandin’s first teachers explains to her that her mind works differently than others. But he doesn’t recommend fixing that difference. He predicts instead that the difference will turn out to be “quite an advantage.”

In her forays across disciplinary, media and professional borders, Arendell is reporting but she is also advocating. Looking back and forward from the Society for Disability Studies Conference in Tucson, we must remember that those poolside lifts didn’t just happen to be there (though legally they should have been). The conference organizers had insisted on full access and the hotel scrambled to have accommodations in place for their guests. Arendell’s writing is poised, her tone thoughtful, but the intent is radical. She and other scholars, artists and activists arguing for neurodiversity are out to redress wrongs and to offer new horizons for human behavior and endeavors. Arendell’s specific contribution to this movement is to query how theatre—at once the most social of the arts, according to Aristotle, and the most boundless, emerging some claim from ecstatic dances to the god Dionysius—can permit new languages and new social/performance possibilities. Telory Davies Arendell leaves us with questions and prods us to action.

—Victoria Lewis, Theatre Arts, University of Redlands
Neurological disorders are odd creatures. In the United States we take the human form to be intact, controlled by self, and protected by inalienable rights. As anyone who lives with a disability knows, this is somewhat of a false assumption anywhere in the world. Not only does the body escape these mandates, it often does so in ways directly linked to processes in the brain. As a scholar/artist with a neurological disorder, I have lived nearly twenty years post diagnosis with the knowledge that malfunctions in the brain or spinal cord go far beyond the prospect of memory loss, double vision, and twisted words. The brain holds the body as prisoner at will, and with little warning about unintended consequences.

Autism is a curious conundrum. I say this knowing both the strengths of autistic perception and also the societal challenges. There are, after all, roughly 40 percent of those on the Autism Spectrum who cannot speak verbally and are now offered new technologies to develop voices of their own. As a student of dance and theatre, I have always felt closest to performance that looks for alternative modes of communication to get its point across. Spoken language, although our staple in Western culture, is not always the loudest voice in the room.

I write this book on autism and performance to tease out those interstitial spaces where language becomes something much larger than words. The language of stage space needs by definition to include discussion of bodies, of sounds, of set pieces, of unspoken moments that move beyond what we as humans are capable of saying.

This book is for anyone who has ever wondered what thoughts lie behind a mouth that cannot speak them, what movements dance through a body that cannot dance them, and what altered vision can do to revise stereotypical perception.
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This is about what is, not what is missing. Forget the notion of a cosmic balancing act where a god of impartiality runs around taking things away but giving one gift for every sacrifice. It is about the fact that those of us who are viewed purely as having had things taken away—and as being essentially barren wastelands—are not shut out of the richness of life by being who we are. The richness we experience is not some cheap romanticized copy of the richness others experience. The richness of life is there for everyone, and whether one experiences it or not is not dependent on whether or not one is autistic.¹

Amanda Baggs is a woman on the autism spectrum who distrusts spoken language and promotes multiple other means of communication. Her statement expresses a perspective that those of us who seek to define autism in pluralist and inclusive ways recognize as both a strength and challenge. Baggs asserts that encountering the world as a person on the autism spectrum does not mandate sequestration or a social pariah status. Rather, this encounter is different from that experienced by neurotypical individuals. This difference includes alternative modes of processing information, recording images, discoursing with others, and interpreting social scenes. In this conversation, performance can function as an analytical lens, a representational space, a means of perceptual innovation, and a therapeutic tool.

The definition of autism as a disorder has evolved from its first diagnosis in the 1940s to our current frame of reference with several key revisions. Rebecca Chilvers defines an autistic disorder as one that “…applies to individuals who have social interaction impairments, communication impairments and repetitive, stereotypic and restricted interests and activities prior to 36 months of age.”² These three categories—interaction, communication, and perseveration—underlie any published study of those on the autism spectrum.

Behaviorally speaking, these fundamental characteristics have not changed over time. What has shifted in recent years is an approach to disability that positions autism as a social construction rather than a medical problem. The implication is that disability is the result of cultural conditions that impair individuals at the level of life function. If the society around those with disabilities were constructed with the concept of Universal Design as its guiding principle, for example, difference would be an assumed part of the way culture operates rather than a revision to pre-existing structures. As Bill Rocque suggests, “Contestation over the meaning of autism pointedly demonstrates that, despite being a biogenetic condition, ASD [Autism Spectrum Disorder] has clear sociocultural and political dimensions that affect how neurotypicals act toward those labeled autistic.”³ At a basic level, this shift in social perception requires the recognition of difference as a positive variant rather than a
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threat or an anomaly. Rocque observes: “People with autism are rejecting dominant discourses, figuring autism as neurodiversity, not pathology. In so doing, they open up spaces for valued social identities and alternative embodiments” (18 of 24). Again, this shift in perception appears self-evident, yet the realities of this change are of course far more complex. This book begins with neurodiversity as the starting point on a journey of societal reconfiguration and an “autistic renaissance,” as some have begun to call it.4

While there is merit in the popular saying, “When you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism,” the medical industry observes a degree of similar behaviors in individuals on the spectrum. In broad terms, “People with ASDs [Autism Spectrum Disorders] tend to have problems with social and communication skills. They are likely to be habitual in their behavior and do not want to deviate from their daily routine.”5 And yet, even within these broad categories, there are slight differentiations. For example, whereas noted autistic educator Temple Grandin sees the world as a series of specific pictures with a heightened ability to process images in patterns, others on the spectrum shy away from visual thinking. Cognitive difficulties experienced by those on the spectrum may include: “over-association, perseverative attention to detail, delayed apprehension of the whole, a persistent animistic sense of the natural world…, a preference for auditory over visual processing, and a tendency to find or impose patterns, even synesthesia…”6 At a March 4, 2011 public lecture in Springfield, Missouri, Grandin commented that the “normal” brain drops out the details whereas the autistic mind fixates on only the details. It may be that each individual on the spectrum focuses on different details. For visual thinkers like Grandin, this attention is on visual detail; for others it may be what Emily and Ralph Savarese suggest is a preference for auditory rather than visual means of interpretation.

For others on the spectrum such as Valerie Paradiz, cognitive disturbances include “sensory integration and speech processing” difficulties.7 Contemporary first-world culture has become a highly fast-paced, multi-stimulus kind of environment. The extra time it may take a person with autism to process multiple simultaneous messages is not a temporal reality for today’s cultural traffic. Therapists Kathy Evans and Janek Dubowski remark specifically, “…in children with autism, deficits in communication and imagination are very apparent.”8 We might adjust their term “deficits” to a more inclusive, less derogatory word such as “differences.” A more pertinent way to describe this aspect of autistic experience might approach these alternate pathways of information processing as communication differences. This shift in terminology does not diminish the difficulties that people on the autism spectrum may experience within neurotypical culture. Rather, it makes room for inclusion on a broader continuum of sensory responses. This breadth is reflected in Meredyth Goldberg Edelson’s observation that “…the heterogeneity in symptom presentation and severity, the heterogeneity in cognitive abilities, and the fact that even individuals with superior intelligence may not be able to decode and/or engage in typical social interaction can result in considerable variability in the ability of
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individuals with autism to interact and communicate successfully with others.” As we develop assistive technology to address various modes of communication, those who might have been diagnosed as mentally retarded in the past are now gaining recognition as thoughtful individuals with communicative differences.

AUTISM AND ASPERGER’S SYNDROME

Although autism is a continuum disorder, there appear to be two recognized contingents along the spectrum. Those considered “high-functioning” are usually individuals diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome, while those with minimal language skills are often diagnosed as autistic. However, both sets have the “Autism Spectrum Disorder” denomination. The major differentiation made between these two groups relies on spoken language:

Students with Asperger Syndrome (AS) are those who developed significant language skills by the age of five. They have substantial spoken vocabularies and age-appropriate syntax. These youngsters, however, have difficulty with the reciprocal nature of communication, or the give and take of conversation. Their language can tend to be more like giving a speech than having a conversation.

Given this specification, one of the first tests a doctor will perform with a potential ASD patient is one that tracks his or her ability to name visual representations of objects.

What we must understand about the medical reliance on spoken language as a diagnostic criterion is that a person’s inability to speak does not preclude an ability to communicate. In fact, Paula C. Durbin-Westby is careful to point out that “…communication difficulties are one of the hallmarks of autism spectrum conditions, yet those who ‘speak’ for autistics have managed to omit one of the most basic needs of autistics, and of all human beings: the need to communicate effectively.” Clearly, the need to communicate is a basic human function, no matter what the cognitive apparatus of the individual. Durbin-Westby assures us: “All people, including all autistic people, communicate, although not all communication is easily understood by others” (8 of 15). Although the mode of communication may vary greatly in ASD patients, communication itself is a fundamental commonality among human subjects.

MULTIPLE FORMS OF COMMUNICATION

The next step in this argument requires recognition of multiple forms of communication. Those on the spectrum who cannot speak coherently may take longer to comprehend the speech around them as symbolic. This does not mean that they lack an inherent intelligence or the need to communicate with others. Sarah Birge reminds us that, “…while people with disabilities may have unusual ways of
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interacting, this does not mean they are incapable of communication or enjoying close relationships, or that their experience of the world is somehow inferior to others.” This observation brings us back to Amanda Baggs’s encouragement to focus on the communication skills that do exist in those on the autism spectrum rather than what is perceived as “missing.”

Disability Studies scholars join activists in a contemporary push for the concept of neurodiversity and all this term implies. More specifically, neurodiversity as a new way of looking at disability cultures provides a perspective that “…describes the neurology and personhood of autistic people through the lens of human diversity.”

Just as previous diversity movements such as those related to sexual preference, race, transgender, or even disability itself indicate, personal identity is a many-splendored thing and takes multiple forms, all worthy of recognition. Rebecca Chilvers makes the salient point that “…rather than being a categorically separate condition removed from ‘normal’ experience, autism is at the extreme of a continuum of behaviours seen in us all.” Ultimately, we need to respect a difference in communicative modes as a viable personal difference. “L[aurent] Mottron has remarked, ‘I wanted to go as far as I could to show that their [people with ASD] perception—their brains—are totally different. Not damaged. Not dysfunctional. Just different.” In this effort, Mottron is as much a disability activist as an advocate for those on the autism spectrum. As a personal identity movement, “Neurodiversity must mean embracing those who have no interest in, or apparent aptitude for, neurotypical language habits, but we have generalized negatively, even catastrophically, for too long.”

MORE RECENT DIAGNOSES OF ASD

The disorder’s initial diagnosis in the 1940s was followed by decades of controversial theories (e.g., “refrigerator mothers”) before more accurate appraisals of ASD appeared. Joseph F. Kras offers one explanation: “Significantly, autism began to be more widely diagnosed in the 1990s. Some have attributed this rise to an ‘epidemic,’ while others, such as Morton Gernsbacher, have argued that “no scientific evidence indicates that the increasing number of diagnosed cases of autism arises from anything other than purposely broadened diagnostic criteria, coupled with deliberately greater public awareness and intentionally improved case finding.” While appreciative of the expanded diagnostic categories for the autism spectrum, I want to both remind us of its different contingencies and also raise a slight warning about the obvious potential for misdiagnosis under broadened diagnostic criteria. As Temple Grandin observed in her lecture in Springfield, Missouri, there is a current tendency in cognitive science to misdiagnose ASD for people who qualify, in Grandin’s own terminology, as “nerds,” or those with highly mathematical forms of patterned thinking. These are individuals who have quite literally transformed the Silicon Valley computer industry with their rare abilities to write computer programs, gifts that equal their social inability to interact successfully with other people.
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With this potential for misdiagnosis in mind, let us turn to some very specific criteria used by doctors across the board with their potential autism patients. Therapists Evans and Dubowski inform us that the three major diagnostic categories for ASD include: “impairment in social interaction,” “impairment in communication,” and “repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior” (63). In a more narrow segment of this larger diagnosis, individuals with Asperger’s are evaluated according to their linguistic capability; in order “…to receive a diagnosis of Asperger Syndrome, it is essential that there is no language delay in infancy” (Chilvers, 13). Although the language delivery in a person with Asperger’s might present habitual roadblocks, language formation is a structure that follows a neurotypical pathway with these individuals.

However, as Cindy Schneider explains, there are several sites of communicative dysfunction that may or may not occur for those with Asperger’s. Schneider separates these types of disorder into conceptual learning, inferential learning, and language formation disabilities. Each category of disability acts on different aspects of cognition and linguistic perception:

A conceptual learning disability refers to deficits in concept formation, or ‘big picture’ thinking. Persons diagnosed with AS [Asperger’s Syndrome] tend to be detail oriented at the expense of the broader view. …Additionally, these students have difficulties in ‘executive function’. Our executive functioning allows us to sequence, prioritize, shift attention, and generally organize ourselves…. In individuals diagnosed with AS, …they have great difficulty planning, organizing, or shifting attention. This deficit also makes multitasking a problem…. An inferential learning disability can be seen in the individual’s difficulty with abstract language, implied meaning, and figurative language. A deficit in the ability to infer also creates difficulty in understanding nonverbal communication signals….21

Let us keep in mind here that when Schneider uses the term “deficit” in her breakdown of learning difficulties, she uses a neurotypical set of standards as her basis for comparison. Within a neurodiverse schematic, these “deficits” might be more accurately described as “differences.”

Schneider details two additional learning disabilities in her book: one that stems from problems with language formation and the other that deals with establishing perspective. Both of these categories study a person’s aptitude for consensual speech interactions, and are ones that imply an understood reciprocity between speakers. For individuals with Asperger’s, this capacity to place oneself outside speech in order to listen and respond appropriately to another speaker is a challenge. Their preference is to perform a series of monologues, a term that social science has borrowed from theatre in order to best describe this particular behavior: “A language formation disability is evidenced in a difficulty formulating and initiating language in a reciprocal conversation…. A person diagnosed with AS often would rather do
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a monologue about his favorite subject. This individual may show no interest at all in what the other person might say, but may direct the conversation back to his favorite subject” (17). As the co-speaker in this sort of conversation, the person on the receiving end will no doubt become frustrated when their conversational partner makes no space for his or her contributions. It might feel, for example, like one is both not being listened to and also not given the chance to speak. This scenario presumes a monologist and an audience member rather than a give-and-take verbal interaction.

THEORY OF MIND

The lack of reciprocity in conversation extends to a concept that neurodiagnostic research has termed “Theory of Mind.” It draws on an individual’s social awareness of the space, and others who surround them, in a linguistic exchange:

Perhaps one of the areas of greatest impact is the perspective-taking learning disability. This is often referred to as a deficit in Theory of Mind…. Theory of Mind has been described as an awareness of what others think or know. After [neurotypical] children reach the age of about four, they begin to understand that other people have thoughts and feelings different from their own…. The ability to predict what these thoughts or feelings might be continues to grow as children develop.

Those with Asperger’s, however, “…do not intend to be cruel or hurt the other person’s feelings, they simply do not know how to take another’s perspective” (18). Reciprocity of any kind is a learned skill, and is often acquired through basic interactions early in a child’s life between mother or father and child. Those with Asperger’s recognize speech as a form of communication, but have difficulties moving beyond the “repeat after me” phase of reciprocity. After all, any monologue is bound to be a repetition of what someone has already heard in some form, be it gleaned from the television or the computer or a sibling or a parent. The step in cognitive development of those with AS (Asperger’s Syndrome) that takes the place of a learned reciprocity is one where words heard and repeated or strung together fill the gaps in conversation without pause. It is almost as if they are having a conversation with themselves, although their speech is not necessarily dialogic.

It is important to remember that what the parents, siblings, teachers, or therapists perceive as the motivations and experiences of those on the spectrum do not always match what those with autism understand as their own realities. In effect, “…our experience of individuals with autism ought no longer to be assumed the same as their experience. Individuals with the autism label often describe experiences which are not immediately obvious to the rest of us but which may well affect our understanding of their behavior.” Put quite simply, one person’s Theory of Mind is not another’s, and unless we start with a neurodiverse frame of perception, autistic
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behaviors and forms of communication are bound to appear foreign or outside a more normative frame of reference.

Thus, even though those on the spectrum may appear antisocial from a neurotypical perspective, this behavior should never imply a lack of desire to communicate or share information with others. “Differences in the way people are able to use their bodies and focus their attention leads many to assume that a person does not care to participate or communicate and does not desire relationship. These assumptions affect our expectations, the way we speak with them and the educational and social opportunities we offer to them.”

As you might imagine, misunderstanding is fairly routine in an environment that does not take neurodiversity into account. Stereotypes and false representations abound. Scott Michael Robertson alludes to these existing false representations, which include “…portrayals of autism as a partial or whole loss of personhood, representations of autism as a retreat into an empty fortress, characterizations of autistic people as locked inside a shell, and presentations of autistic people as victims kidnapped and held hostage by their disability.”

There is much that those on the spectrum can offer to neurotypical culture; this community just needs to alter its perception of autism enough to make space and time for more neurodiverse responses.

RECOGNITION OF STEREOTYPES

The first step in this process is a full recognition of stereotypes. As Zosia Zaks informs us, “The classic stereotype holds that an autistic person lacks reciprocity and empathy. Yet the autobiographies of autistic individuals prove this to be woefully inaccurate. While science locates such difficulties in the brain, disability scholarship attributes them to society’s refusal to accommodate multiple methods and styles of communicating and relating.” Here we see Disability Studies expanding the space where autism resides in the popular imagination to more accurately reflect the needs and desires of those on the spectrum. Social barometers need a recalibration in order to perceive the desire to communicate in different ways.

Neurotypical culture assumes a social introversion on the part of autistic individuals, and yet it blatantly fails to recognize its own lack of empathy in most scenarios that cross neurodiverse boundaries. “[Mark] Osteen argues that most popular representations of people with autism are not truly empathetic, but instead reinforce neurotypical experiences (for example, by placing value on ‘overcoming’ autism), thereby silencing rather than valuing the autistic perspective.” Some amount of any understanding requires identification with the material studied. While the artists I discuss are all committed to changing social perceptions, even they have some difficulty avoiding stereotypes.

Stereotyped characterization is usually the safest and easiest point of entry into difference, but this route is highly problematic. At times, even those who start from a place of care or concern end in a contested space of representation.
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AUTISM AND PERFORMING ARTS

My own work explores how the performing arts have embraced autism as a set of new perspectives that change the way audiences conceive of space, time, personhood, embodiment, communication, and stage or film imagery. I begin this exploration in Chapter One with the early work of Robert Wilson and his autistic collaborator, Christopher Knowles. This artistic partnership reveals late-twentieth-century perceptions of autistic behaviors and ways of processing image in relation to time and space. Wilson and Knowles produced several cutting-edge theatre pieces that Wilson refers to as ‘operas’ because they combine live music, dance, spectacular imagery, and unusual dramatic storylines. Wilson’s is a new-age opera, differing from more traditional styles of Wagnerian opera and the like. Rather, his is an opera of images, sounds, and motion that gives primacy to the sort of patterned arrangement of ideas and images in which those on the autism spectrum excel. Wilson’s *A Letter to Queen Victoria* (1974) and *Einstein on the Beach* (1976) employ autism as a new stage idiom that transformed theatre in radical ways consonant with early postmodern performance.

In the second chapter, my analysis of Pig Iron Theatre Company’s 2007 play, *Chekhov Lizardbrain!*, picks up where Wilson falls short in terms of autistic representation, although some of the old stereotypes linger. Although the text underwent a number of revisions, the company’s reliance on these existing stereotypes limits what this production can offer in the way of progressive images. Where the company excels is in its complicated mix of three disparate elements: neuroscience’s definition of autism; Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*; and autistic scholar/designer Temple Grandin’s theories about animal portions of the human brain. By the show’s end, somehow Chekhov has decoded autism and autism makes remarkable sense of Chekhov.

My third chapter focuses on the Service-learning that my “Theatre for Social Change” class at Missouri State University employed to create a new play, *The Wanderer* (2009). Aided by community partner Rivendale Center for Autism and Institute of Learning, they taught theatre techniques to children on the autism spectrum. Using the classic storyline of *The Wizard of Oz*, the play presents a new way of telling an autism narrative. Perseveration, various forms of communication, and textural or movement dependence become artifacts given to the main character who wanders through a series of doors in a neurodiverse community before finding his way home with the reassurance of a new kind of heroism. As a class, we investigated ways the representation of identity dictates the treatment of individuals, generating a new way of telling old stories.

There are a number of filmic portrayals of Autism Spectrum Disorders. As with literary or theatrical examples, these films run the gamut from elaborate biopics about real individuals’ lives to fictive caricatures or even docudramas. Whereas Dustin Hoffman plays a fictional character in *Rain Man* (1988), Claire Danes in the *Temple Grandin* biopic (2010) took on the daunting task of impersonating a
This HBO film managed a revision of disability narrative that succeeded in moving the autism conversation into a social rather than medical model. Other attempts at this progression include Gerardine Wurzburg’s *Autism is a World* (2005) and Tricia Regan’s *Autism: The Musical* (2008). My fourth chapter compares these films, exploring their varied representations of autism given their different temporal and cultural frames. Since film reaches a broader audience than live theatre, the fact that *Temple Grandin* won as many Emmy Awards in 2010 as it did put autism in mainstream media with a more accurate portrayal of ASD. And yet, the lead actress for this film is not disabled, so representation is still at one remove.

My fifth chapter, “Disney dialogues: No Sidekick Left Behind,” continues this conversation about how to make the strangeness of language and social interaction more accessible to individuals on the autism spectrum through the use of film. Ron Suskind’s 2014 book, *Life, Animated: A Story of Sidekicks, Heroes, and Autism* provides a close look at one family’s attempts to reach their autistic son, Owen, through the use of Disney characters. Owen’s love of rehearsed dialogue between animated characters is what pulled this child into speech after a loss of this facility as a young boy. This boy literally learns communication and the art of social interaction through the repeated study of character in Disney films. His family learns to “speak Disney” as both a means of connection with their son and a way to meet him where his comfort lives.

Through a conscious and directed use of commercial media, Owen’s parents enact a rehearsal of social skills in which their son can excel. As his father admits, “He’s not playing the roles as well as we are; he’s playing them better than we are. Mimicry is one thing. This isn’t that. The movements, the tone, the emotions, seem utterly authentic, like method acting” (57, Suskind). One of method acting’s tenants is a belief that living “in character” even while off a film set or stage helps actors grow into their roles. In Suskind’s case, living and speaking as Disney’s sidekick characters allowed an entrance into speech and a growth into a socially aware identity. My discussion of Suskind’s book will focus on Walt Disney’s challenge to animators that all film scenes be vivid enough to offer understanding even without the accompanying sound. I add this conversation to Broadway’s earlier push toward revising *The Lion King* for those on the Autism Spectrum in alternative formats for special performances.

Finally, I examine theatre as therapy in the sixth chapter of this book. I employ feedback from current art therapists as well as commentary published by theatre practitioners who apply dramatic communication skills to a specialized training for those on the autism spectrum. I envision art as a meaning maker, pairing acting and autism in a sensory integration that uses the body to revise the mind. This final chapter entertains the notion of a somato-psychic approach to learning that lets physical interaction lend itself to intellectual growth.

In my concluding Chapter Seven, I include discussion and brief sampling of local Springfield, MO attempts to photograph children on the autism spectrum. This seventh chapter takes the name of the photographers’ exhibit in multiple public sites,
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“Faces of Autism.” The politics of this collection and its exhibition include what has come to be known as a somewhat questionable way to represent individuals with disabilities. As with so many other attempts, this collection of photographs has been made “for” rather than “with” those on the spectrum and their families. I include these shots not as evidence of artistic malpractice, but rather as one local group’s efforts to make the face of autism more public, shared with community members. They offer a strategic way to let autism take space in gathering sites where medical models of disability need questioning (hospital lobbies) or have no room at the table (coffee houses). These are faces to love, appreciate, and recognize as powerful rather than as objects of neuro-scientific study.

This is a book for those who have a stake in and curiosity about the relationship between autism and the stage. Performance here covers theatre to therapy, film to biography, art and beyond. If you are a theatre or film critic, a speech or drama therapist, a higher education specialist or special education instructor, a parent of a child on the autism spectrum or an individual with ASD interested in theatre, this book may hold unique value for you. This work is meant to cover a range of issues and reach out to audiences, critics, professionals and parents who want to know more about performance representations of autism. One message reverberates throughout the book: each autistic person illustrates different approaches to and perspectives on life. We become richer each time we come to understand these new perspectives and performance powerfully enhances our understanding of them.

NOTES

4 The phrase appears, for instance, in Emily Thornton Savarese and Ralph James Savarese, “The Superior Half of Speaking”: An Introduction,” Disability Studies Quarterly 30:1 (2010), 16 of 27. A number of essays in this landmark issue of DSQ serve as an important source for this and following chapters.
6 Savarese and Savarese, 22 of 27.
10 Note here that the terms “high” and “low” functioning are problematic in and of themselves for obvious reasons.
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15 Chilvers, 30.
17 Savarese and Savarese, 21 of 27.
20 Drury University, 4 March 2011.
21 Schneider, 16.
22 Some scholars in Disability Studies have already troubled this notion.
23 Schneider, 17.
26 Robertson, 7 of 27.
28 Birge, 4 of 21.
In the early 1970s, international stage director Robert Wilson began working with a young autistic poet, Christopher Knowles (b. 1959). Knowles’s approach to language as a spatial, pictorial, and sonic art form shaped Wilson’s 1974 piece, *A Letter for Queen Victoria* and his later opera, *Einstein on the Beach* (1976). Knowles, who helped Wilson write the text for *Einstein*, remained his apprentice and muse for a number of years. The notion of collaboration between a subsequently world-renowned theatre director and an autistic minor whose own artwork and career fell out of view is riddled with complication. I draw on Wilson’s work with Knowles as one example of contemporary theatre’s appropriation of autism as an artistic vehicle for the expression of alternate perception.

How do we explain this extraordinary collaboration between a major director and a young autistic poet? Wilson’s interest in performers such as Knowles reflects an artistic desire to disrupt conventional representational structures. Knowles’s use of autistic language patterns—repetition of sounds and phrases in echolalia, a play on word arrangements, and imitation of media banter—reinforced Wilson’s own distrust of the spoken word. Wilson’s micro-managerial directing style both encouraged and appropriated Knowles’s natural ability to reconstruct language as a primarily visual form of artistic communication. Their collaboration created a highly precise form of theatrical order that generated both innovation and controversy.

“AUTISM AS AN AESTHETIC ANCHOR”

Theatre scholar Bonnie Marranca believes that “by finding a creative place for Knowles in his theatre Wilson has challenged psychologists’ insistence that the autistic child cannot be integrated into society. He has proposed him as a model member of a new society through his use of the phenomenology of autism as an aesthetic anchor of his theatre….” Although I embrace Marranca’s concept of “autism as an aesthetic anchor” in Wilson’s work, I find this terminology somewhat ironic. In an obvious way, an anchor limits motion, and the physical movement in *Einstein* is anything but permanent stasis. From a medical perspective, individuals on the autistic spectrum often require literal physical anchoring to calm an out-of-control inner anxiety in response to external overstimulation. Moving beyond Marranca’s observation, I suggest that Wilson’s use of autistic perception constitutes what Disability Studies scholar Lennard Davis might call a “dismodern” deconstructive theatre practice.
Davis argues for an end to identity categories altogether and imagines the body as completed by prosthesis, technical aids, or surgical intervention (for example) as part of a “dismodernist” era wherein disabilities—due to age, disease, accident, inheritance, or otherwise—are potentially common denominators. He suggests that difference of all kinds is what the human populace has in common, rather than what separates us.

In Wilson’s early work with Knowles, autistic perception is partnered with a postmodern fragmentation and minimalist automatism. Wilson runs the risk, in this pairing, of holding both parts together too tightly. Autism cannot and should not be equated with postmodernism or automatism. Wilson explores the intersection of multimedia, postmodern performance, and disability to question the act of representation itself without making his own representational politics transparent. This new method of conjoining disability with postmodern art practices was perhaps more the result of synchronicity than of progressive thinking on Wilson’s part. He clearly saw in Knowles an avenue less traveled in artistic circles and leapt to claim this pathway as his own. He integrated Knowles’s autistic processing of time and space in ways that couched this set of perceptions in a broader context of experimental art. He used Knowles and other artists with disabilities as innovators, but also as contemporary spectacles. In effect, he created a “dismodern” theatre aesthetic by employing the alternative perceptions of disabled performers in the course of his artistic experiments. The term “experimental theatre” takes on a slightly different set of connotations in this light.

Wilson’s theatre is not a theatre that stages physical disability; rather, his is a theatre that uses cognitive and sensory disability as the modus operandi. His first few productions involved performers who were deaf, autistic, or schizophrenic but not mobility impaired. The ‘dis’ of disability disappears on Wilson’s early stages in terms of actual representation, and yet he has already made choices to exclude visibly impaired participants in his early work. The presence of his disabled performers is full and functional, not lacking, but their input in these early collaborations was always tempered by Wilson’s editorial license. Disability is a key part of Wilson’s process, not just the final representational product, and yet he holds the ultimate authority over any final production. If anything, this inclusion of disabled perspectives in the collaborative assembly of performed material may be one of Wilson’s saving graces. This is not just a contemporary freak show, but Wilson rides a fine line between representing difference and revising representation to allow for different perspectives.

PERFORMANCE ALWAYS STARTS WITH THE BODY

What is it, then, that makes collaborative performance, as opposed to more conventional presentations of pre-scripted dramatic texts, more useful as a starting point in the discussion of disability in stage representation? Performance always starts with the body as a primary site of representation, knowledge, and experience.
Performance must always address the body; it has no other choice. Dance works in similar ways, but even in dance the body is somewhat masked by technical movement motifs and gestural symbols. In performance art, the body becomes the text. In Wilson’s brand of operatic performance art, written text takes a back seat. Pictures, sounds, and movement choreographed to look naturally mechanical are all texts of various bodies. Some of these body-texts are highly precise, some are naturally awkward, some display awkward precision and/or precise awkwardness. Room is made for all of these modes. When Wilson slows these movements down on stage, all motion takes on a ritualistic beauty. Entertainment is impossibly fused with purpose, and the simplicity of slow motion becomes incredibly complex with the closer scrutiny that slower movement demands. At slower speeds, the most awkward movement is graceful, and grace suddenly becomes an agonizingly awkward series of events.

It is in this slower moment of physical motion that Wilson’s vision resides. He works with extremes both temporally and spatially toward this same end. Stage images that are too big to fit within the confines of the set are a popular Wilson technique. One of his earliest operas, *The King of Spain* (1969), used an oversized cat whose legs were so long that these were all that was visible. Enormous cat legs traipsed through the living room of a Wilson set without being noticed by the scene’s other characters.

Life is absurd in moments when extraordinary dimensionality becomes the norm. This is no doubt Wilson’s purpose in slowing time down to a near standstill and blowing space up to circus proportions. These revisions of time and space have more to do with disability in Wilson’s work than anyone has previously recognized. He values the extraordinary, and he recognizes in disability an extraordinary existence. In Wilson’s early operas, disabilities become visionary powers, tools to open the universe to new avenues of perception, raw materials for the construction of an entirely new aesthetic system that employs these same sorts of extraordinary proportions and circus motifs.

The use of freak show or circus venues and narratives in experimental theatre of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries might be construed as an example of cutting edge theatre expanding into disability as both a means of innovation and an appropriation of identity politics. Wilson was not the only U.S. director who dabbled in disability representation throughout his career. While director Joseph Chaikin may well have used Disability Theatre for similar purposes late in his career, he himself was a practitioner with disabilities, and his collaboration with disabled playwright John Belluso (*Body Pieces*, 2001) marked a genuine interest in actual representation of impairment on stage. I am not sure that we can make the same argument for Robert Wilson’s early work with performers with disabilities. Perhaps the consciousness we now recognize in theatre practice in relation to disability was not present at the time of Wilson’s early work. We might try to imagine what his 1976 *Einstein on the Beach* would look like if Wilson had created a truly collaborative performance piece with Knowles using a post-Millennial awareness.
of neurodiversity. Needless to say, this might or might not radically alter the piece’s structural (or über-structural) organization.

WILSON’S INTERSECTION WITH DISABILITY

Although he never self-identified as an individual with disabilities, Wilson has claimed a personal history with impairment, and this aspect of his own life is one possible point of connection with Knowles and other children whom he fostered in his early career. Although Wilson underwent treatment for a speech impediment, members of his family deny his childhood stutter. His sister, in particular, claims no memory of her brother’s difficulty with spoken language. This begs vital questions about Wilson’s entire theatre career, as he founded his company on training that he received from dance instructor Byrd Hoffman to correct this stutter and named his company after her. Hoffman led him to a different understanding of representation and perception that underlies all of his work on the stage, disability related or not. Could this mean that Wilson owes his artistic methods to the treatment of impairment? For scholars who have dubbed Einstein on the Beach as a touchstone or cultural zeitgeist of the twentieth century, the answer might be a loaded, but resounding, affirmative.

There exist clear connections between Knowles’s personal affect and the performance style Wilson directed his actors to apply in his early works. In rehearsal for A Letter for Queen Victoria, for example, Wilson instructed his non-autistic performers to imitate Knowles’s movements and vocal delivery. In Knowles’s speech, words and phrases often came across as devoid of emotional affect. More attention was paid to the pure sound of language, which fascinated Wilson. Wilson instructed his non-autistic performers to speak in a mode that was based in part on Knowles’s own vocal patterns, and in part on the influences of minimalist music. Einstein’s Phillip Glass or composer Steve Reich’s work with subtle chord progressions over extended time in highly repetitive structures provide strong examples of this style. The presumed irony of Wilson’s stage direction for Letter is that Knowles’s presence in this piece appeared more live, more full, than did any other performer’s.

This heightened presence belies the false stereotype about autistic individuals that they are absent in interactions with others. The distillation of language in Letter transformed Wilson’s non-autistic performers into automatons, while Knowles was fully present and fluent in the abstract phrases he helped create. This apparent paradox—that Knowles’s autistic sensibility appeared as the most present presence in Wilson’s early operas—troubles stereotypical assumptions about autistic speech as empty or void. Although communication with others is often a challenge for those on the autism spectrum due to difficulties in reading affect or body language, this should never imply a lack of presence or a desire to be isolated. Wilson’s non-autistic actors borrowed this stereotype of affectless speech to create a group phenomenon of automatism on stage.
WILSON AND AUTISM

Wilson’s interest in autism might also have implications that reach beyond his personal history and his work with Knowles. A number of the protagonists featured in Wilson’s productions have various cognitive disabilities. In an anonymous review of Thomas West’s 1997 *In the Mind’s Eye*, the online staff writer observes that this book “never mentions autism (referring instead to ‘dyslexia’ and ‘learning difficulties’) but many of the people profiled are possibly autistic. Profiles include Faraday, Maxwell, Einstein, Dodgson, Poincaré, Edison, Tesla, da Vinci, Churchill, Patton, and Yeats.” It might be more accurate to suggest that a few of these notables were known to have what we now recognize as autistic tendencies. Wilson’s operas have featured three of the thinkers included on this list. *Einstein on the Beach* contains both a physical representation of the brilliant physicist and an aesthetic approach that features an autistic ability to make everything mathematically precise, repetitive, and densely patterned. In *Edison* (1979), Wilson’s love of intricate and expressive stage lighting pays full tribute to this inventor. Edison’s deafness also harkens back to Wilson’s 1970 work with Raymond Andrews in *Deafman Glance*. Wilson’s *Alice* (1992) focuses less on Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* character, and more on its creator, Charles Dodgson. Dodgson was apparently a “life-long stutterer,” and was no doubt of personal interest to Wilson in this respect. Granted, I am not trying to paint all points on the autism spectrum as akin to savant existence, just as I would not claim autistic behavior for all of Wilson’s characters. While Wilson’s choice of these particular historical figures may be purely coincidental, I find it noteworthy that these individuals had learning differences. I both applaud Wilson’s interest in autism as an alternative mode of perception and duly acknowledge his potential artistic exploitation of disabled performers in his collaborative work with them. Lennard Davis’s notion of the “dismodern” serves in Wilson’s work with Knowles as a means to an end; autism is a difference that re-lenses the way an audience sees the stage. Under the rubric of “avant-garde art,” Wilson translates what he perceives as Knowles’s autistic interaction with the world for international audiences. As with any translation, Wilson gives us his interpretation of autistic perception, which is no doubt an interpretation that misses some things and misrepresents others.

I would like to take a moment to focus more specifically on autism and Wilson’s relationship to this particular disability. Although critics rightfully question the veracity of Internet posts, curated sites on the Internet can provide useful information about autism from both experiential and medical perspectives. Contributors to websites such as “autistics.org” offer an embodied knowledge about this disability. In “Don’t Mourn for Us,” autistic advocate Jim Sinclair writes that:

> Autism isn’t something a person *has*, or a ’shell’ that a person is trapped inside. There’s no normal child hidden behind the autism. Autism is a way of being. It is *pervasive*; it colors every experience, every sensation, perception, thought, emotion, and encounter, every aspect of existence. It is not possible to separate
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the autism from the person—and if it were possible, the person you’d have left
would not be the same person you started with.\(^9\)

Robert Wilson’s use of Christopher Knowles as a muse for his early work gives
credence to Sinclair’s statement. This director did not necessarily go in search of
autism as an artistic approach. Wilson apparently saw in Knowles a unique experiential
knowledge and cognitive perception that harmonized with his own artistic pursuits.
Although language was a large element of his work with Knowles, there are other
representational structures that this autistic perspective changed in equally radical
ways. Time, space, movement, and technology are points of intense intersection
between Wilson and portions of the autistic community. Wilson connected with
Knowles for very specific, idiosyncratic reasons that fed his impulses to control
language and space on stage.

SPATIAL THINKING AND LANGUAGE

For some autistic individuals, space takes a priority as a means of engagement. In
her article, “Being a Spatial Thinker,” Amanda Baggs describes in detail how autism
has shaped every aspect of her experience:

I am very good at spatial things…. Spatial thinking is a way of organizing
things in my head. …I do not think with language. …Linguistic things are not
natural to me. Spatial things are more natural, and the thing that is most natural
is non-symbolic whatsoever.

…I have several internal spatial maps of my mind, which vary according to
situation. …These models are all manifestations of one model that I have.
However, it does not translate easily into a three-dimensional and linguistic
representation. It is almost like a four-dimensional (or more) object intersecting
with three-dimensional space.\(^{10}\)

For Baggs, representation itself is tied to spatial definition. All discourse is affected
by an ability to spatialize. If linguistic concepts cannot be spatialized in retentive
ways, Baggs cannot command these concepts. Her experience with language
connects with Robert Wilson’s creative process in the spatial mapping of conceptual
and linguistic thinking.

When asked about his work (either in retrospect or with a current project),
Wilson’s first response is to find paper and pencil to draw pictures of his ideas. This
consistent reaction is noted by all of Wilson’s biographers. Spatial thinking is one of
his trademarks. His theatre is most often referred to as a theatre of images rather than
words or dance or song, although his operas include all of these things. It is important
to recognize, however, that not all individuals on the autism spectrum process
communication in spatial terms. For some, an auditory modality works far better.
Even Amanda Baggs, who self-identifies as a spatial thinker, has online testimonies
such as “In My Language,” which is posted with its own translation.\(^{11}\) She can fairly
easily move back and forth across the dividing line between conventional language use and something that more closely resembles music or architecture.

Baggs claims that she “…once met an autistic woman who could sing out the tonal aspects of a conversation without saying a single word,” and Baggs understood this woman’s conversation entirely. Part of why she understood what most would find nonsensical was, as Baggs explains, “precisely because that is how my mind most readily processes conversations.” She goes on to clarify that:

Language patterns, however, are merely the tip of a larger and far more interesting iceberg. Everything I perceive—from the movements of my body to the smells in the air—goes into my mind and sifts itself into similar kinds of patterns. Some of them correspond to what other people are usually aware of, and some of them don’t. I consider these patterns and connections to be more my language than the words that appear on the screen when I let my fingers use the keyboard. And far more my language than the words that have popped out of my mouth throughout my life. They are how the world makes sense to me. Anything else is just the artifact of a shoddy translation. (3 of 8)

For Baggs, language is less a rational system for constructing meaning and more a series of phonetic and spatial images that follow patterns. As she attests, “This is why I was able to work out which words go with which responses long before I was able to work out the meaning of the words and why—to this day—my ability to fit words into familiar patterns outstrips my ability to understand the words themselves” (3 of 8). Baggs’s language and sensory perception thus follows a consistent, but unconventional, process of pairing meaning with sounds.

TRANSLATING DISABILITY

In a 1982 interview with Arthur Bartow, Wilson says of Knowles, “Christopher was totally involved with organizing words in geometrical ways, with arranging them architecturally the way music is arranged, and was quite stubborn in his determination to speak or to write, verbalize himself this way. Hence, he was institutionalized, and they were trying to correct it. What I did was to simply take him from the institution and say, ‘Great! It’s fantastic what you’re doing. It’s beautiful. I support it, and I’d like to learn more about it.’ And I incorporated what he was doing in my work.” Wilson took on these perspectives as new ways of seeing, new means to see what had not been seen before. Wilson no doubt took the liberties familiar to most translators of any language who try to approximate a meaning structure across the divides of multiple word systems.

Wilson’s early productions are different from many other twentieth-century artistic representations of disability because they start in a place where disability is the norm, in translation or otherwise. All avenues of perception, cognition, reason, and action begin in a space of mental and physical alterity. Wilson invites his audience into worlds that are deaf, worlds whose language is scrambled, worlds
that present the schizophrenia of contemporary existence, worlds that change the perceptual length of a single minute, and worlds that never take any mental thought or physical movement for granted. Wilson’s theatre starts from these places. It is a theatre that employs what Disability Scholars in Performance Studies have called a “disability aesthetic.”

**PROCESS AND PRODUCTION**

Wilson’s use of disability exists as much in the process of producing as in the product itself. He used actors who were disabled for his early works, but he made their disabilities an aesthetic starting point rather than a representational marketing tool. Christopher Knowles’s cognitive differences are only recognizable in conversation or in close visual observation of his physical movements. Knowles is the master of his own form of poetry, and Wilson credits this ability. But until this actor opens his mouth on stage, the audience does not necessarily mark him visually as impaired. His written language patterns reflect ways of processing verbal information as pictures. Much as Amanda Baggs does, autistic authors Temple Grandin and Donna Williams visualize concepts and make pictures in their minds as a way to understand speech and to construct meaning from language. Grandin has a kind of photographic memory for space and image. I will discuss her spatial imaging in more depth in a later chapter. Wilson shares this need to draw images, to use storyboards rather than words. His and theirs is a language of pictures, what he calls “visual music.”

**VISUAL MUSIC IN SPACE**

In keeping with this visual orchestra, Knowles’s autistic use of language as a repetitive series of sounds introduced Wilson to the concept of words as pure sound rather than principally cognitive elements. Wilson appreciated Knowles’s ability to turn language and visual imagery into a more numerically arranged system. Knowles could look at written phrases and rearrange the words or letters to form geometric sculptures. Letters were quite literally building blocks, units of both musical and architectural construction. Although language was a large part of Wilson’s work with Knowles, other stage elements also changed in equally radical ways.

For example, Wilson’s operas celebrate a primacy of space and a suspension of temporality. His construction of action sequences is often non-causal, involving instead an atemporal sequence of visual images. Here we find a loose homology: many autistic children visualize single frames one at a time, processing one thought at a time, rather than creating a comprehensive story. Stage images are repeated in many of Wilson’s productions in lieu of causality, and their repetition becomes the only structural marker of continuity. Does this mean that Wilson creates all of his productions from an experiential knowledge of autistic behavior and perception? No, and I would never go so far as to argue that extreme. However, there are similarities,
homologies if you will, between this director’s methods and aspects of Knowles’s cognitive processes.

Wilson’s operas often originate in countries where his direction requires an interpreter and/or the final product employs languages that Wilson does not speak. I found myself listening to the Swedish actors in Wilson’s 2001 Brooklyn Academy of Music production of Strindberg’s A Dream Play with more attention to the sound of their native language—for example—than the sense of its delivery, which never directly matched the translation posted above their heads on the stage. Words and bodies existed in the same physical space, but were oddly distanced from each other. The repetition of words and movements in a single scene offered a moment of recognition, relief in an appearance of the known.

Wilson took the things about Knowles’s speech and social interaction that made him different and normalized these attributes within the structure of his operas. The whole concept of automatic speech and movement gets thrown into relief as dancers spin in A Letter for Queen Victoria while other performers speak sentence fragments in non-dialogic dialogues or simultaneous non-sequiturs. These sound much like overheard bits of conversation that collectively form a stage fabric of noise and action. The overarching images for Wilson’s set in this piece include a courtroom (one of his favorites, and it takes on a larger prominence in Einstein), a prison, a war-ravaged landscape (complete with Knowles, who flies in from the wings claiming to be an airplane), and a garden party where silent people gesticulate furiously with hand movements before breaking into what amounts to a word salad. In this particular production, Wilson used Knowles’s approach to language as the organizing principle and Knowles’s autistic presence as the primary source of liveness on the stage. Whereas he literally disappears in Einstein, Knowles is the one performer who fits into Letter’s linguistic mesh. It is as if all movement and action were lifted from another context and voided of its original language and meaning. Now new language fills the void and is extra-sensical by conventional standards in both contextual and syntactical ways. Movements are seemingly symbolic, but the context for reading them is absent, so they remain as empty signifiers, consciously cluttering the stage space.

As Ralph Savarese writes in conversation with autistic author Tito Rajarshi Mukhopadhyay, “Both in your ‘tangential perception’ and your way with language, …the object, or signified, is not completely mastered by the word, or signifier. [Thus]…everything seems much less fixed and settled in your work, thereby allowing for surprise and fresh insights.”

Amanda Baggs’s ability to arrange words in familiar patterns by “…perceiving connections without force-fitting a set of thoughts on top of them” employs a similar separation of signifier and signified that rearranges these connections in alternative ways. Savarese indicates a kind of breath in Mukhopadhyay’s writing that allows and encourages the reader to wander through his words, as if the words populate the space in a relaxed time frame that makes room for new meanings. In A Letter for Queen Victoria, autism serves as a new spatial, linguistic, and temporal order—one in which Christopher
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Knowles is both a co-author and the realest reality within a framework of re-articulated language. The danger here is, of course, that Wilson may be too closely pairing postmodern minimalist approaches to language or music with autistic experience. Although, Savarese commits a similar artificial overlay of poetry and autism when he suggests that: “Perhaps the medium of poetry best captures with its interruptive force the rapt attention of autistic engagement” in his interview with Mukhopadhyay.19 Perhaps autism represents, rather, a set of experiences that parallel certain trends in postmodern artistry that attempt to breathe poetic space into language, that loop and slow down time, or that reimagine space as a continuum of repetitive moments.

AUTISTIC PARALLELS IN EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH

In Einstein on the Beach, Wilson plays with these sorts of parallels. His performers speak in the same tones of neutrality found in television advertisements or the rehearsed banter of airline stewards. Their repetition of number sequences, musical solfège (do, re, mi, fa, so, la, ti, do), and minimalist note phrases is truly mesmerizing. All of what at first appears random quickly seems painstakingly planned, both musically and choreographically, in this piece. The music is so continuous that Wilson’s singers must practice circular breathing in order to ensure no breaks in the sound. In one of the character Einstein’s appearances, he sits playing continuous violin accompaniment, and viewers may appreciate the stringed instrument as one that needs no breath. This song’s relentless repetition of notes and patterns feels like a very active vocal conversation that seems improvised but is actually highly structured. Minimalist music is mathematically precise, which goes far beyond composer Philip Glass’s use of numbers as part of the score for this piece. At best, it is a repetitive methodical madness disguised as ultimate control. As you might imagine, when this cacophony pauses, the silence is the emptiest of empty spaces and comes out of nowhere.

This kind of cybernetic exactitude in Wilson’s productions does not make the performers immune to their surroundings or fellow artists, however, and this may be one clear point of departure from various autism narratives that cite difficulties with interpersonal communication. Inter-actor connections are crucial to the overall functionality of Wilson’s productions. Without this timed blocking and precise motion, his performers would quite literally collide. Wilson’s theatre establishes “physiopsychic relationships” between the performers as one means of avoiding injury or otherwise.20 These relationships extend to the props and set pieces on Wilson’s stages. In a sense, the human element is given no more importance than the various design elements, and Wilson makes these inert physical objects come to life while lending his human performers a more mechanical function within the stage picture. Performers and musicians work as an ensemble to create an interactive communications network. The objects within this space hold equal status as performative items within the pictorial and sonic stage environment. In Einstein, we
again see the courtroom and the prison, joined by a giant classroom, a beach scene, a train, and a spaceship.

Lucinda Childs (left) in Einstein on the Beach. Photo credit: Patrick Bensard.

Each scene and set arrangement return with slight differences several times; for instance, the courtroom returns in the second half of the piece with an oversized bed, and literally pokes fun at popular culture’s admixture of juridical procedures and bedroom politics.

Knowles wrote much of the text in Einstein, but did not appear on stage for any part of this show. The lack of his physical presence in this larger work eradicates any moments of unrehearsed live sensation in the midst of Wilson’s heavily programmed automatons. In Wilson’s early operas, disabled collaborators and performers such as Knowles helped fashion a unique aesthetic that Wilson has retained throughout his career, even when he stopped relying on their live presence. The use of repetition, words as sounds, poetic or pictorial space, and an equal emphasis on all stage elements are among the tools that Wilson brings into any new production. If one were to categorize or label Wilson’s use of this performance mode, one might say that his characters live in a constant state of dismodern disconnect. Language has failed them in its normative usage, time is looped and locates them in a continuous present, and image repetition is the guiding organizational principle.

MULTIPICITY IN WILSON’S OPERA

Wilson’s use of input from collaborators with disabilities has always involved a sharing of ideas and methods that purportedly benefits all of the parties involved. Actors working with Wilson are trained by his process to be capable of doing multiple
simultaneous physical and verbal actions. Wilson uses this technique to encourage both his actors and the audience to think simultaneously on multiple levels without distraction. In this multiplicity, a space opens in the brain that allows for dreamlike perception where the periphery becomes the focus. Whether it is a remapping of the soundscape in a silent Deafman Glance or a primacy of circular motion and word salad in A Letter for Queen Victoria, Wilson takes different modes of perception as points of departure for what we can now refer to as a dismodern aesthetic.

Clearly, Wilson supported cognitive difference in part because it let him do unprecedented innovative work on the stage. Donna Williams describes her autistic perspective as “a culture looking for a place to happen.” Wilson created such a place on stage for Christopher Knowles, and in doing so, brought disability into conversation with cutting edge artistic movements of the late twentieth century, possibly before the art world was ready to hear these voices as dismodern rather than postmodern.

Whereas A Letter for Queen Victoria was a flop on Broadway, Einstein was hailed as a crucial contribution to the twentieth century. What does it mean that an essentially autistic opera became such an emblem? Wilson changed spatial and temporal definitions just as Einstein did. He chose autism as the grounds for a new aesthetic in part because he saw autistic behavior as an appropriate response to the chaos of contemporary industrial life, just as Antonin Artaud and the Surrealists of the 1930s embraced madness as a strategy of resistance to the stifling conformity of the bourgeois society of that era. I end with a tribute to Christopher Knowles’s words that helped make Robert Wilson famous for his best known piece, Einstein on the Beach:

Will it get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get for it is.
It could get the railroad for these workers. And it could be were it is.
It could Franky it could be Franky it could be very fresh and clean.
It could be a balloon.
Oh these are the days my friends and these are the days my friends.
It could get some wind for the sailboat. And it could get for it is.
It could get the railroad for these workers. It could get for it is were.
It could be a balloon. It could be Franky. It could be very fresh and clean.
All these are the days my friends and these are the days my friends.
It could be those ways.
NOTES

1 According to Anne M. Donnellan, David A. Hill, and Martha R. Leary, “Many people now understand that echolalia is neither always meaningless nor always meaningful; rather it serves a variety of pragmatic functions on a sociolinguistic continuum. Although sometimes not intentional, echolalia may be used intentionally by many who lack other strategies for communicating to maintain relationships, improve their comprehension of spoken language and to express meaning. … Acknowledgements to a person’s efforts to accommodate, improvise and create meaning is a cause for celebration and an opportunity to improve communication and boost self esteem.” “Rethinking Autism: Implications of Sensory and Movement Differences,” Disability Studies Quarterly 30:1 (2010), 17 of 32.


4 Wilson’s vision begins within a space of appreciation for disabled realities, and yet his reference to circus dimensions is one that possibly ties him to both Joseph Chaikin’s late work with playwright John Belluso, Body Pieces (2001) and to other disabled theatre practitioners. Chaikin incorporated a circus motif in this work by using one-legged actress Anita Hollander as a mermaid and an apparently non-disabled actor, Wayne Maugans, as a circus Barker. For a discussion of Chaikin and Belluso’s piece, see my article, “Freakery and Prosthetic Actuality in Joseph Chaikin’s Body Pieces,” Disability Studies Quarterly 25:3 (Summer 2005) or the chapter, “Chaikin’s Body Pieces: Prosthetic Legs and Missing Words” in my 2009 book, Performing Disability: Staging the Actual (VDM, 2009).


8 Thomas G. West, In the Mind’s Eye: Visual Thinkers, Gifted People with Dyslexia and Other Learning Difficulties (New York: Prometheus Books, 1997), 133.

9 Jim Sinclair’s controversial essay “Don’t Mourn for Us” can be found at http://www.autreat.com/dont_mourn.html.


12 Arthur Bartow interview with Robert Wilson, 1982, courtesy of Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

13 Petra Kuppers and Carrie Sandahl are two other noted scholars working at the intersection of Disability Studies and Performance Studies who reference this term.

14 Sylvère Lotringer interview with Robert Wilson, 1978, courtesy of Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.


18 Savarese, “More Than a Thing to Ignore,” 4 of 23.

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22 Christopher Knowles, “Knee Play 1,” Character 2, *Einstein on the Beach* manuscript, courtesy of Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library.