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Freaks and not freaks: Theatre and the making of crip identity

ON SOME LEVEL it seems obvious that some disabled actors will want to explore the history of freak show performances. To replicate a performance form that neither performer nor audience have experienced has the frisson of an historical re-enactment. Somewhere, people *who looked like you* were stared at as *freaks* by the audience. What would that have been like? For the freaks? For the spectator? This essay is an attempt to engage with the multiple possibilities of engagement and identity that are bound up in the idea of the freak shows, acting and spectatorship.

From their very earliest days, Graeae Theatre Company, a UK company artistically led by disabled people, have explored and used freak show images: their first piece, *Sideshow*, played wittily and angrily with the ways in which disabled people are enfreaked in their everyday lives. A more recent piece by Graeae, *The last freak show* engages with disability as a performance tradition. Disability theatre has developed a relationship with the freak show, and this

has been explored in many performances in the UK and the USA. The freak show has also been used theatrically outside the boundaries of disability theatre, and I will be looking briefly at Tennessee Williams' atmospheric freak show play *The mutilated* to explore the possibilities of the connections between theatre, stigma and the proto-cripple identity.

The freak show is cited and quoted in the work of disabled performers, and in this essay I start to consider the uses of the cultural trope of the freak show in disability theatre. I want to consider the ways in which disability and freaks mutually alter each other. I consider some of the implications of the notion of the freak show for a performative elaboration of disabled bodies. I also speculate about the possibility that disability theatre formalises the relationship between performer and spectator, overwriting more difficult, problematic, contingent relationships in favour of a performative construction of the disabled person and the disabling society.

The constraints of space here prevent me from synthesising anything of the superb range of histories and cultural criticism of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century freak show or circus side-show. Freak show scholarship may be said to overshadow the work that I analyse here without having a physical presence in this piece of writing, and this starts to communicate the very point of my argument. Freak show scholarship has in many diverse ways infused important debates in feminist theory, theatre and performance studies, literary criticism and film studies. In keeping with the breadth and diversity of the debates that span multiple disciplines, I have chosen to introduce critical utterances that at various stages problematise my approach to theatre and the figure of the freak.

What is a freak show?

In the subtitle of his book *Freak Show*, Robert Bogdan refers to a tradition of "presenting human oddities for amusement and profit" (1988). The freak show offers the discourse of the museum, with its attendant colonialism and scientism, the phoney claim that the display of human diversity may contribute to knowledge. This is placed alongside the tawdry glitter of the capitalist industrial entertainment that was the travelling circus sideshow: the possibilities of making big profits by earning small change from the curiosity of the masses.

Tod Browning's film *Freaks* is a familiar and accessible text about the freak show. *Freaks* tries to capture sideshow performances as ordinary actions within the diegesis of the movie. The act of drinking wine with your foot, or rolling and lighting a cigarette with only your mouth were central to the sideshow acts of the performers. Within the narrative of the film, these acts are presented as incidental and mundane, but within the freak show and also within the film itself they would have been the point of the whole performance.

This is a key element of the freak show: the boundary between being and performing is eroded. The anomalous body provides the occasion for the performance. In a discussion of the monstrous and the freak show, Margrit Shildrick emphasises the point of the distinction between the banal content of the action of a freak show and the way that it was framed to render it novel:

The point is that freak shows were *productions* which staged not 'real life' as such, but more or less meticulously contrived spectacles, which encouraged viewers to think and see in terms of various binary distinctions between "them" and "us" (Shildrick 2002:24).

For Shildrick, the significant act or action takes place at the level of the spectator. The meticulously contrived spectacle sets up a dynamic, disturbing (and pleasurable) set of connections and speculations between the categories that already exist as part of the mechanics of viewing, thinking and perceiving difference.

The last freakshow

Let me first examine an example of the citing or quoting of the popular performance tradition. In *The last freakshow* (Kenny 2002), the performers in a financially troubled circus side-show meet to celebrate the year 2000 with their final performance. The characters are played by disabled actors, each of whom have twisted their own specific impairments into some sort of freak show attraction. The ringmaster, Gustav Drool, mediates between performers and between performers and audience and offers the main point of movement and focus as he interprets, frames and explains. As he introduces the freaks, he addresses the audience directly, claiming a kinship with impaired people in history. He also claims to be a messenger, speaking for disabled people of the past in the first person singular:

GUSTAV: To cut a long story short, and not wanting to rub your noses in it – I've been enslaved, incarcerated, mocked and ignored. I've been experimented on, sterilised and gassed and I'm currently gazing through the bars at the paint cracking on orphanage walls from Bow to Beijing. I guess you could say I was pissed off . . . and I still haven't got to give me message. (Pause) Well this is your last chance. This is the message. But it's in code (Kenny 2002:229).



*Garry Robson as Gustavo Drool in The last freak show.
(Photo: Joel Fildes)*

Gustav is a messenger for culture and a representative of history. Questions about autobiography and personal narrative fill the space that seems to have been created for spectacle. Photographs of real historical freak show performers are projected and discussed by the characters as if they were family members. History is truncated. The history of the diegetic performers and the past freak show performers is the same. The difference is that the form of the freak show is dying. The popularity, the *celebrity* of the past freaks is contrasted with the financial failure of the present day freaks. The performers in the last freak show look back: what has gone wrong, and why is the freak show dying? In performance, as the cast gather round projected images for their family history session, the black and white images of the real past freaks produce a frisson of excitement in the audience. The bodies of the live actors are disabled people, and they are trying to perform freakishness. But they are not freaks. Fictional anecdotes connect the past freaks (the real freaks) with the disabled actors. But in the diegetic world it isn't enough to make the performance form viable or popular. In this fiction, the freak show is always at the point of receding into the past.

Christian the wobbling boy is accompanied by a mirror alter-ego, referred to throughout as his brother, Gilbert. Gilbert, we learn, walks and talks, and, unlike Christian, doesn't wobble. Gilbert is in the Army, whereas Christian is a freak show performer. The part was created by the actor Jamie Beddard, whose movement is affected by cerebral palsy. In photographic images, his impairment is not at all apparent. The "twins" conceit makes theatrical the nature of Beddard's impairment and creates a binary between two ways of reading Christian – as movement or as image.

One of the most important influences on Graeae's work through-

out its thirty-year history is the social model of disability. This considers disability as a form of inequality that is created and maintained by society and culture. Its aim is to eradicate the attitudinal and physical barriers that stand in the way of disabled people and their full participation in society. Disability criticism considers the various ways in which notions of disability in art and culture are used and abused to maintain the power differences between disabled and non-disabled people. To associate disability with the monstrous, the evil or the unusually saintly is to prevent others from responding straightforwardly to the individual. The use of disability as metaphor is one example of the preoccupations of disability criticism. Here, in a private moment that is not addressed to the audience, Christian talks to his mirror-twin about therapy, and about the reality that might lie beneath the freak show image:

CHRISTIAN (talks to mirror image): Gilbert [...]

I've been doing therapy lately

I've done all sorts.

I've located my inner child

But it won't speak to me.

I mean. Nobody's right are they?

Lately, I've been locating my inner cripple.

I haven't told Avia because she'll think its metaphorical.

It isn't.

My therapist says, you've got to look past the outer casing to see the real person.

The therapist helps find the true you.

I mean you might be a paraplegic, but the inner you, might be totally paralysed (Kenny 2002:241).

Christian offers a chance to reject the reading of disability as metaphor, and also to upset the assumption that the freak show image is either straightforwardly false or straightforwardly truthful. The wobbling boy may be created to dupe the spectator, to frame the actor as freak and to perform simply being. However, the gap between the character and his mirror image provides the specular distance that allows the character to analyse himself, to see himself as other than he seems to others, or to himself. This brief solo conversation opens up some of the possibilities that the one-way conversations between disabled people and freaks may reveal.

Theatre Studies and Spectatorship

If theatre studies really has a disciplinary perspective, then it is grounded in the exercise of critical extrapolation and model making. There is a perpetual uncertainty about the object of investigation, and the act of positioning the speaker and directing the critical act is a gargantuan effort that often exceeds the potential of the argument.

Questions of intention and reception, meaning and interpretation, are opened to critical scrutiny from every perspective. The act of creating a performance involves, of course, a process of scrutinising human behaviour, an aesthetic and analytical model for rendering such behaviour into art, and a profound empathy and speculation about the ways in which an audience might respond to that which is shown onstage. At the centre of the discipline, in all its concerns with reception, is the profoundly humanist and liberal supposition that you will respond as I respond: as a director, what I create onstage must please you if it pleases me, must communicate to you if it is legible to me. You and I are more or less the same, at least to the point where we can converse and share ideas through theatre.

The conventions of behaviour and representation, and the aesthetic or stylistic elements that frame and contain these conventions, might be those we could call universal or truthful, if we could imagine forgetting all the works of post-structural theory we have ever read. But, as Susan Sontag warned, "None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory". (Sontag 2009:4) Surrounding the centre of this humanist disciplinary perspective are the layers of attempts – full libraries of these – to employ critical and cultural theories to blast away at the foundations of this empathetic nucleus.

In her book *Staring: how we look*, disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, places discursive brackets around an element of her book. The humanist empathy that I need to make or to write about theatre, Garland-Thomson uses in order to write about the human response to anomalous bodies. Quite reasonably, since she has no wish to expend either the limited word budget or the argumentative force of her work on material that is not her focus, she explains that she has adopted, for the sake of the fluency and structure of her argument, the "invitational we" (Garland-Thomson 2009:10). This theatrical positioning is at the centre of the humanist engagement. It is the mode of investigation and also the object of inquiry.

Garland-Thomson invokes Erving Goffman who, throughout *Stigma: The management of a spoiled identity*, addresses the reader in terms that oblige us to share a critical and experiential perspective. Goffman's work is one of the common foundations of both disability and performance studies. Throughout *Stigma* Goffman addresses the reader as "we normals" and he collects together those with:

Abominations of the body – the various physical deformities. Next there are blemishes of individual character perceived as weak will,

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domineering or unnatural passions, treacherous and rigid beliefs, and dishonesty, these being inferred from a known record of, for example, mental disorder, imprisonment, addiction, alcoholism, homosexuality, unemployment, suicidal attempts, and radical political behaviour (Goffman 1990:14).

Goffman's *Stigma* was published in 1963, a mere two years before Tennessee Williams' play. The construction of a dramatic framework for the perception of stigma is the principal form of *The mutilated*. For Williams, the diegetic world offers no escape, but the uneasy alliances between alcoholics, thieves, prostitutes and disabled people create a powerful, compelling and disturbing world.

The repetition of the first person plural, the phrase "we normals" in Goffman's book feels increasingly satirical as the book proceeds and we recognise the tenuous nature of a coherent and normal identity. In order to engage with the argument, we must put up with the positioning in which we are all together, all unanimously engaged in the stigmatising of human oddities.

For the sake of the argument we must submit to this positioning. Both Goffman and Garland-Thomson seek to invoke a tension between the average and the knowing onlooker. If Garland-Thomson says that "we" stare, for example, at a person with facial disfigurement, or if Goffman says that "we" regard people with non-mainstream political views as stigmatised, what they are each creating is an audience to substantiate their social critique. There is a form of interpellation in which "we" confess to a perspective in order to critique and indeed challenge it. It seems reasonable to suggest that this perspective is a form of empathetic social role-play, and that this is the precise issue at the centre of theatre studies methodologies.

It is a boring truism that theatre needs an audience in order to be theatre. Is it the case that the appropriation of tropes of freak show performance needs an audience to respond spontaneously in a live moment? Or does the live audience merely stand in for the "invitational we", a collective that exists only for the sake of a theatrical argument about difference and inequality? Some feminist writing of the 1980s is lampooned for the habit of stating "As a feminist..." or "As a woman and a mother and a circus performer, I ...", implying that the identification of an identity position offers an explanation for and ownership of the analytical position that she articulates. The invitational "we" runs counter to the impulse of queer theory and its close relation, Crip Theory. We are disabled people who imagine that under some circumstances we are "they" to others.

In his book, *Staging stigma: a critical examination of the American freak show*, Michael M. Chemers claims that "[Garland-]Thomson's rigorous humanistic investigation has incited a new category of scholarship, a growing lineage of serious writings that investigate freakery not solely as the victimisation of a disenfranchised minority but rather as a highly specialised and potentially liberating form of performance art." He goes on to claim that, "Although not every disabled body in performance is freakery, every disabled body in performance (on stage or in everyday interaction) enters into some kind of dialogue with the perceived history of the freak show" (Chemers 2008:25). These are powerful claims, and I am entirely happy to concede the importance of freak shows to disability culture, but with one proviso: that we look carefully at the audience, as well as at the freak, that we engage carefully in the interpellative acts that occur in the act of making theatre.

Disability seeks to reorder, but it is profoundly against disorder. At some level, disability is always administrative. Disorder is the

province of freaks, the uncanny and the abjected. Freaks are theatrical and powerful, and are always collected into some sort of ensemble in the contemporary imagination of them. Disabled people are ordinary, and that is the point of social model perspectives. The disabled person who is interested in freaks – or interested in being a freak – has become fascinated with the power of their own presence in the visual field. But "freak" is not straightforwardly a political identity. Freaks may be the distorted shadows of the effects of the stare, but they are not a solution or a negotiation of a new form of political existence. Instead, they offer a chance to disturb the categories that disable, and to disturb disability itself.

The imagined past popularity of the circus side show or freak show contrasts strikingly with the lack of popularity of disability theatre which is, by its nature, small-scale and fairly low budget. One of the subjects of the freak show play is the invocation of past popular audiences. The play addresses past prurience and past prejudices which, through the act of repeating and performing, arcs over into the audience of today. "We", the audience, are addressed as punters. We are invited to stare, we are told about our responses to these visibly anomalous bodies. Often it is a bad fit. In a piece of disability theatre what must the disabled spectator do in order to think of the familiar bodies on the stage as somehow freakish and disturbing? If one is a disabled person, it may be unusual but wonderful to gaze at a person with a similar impairment to one's own. Faced with the elusive mirror for one's own body, the disabled spectator may well simultaneously read and re-read their own positioning in term of novelty and familiarity, identity, similitude and difference.

To invoke the idea of freaks is to choose a past and to create a specific moment of genesis for the noticing of spectator positions. The freak show offers a cipher for the mediation between audience

and performer. The use of the freak show persuades the audience to look at impaired bodies with interest, with desire mixed with horror, and with boredom mixed with disgust. Even if the audience resists this persuasion, the performance ignores this and addresses them into the position of freak show audience. The invocation of the "we" in both Goffman and Garland-Thomson is an attempt to draw us in, to draw us towards that which is both unusual, freakish, monstrous, and also part of us.

Freaks and not freaks

In an extended discussion of the political possibilities of the notion of the freak show, Feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz explains what she means when she talks about freaks. She uses the term, she says, as a political gesture, as something "*roughly equivalent to 'queer'*"; a term which might function as an act of defiance, a "political gesture of self-determination" (Grosz 1996:56). She then goes on to describe the people she wishes to include, and those she wishes to positively exclude from her analysis. She does this in the following passage. I quote at length here because it enumerates the negative examples, and its effect is cumulative:

First, let me clarify what I do *not* mean by the term: I wish to exclude from my discussion the more commonplace bodily infirmities and deficiencies – those born with non-functional or improperly functional limbs and organs, the blind, those who are unable to walk, and those with cerebral palsy and other medical disorders. While these persons may be as or more disabled than those categorised as freaks, they do not exert the same ambivalent appeal. [...]. The term *freaks* does not simply refer to disabilities of either a genetic, developmental, or contingent kind. Indeed some classified

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as freaks (such as the bearded lady or the human skeleton) are not necessarily physically incapacitated at all, although, of course, many are. [...]

The freak is thus neither unusually gifted nor unusually disadvantaged. He or she is not an object of *simple* admiration or pity, but is a being who is considered simultaneously and compulsively fascinating and repulsive, enticing and sickening (Grosz 1996:56).

Grosz expresses a wish to exclude the more commonplace bodily infirmities and deficiencies. This seems perfectly straightforward. If we are used to seeing a particular bodily form, then the impulse to simultaneously stare and look away is reduced. You cannot have a commonplace freak. With reduction in novelty value, the freak makes the transition from freak to not-freak and into the commonplace category of disability.

Grosz's careful selection is an attempt to use language to articulate the operation of other linguistic categories. Her goal is the increased disturbance and the creation of a radical indeterminacy of identity categories, for which she requires tight categories of identity. The operation of freakish bodies relies on the careful exclusion of disability and impairment because Grosz seeks to read freakish bodies in the light of other theoretical and political paradigms. The creation of a category that includes both conjoined twins and people with cerebral palsy upsets the disturbance of categories because the radical potential of these bodies cannot be focussed so precisely and effectively on the boundaries of other categories if it seems that another set of boundary laws operate upon them. In other words, identity politics can't be used to dismantle identity. Unless, of course, one finds a series of free floating bodies to signify without signification, to be the conduit for the analysis of the categories of sex and

gender, and the discovery of the failure of these categories. In this way Grosz establishes the freak as both a theatrical and a political figure. The disabled person is not and cannot be read in this way without shifting the spectatorial frame.

Wherever we believe that difference is *caused*, we resist the urge to indulge in the fascination and repugnance that is enjoyed when apprehending a freak. Freaks are stripped of their medical narratives. To Grosz, disabled people cannot be freaks. They are protected by legislation, studied by science and social science, medicine and disability studies. The scientists have tamed the freaks and created disabled people. Freaks, on the other hand, are a way of stepping back to a less enlightened time where our fear of the different and the ugly, the uncanny, the abject can have profound effects that sustain the boundaries of our own identities. The freak show holds a purpose in our comprehension of a terrible past in which pennies were paid at bedlam and Leo the dog-faced boy earned his living simply by *being* the body he was, and being present within the performance frame of the freak show. Disabled people are not freaks *unless they fascinate and appal us simultaneously*. Grosz is interested in the junction between freak and normal. For Goffman, normality is first person plural, "we normals". For Grosz, the normal is the second person, "you". In both cases the freak is a third person term.

The mutilated

If we perceive freakishness as a way of framing and interpreting certain bodies, then we need to consider that freaks are not necessarily the interpretative property of disabled critics and performers. In search of an example of freak images that are cut loose from disability, I would like to look briefly at one American play of the 1960s. Tennessee Williams' work offers several significant examples

for the use of impairment, and if I were offering a comprehensive survey of "images of disability", his work would deserve a separate chapter. From mental distress in *A streetcar named Desire* or *The night of the iguana* to intellectual impairment in *Suddenly last summer* through the clash between physical frailty and strength in *Kingdom of earth*, deafness in *A lovely sunday for Creve Coeur* or physical impairment in *The glass menagerie*, Williams demonstrates a consistent interest in and use of impairment on stage. The reason for mentioning him here, however, is because one of his late one-act plays evokes a nightmarish world of loss, pain and exile through the citation of freak show images, and this seems to offer a useful example to try analyses of the uses of freak shows outside the frame of disability.

An ensemble Christmas carol brings the audience into a non-realistic nightmare world of entrapment and exclusion:

I think the strange, the crazed, the queer
Will have their holiday this year
And for a while, A little while
There will be pity for the wild (Williams 2000:585).

The mutilated is an expressionistic leap into the world of Trinket Dugan, a wealthy woman who has been traumatised and ostracised through the removal of a breast. The illness that presumably led to this trauma is left unexplored, although Williams allows it to enter the play – literally – as a character who represents fate. The employment of his freak show images and the creation of the world of the exiles have such an excess of signification that the psychoanalytic material explored above seems to infuse every element of the play. At the same time, the play is undoubtedly of a kind with the pieces of work that Susan Sontag attacked in her polemic *Illness as metaphor* (1978).

Sontag argued strongly that it is morally impermissible to use cancer as metaphor, and Williams is doing precisely this in treating Trinket's recovering body as somehow scandalous. There is an evocation of cultural prejudices about bodies and behaviours that are invoked to develop a "non-realistic" world in which the stage world stands for a rejected category of living. Trinket's cancer and surgery stands as biological metaphor for the rejection of other forms of living. Williams also evokes the world of stigmatised living as a way of wallowing in the landscape of rejection and stigma.

The play never specifically addresses the idea that Trinket has recovered from cancer. The attempts to be non-specific are attempts to avoid direct address, to evoke a broad and dislocated world of isolation rather than the specific circumstances of a person who has experienced a specific disease. The play is composed of the sorts of metaphorical trappings that Sontag discusses when she explains that "the metaphorical trappings that deform the experience of having cancer have very real consequences [...] the metaphors and myths kill" (Sontag 2002:99). Celine, the alcoholic shoplifting prostitute (a description that emerges very clearly from Goffman), discovers that Trinket has been "mutilated" and, when Trinket refuses to be blackmailed, sings this song loudly as a threat of disclosure:

Sa-rah Bern-hardt had one leg.
 The oth-er was a wood-en peg.
 But good she did, yep, she did good,
 Clump-ing on a STUMP OF WOOD! (Williams 2000:611)

There is a feathered bird-girl too, a constructed freak show performer, who passes through the play without speaking. The song and the bird-girl add a backdrop of freak show performance. References

to freakishness and weirdness occur very regularly throughout the dialogue. The citation of a real-life performing amputee – Bernhardt in her later years – folds in a freak show reference in which, according to urban legend, the freak show proprietor P.T. Barnum is rumoured to have tried to buy Bernhardt's amputated leg from her.

The feathered "freak" and the woman recovering from a mastectomy are placed together on stage. All the roles involve the visual disturbance of the fabric of the ordinary or the realistic world. If we borrow Williams' word for this fictional world, we could say this: even when they are trying to be passed off as real, freaks are *nonrealistic*. They form an ensemble of characters, trapped by their differences in the non-realistic world of the "strange, the crazed, the queer", and offer a shift in the shape of the world. Sontag's anger at the injurious effects of the metaphorical use of cancer might be remembered at this point: real bodies meet fiction, but in many different ways.

Administrative Disability

At this point I need to look outside theatre for an example that helps me to focus on the articulation and control of spectatorial positioning. I have found one example that seemed at first not to rely on an assumption or performance of the audience's non-disabled identity. The Paralympics is the most famous international gathering of disabled athletes, and it draws audiences of millions for its international broadcasts. The ways in which disabled bodies are looked at is quite precisely organised. The event offers an ordered contemplation of types of corporeal divergence from *the usual human body*. This is a short quote from the Olympics website in which you will start to notice the Paralympics' way of distinguishing between classes of athlete for track and field events:

Athletes are classified in various classes, based on their type of disability:

Athletes with cerebral palsy are classified in classes 32 to 38. In classes 32 to 34, athletes compete in a wheelchair, and in classes 35 to 38 in an upright standing position.

Athletes with spinal cord injuries or other physical disabilities, other than cerebral palsy, are classified according to their mobility profile, in classes 51 to 54 for track events and 51 to 58 for throwing events. In these classes athletes compete in a wheelchair...¹

The ethos of the Paralympics offers an administrative model of disability – not precisely medical, it develops an articulation of ability and similitude that translates into a spectacle of sporting fairness. It holds something in common with the administrative designation of disability for the purposes of support, assistance and social benefits. The lists of functional abilities and disabilities somehow produce a formula to determine how much social support the individual disabled person is entitled to receive. Both involve an interpretation of bodies according to a schema of ability and normalcy.

Both of these models run sharply counter to the social model perspectives of disability politics and disability studies. In the social model, disability is the condition of being disabled by a non-disabled society. However, disability is also a self-chosen identity; it is one which can be celebrated. Disability culture and politics are at the forefront of attempts to challenge and question the assumed ubiquity of human autonomy, symmetry and anatomical normalcy.

The real-terms common ground between the older person with hearing loss, the young para-athlete with lower-limb prosthetics and the middle-aged person with a learning disability is not at all easy to imagine. For this to work, we need to generate a coalition

that is also a utopia. This is not possible within the prescriptive spectatorial framework of the Paralympics, or any administrative model of disability. The spectator is always supplied with biographical detail of the Paralympic athlete and the conceptual frame for watching the competition. Competitive achievement is subordinate to an overwhelming narrative of triumph over adversity. Recent billboard adverts in the UK for the 2012 Paralympic games involve images of athletes with captions, all of which refer to a dynamic of overcoming adversity:

Don't look at the legs, look at the records.
You can see it's a perfect throw. She doesn't need to.
Making a horse dance isn't easy. Without legs it's almost impossible.
400 metres in 46 seconds. Just with his arms.
He doesn't need feet. They'd only slow him down.²

Crip culture offers a chance to reverse the somewhat oppressive prevalence of assumed non-disabled normality. Rather than trying to integrate disabled people into a disabling world, there is an attempt to re-imagine the world as a diffuse, connected place that is made for real bodies and the real abilities and interests of its inhabitants. Rather than tightly control the spectatorial framework with ready-made interpretations, and so entirely unlike Paralympic cultures, Crip Theory seeks to challenge the fundamental fabric of society through the creation of a political and cultural utopia. The strategic similarities between queer and crip politics has been noted by a number of commentators, and especially by Robert McRuer, whose book *Crip Theory: cultural signs of queerness and disability* (2006) explores the common ground of these political movements.

When is a freak not a freak?

If a freak is regarded as a disabled person, s/he is removed from the uncertainty and prurience of complex spectator habits. Disability is an interpellation of both spectator and the non-spectacular body. When is a freak not a freak? When we respond to them in a simple way. When we read one meaning, disability, and not many meanings. When the body loses its ability to transform or disturb or appeal, it is not a freak body. When the signifier is tied to the signified (as if that were ever possible) there is no freakishness. An example of this would be: tragic car accident/wheelchair user or amputee /brave soldier. When our response to the body is to see beyond it or despite it, when we desire to treat or to palliate, or to fit it into a simple narrative of tragedy or triumph over adversity, then we are not looking at a freak. Impairment is the freakish bad conscience of disability within the context of any model.

The wish to disembody the freak from the commonplace disabled person seems initially trivial, but is exceedingly important. Grosz is looking for the possibility of using freakish bodies in a way that doesn't maintain the distinction between body and person. Unlike Goffman, Grosz doesn't attempt to imagine the attempts at integration or the denial of human rights. Like Goffman she assumes that we readers are not nor could ever be freaks, that we experience the vicarious pleasures of voyeurism when we see a freak. Or, rather, to borrow a move from the Social Model, it is our vicarious pleasure that *constitutes* freaks. But she has used freakish bodies to advance generalised theses about bodies in general.

I'd like to step away from freaks for a couple of paragraphs in order to explore another example that may be helpful in articulating my conclusion. In *Gender trouble*, Judith Butler analyses Foucault's account of the story of Herculine Barbin, an intersexed individual

(Butler, 1990: 98–102). Butler shows a careful response to the uses that we make of subjects who live as anomalies, but adds another speculative layer to her reading of Herculine, and to Foucault's reading of her. The point here is about spectatorial perspective. Foucault takes his own position as a reader of structures of power and regulation, and he uses Herculine to read his own theoretical perspective, finding in her body a form of unregulated *jouissance*. Foucault uses Herculine to create an emancipatory discourse where the regulative category of sex is disrupted by the presence of an intersexed individual. Butler and Foucault both see Herculine as an occasion on which to base an analysis of the formal qualities of binary sexual differences.

Butler, however, protests that Foucault imagines Herculine to feel unbounded, liberated joy at her freedom from the regulatory regime of sexual difference, as if somehow her existence performed and embodied a freedom which would be unimaginable without her. Butler claims that Herculine, of course, feels and suffers from the repressive effects of the regulatory regime. The relationship between the troubling or indeterminate individual and the social structures that she or he challenge requires much more engagement. The specular distance between the liberatory figure and the possibilities of freedom from regulation is an effect of a formal and theatrical context and distance.

I shall now speculatively impose the same structure upon the discussion of theatre and freaks. Is it possible that disabled actors in the twenty-first century disability theatre will use their perceptions of the changes won by disability rights movements to reclaim moments of freedom and joy in the act of performing one's own physical difference? The freak, made theatrical, is no longer a freak, but is a theatrical incorporation of their transformative possibili-

ties. Grosz and Butler are worrying away at the act of spectatorship that produces doubt and indeterminacy. Both accept that the way in which the body is read emerges from its cultural context.

The notion that intersexed individuals can produce a crisis of gendered identity is used by many queer theorists, who see the moments where repressive systems are flung into conflict as exciting and radical moments of not just liberatory but revolutionary importance. In the case of the historical freak show, what Shildrick has called the "more or less meticulously contrived spectacle, which encouraged viewers to think and see in terms of various binary distinctions between 'them' and 'us'", Grosz calls "*roughly equivalent to 'queer' ... a political gesture of self-determination*". In the disagreement between these two feminist scholars of freaks we see a series of interpretative possibilities (Shildrick 2002:24; Grosz 1996:56).

The last freak show offers a series of points where the spectator/spectacle relationship is formalised; indeed, the fictional relationship between audience and actor and the frame for understanding ways of watching within the play are all taken from a shared (but unexplored or unarticulated) cultural knowledge of the phenomenon of the freak show. Freak shows are cited as the occasion and the pattern for the encounter between a disabled cast and an audience, referring to a shadowy and unwitnessed performance tradition that exists in popular culture and scholarship, and also in the vivid shared cultural imagination.

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NOTES

1. (<http://ipc-athletics.paralympic.org/Classification/>)
2. The posters are available to see at <http://www.designtosell.co.uk/advertising/paralympics-2012-posters/>

SAMMANFATTNING

Artikeln behandlar frågor som uppstår i samband med teateruppsättningar eller referenser till freakshower eller vad författaren kallar *enfreakment*. Genom närläsning av två pjäser, *The last freak show* av Mike Kenny och *The mutilated* av Tennessee Williams, söker författaren undersöka det komplexa förhållandet mellan funktionshinder, *freakishness*, åskådarskap och iscensättning. Vad är det som uppstår när speciella åskådarpositioner förutsätts eller påförs en publik, antingen omedvetet eller som en medveten provokation? Det politiska perspektivet hos queerteori löper genom artikeln. Den betraktar specifikt den liberalt humanistiska konstruktionen av "vi" som identitetsposition, och analyserar denna som en interpellationshandling i såväl en teoretisk som en teatralisk kontext. Särskilt signifikant är då den funktion som Rosemarie Garland-Thomson kallar "det inbjudande vi" (*the invitational we*): den diskursiva mekanism genom vilken en kritiker tilltalar oss med ett språkbruk som tvingar oss att dela ett kritik- och upplevelseperspektiv. För resonemangets skull måste vi underkasta oss denna positionering. Det finns en sorts interpellation genom vilken "vi" erkänner ett perspektiv för att kunna kritisera det. Det förefaller rimligt att föreslå att detta perspektiv är ett slags empatiskt socialt rollspel, och att detta är själva kärnfrågan i teatervetenskapliga metodologier.

Det är en truism att teatern behöver åskådare för att vara teater. Artikeln spekulerar i frågan huruvida tillägandet av *freak show*-föreställningens bildliga uttryck behöver åskådare för att ge ett spontant gensvar i tid och rum, eller om publiken enbart förkroppsligar "det inbjudande vi".

På ett plan verkar det självklart att skådespelare med funktionsnedsättning vill utforska freakshow-föreställningens historia. Att imitera en teaterform som varken artist eller åskådare har upplevt har den historiska iscensättelsens hela lockelse. "Någonstans fanns människor som såg ut som du och som publiken stirrade på som om de var *missfoster*. Hur skulle det kännas? För missfostren? För åskådaren?" Michael M. Chemers hävdar att "även om inte alla funktionshindrade kroppar som uppträder är *freakery*, så inleder varje funktionshindrad

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kropp som uppträder (på scen eller i vardaglig interaktion) någon form av dialog med freakshowens upplevda historia” (Chemers 2008:25). Artikelförfattaren medger glatt freakshowens betydelse för funktionshinderskultur, men med ett förbehåll: att vi uppmärksam betraktar publiken, och även ”missfostret” på scenen, och att vi samvetsgrant går in i de interpellativa handlingar som uppstår när teater görs.

Identitetspolitik kan inte användas för att demontera identiteter. Förutsatt, givetvis, att ingen hittar en samling fritt svävande kroppar som betecknar utan betecknande, och som kan vara medium för en analys av kategorier och för upptäckten att dessa kategorier har misslyckats. Men ”freak” är inte en politisk identitet. Freaks kan vara de förvridna skuggor som uppkommer som en effekt av stirrandet, men de är inte lösningen eller ens förhandlingsbara som en ny form av politiskt varande. I stället erbjuder de en möjlighet att störa de funktionshinderande kategorierna, och även att störa själva funktionshindret.