



CRIPPLED

A PLAY IN DEVELOPMENT

**Atlantic Region
Table Reads &
Community Discussions
FINAL REPORT**

Report by
Paul David Power

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Resource Centre for the Arts



INTRODUCTION

In January 2016, I was successful in securing a grant from the Canada Council for the Arts Equity Office's Cultivate: Creative Development Grants Program. This funding was provided for the artistic development of a new theatre piece entitled "Crippled". Since securing this grant I have been working with dramaturge, award winning Newfoundland writer Robert Chafe on the script. Development is ongoing.

Crippled is a product of my own experience living with a physical disability since birth. As a member of the arts community for many years, I'm also committed to furthering the representation of deaf and disabled artists in the Atlantic Region through performance, discussion and linking community sectors.

With this commitment in mind – the development of "Crippled" also included table reads of the work in progress in Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to gain feedback on the piece. The table reads were followed by a panel discussion about diversity in the arts - and how we can work together to further the representation of persons living with a disability both on and off our stages. Thanks to support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Resource Centre for the Arts (NL), the Bus Stop Theatre (NS) and Hubcity Theatre (NB) these events were free to the general public.

In the 2010 Focus on Disability and Deaf Arts Report to the Canadian Council for the Arts, authors Rose Jacobson and Geoff McMurchy state:

The Atlantic Provinces continue to be less developed in the areas of Deaf and disability arts and culture... we are unaware of any producing companies – dance, theatre, film – which are specifically mandated to create or present disability arts related or Deaf arts.

The Crippled table reads and community discussions were designed to put

diversity in our arts community in the spotlight in the Atlantic Region. The objective of these presentations was not only to entertain, but also inspire discussion and action to expand the diversity of our theatre scene for artists living with a disability.

The discussions further investigated the statement made in the 2010 Focus on Disability and Deaf Arts Report regarding the Atlantic Region. Namely to determine if there are any producing companies or groups specifically mandated to create or present disability arts related or Deaf arts in the Atlantic Region. Panels were comprised of local stakeholders with backgrounds in the arts and/or disability life experiences.

-Paul David Power

The following questions were posed to panels in each province. Audience members were also invited to share their views.

1. Where are we right now when it comes to the representation of persons with disabilities in the arts? Nationally? Regionally?
2. What are some of the challenges in diversifying what we see on stage?
3. Is there a stigma or misconceptions about artists living with a disability?
4. How can a director or producer prepare or expand their scope?
5. Do we need disabled theatre? Do we need special auditions? Do we need "disable artists" or are we headed further towards segregation?
6. Are our arts presentations accessible? How can we improve accessibility?
7. How can we encourage and mentor future generations of people who may be living with some form of disability to get involved in the arts?

Event/Discussion Participants

Stage readings of *Crippled* included a cast of five – including playwright Paul Power who lives with a physical disability requiring leg braces and crutches. Panel participants and audience members included members from the local arts community as well as those with personal experiences living with a disability.

St. John's NL – January 19, 2017 at the Resource Centre for the Arts



Danielle Irvine (Artistic Director, Perchance Theatre and Sweetline Theatre)

Danielle Irvine is an award-winning Newfoundland-based theatre director who has worked across Canada for over 20 years. Highlights of her career include six years teaching at the National Theatre School of Canada in Montreal; assistant directing at the Stratford Festival of Canada for two seasons and winning the Canada Council for the Arts prestigious John Hirsch Prize for Directing and the Elinore and Lou Siminovitch Protégée Prize under Jillian Keiley.

Danielle has been the Artistic director of Perchance Theatre since 2013 and is also the current founding artistic director of Sweetline Theatre. She has served on the boards of many arts organizations including Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland and the Resource Centre for the Arts. Danielle has also spent many years working in television and movie casting including CBC's *Republic of Doyle* and more recently for the Netflix series, *Frontier*.



Leah Lewis (PhD, Instructor at Memorial University, Artist)

Leah Lewis is a scholar and artist. She makes use of arts based research as a form of knowledge translation, with particular interest in chronic illness and disability. Leah's current projects include a performance-lecture project about the lived experience of a dialysis patient.



Robert Chafe (writer, Artistic Director of Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland)

Robert Chafe is a writer and playwright based in St. John's. His work has been seen across Canada, the UK, Australia and in the United States. He is the author of seventeen stage scripts and co-author of another eight.

He was shortlisted for the Governor General's Award for Drama for *Tempting Providence* and *Butler's Marsh* in 2004, and won the award for *Afterimage* in 2010. His play *Oil and Water*, premiered in a sold out run in February 2011 in St. John's and continues to tour Canada. Robert is Artistic Director and playwright for Artistic Fraud of Newfoundland. And currently, his play, *Colony of Unrequited Dreams*, began a national tour in 2017.



Paul Power (Playwright, Director, Actor, Producer)

Paul has spent the past 20 years working as a writer, actor, director and communications professional. His formal training includes holding a BA in English with a concentration in theatre and a BAA in Journalism. Paul has a long history in raising awareness and understanding

about disability issues through his work as a writer.

His work includes several years working with the Shakespeare by the Sea Festival in Newfoundland and Labrador where he currently holds the position of Associate Artistic Director. He was President of the Liffey Players Drama Society in Calgary for three years. In 2010 Paul moved to Moncton NB and has been the Artistic Director for Hubcity Theatre since 2013. *Crippled* marks Paul's third play to date following the award winning *Roomies* and the comedy-drama *Last Chance*.

Halifax NS – March 28, 2017 at the Bus Stop Theatre Co-Op



Sébastien Labelle (Executive Director, Bus Stop Theatre Cooperative)

Sébastien Labelle is the Executive Director of the Bus Stop Theatre Cooperative and the Director of the Mayworks Halifax Festival, an annual labour and social justice themed arts festival. He is an actor by trade and has worked with prominent Halifax theatre companies including Shakespeare By the Sea, 2b Theatre, Zuppa Theatre Co., Two Planks and a Passion Theatre, and the Irondale Ensemble Project. Sébastien is a community organizer and former union organizer, and will soon be seen in Cory Bowles' first feature film titled Black Cop.



Josh Dunne (Performer)

Halifax comedian and poet Josh Dunn is a veteran of the Halifax comedy scene. He is one of the only working comedians in Canada with cerebral palsy. From the moment he crawls onstage, you know you're in for something different. His inability to stand forces a revolutionary approach to standup comedy. Far from being a one trick pony, Josh loves to talk about his encounters with women, international politics and is completely contextual to the evening he is working. In 2014 Josh was the recipient of the Imagination Award, a \$2,000 award created by reachAbility to reward creative ideas intending to increase the inclusion of persons living with disabilities.



Lee-Anne Poole (Director, Atlantic Fringe Festival)

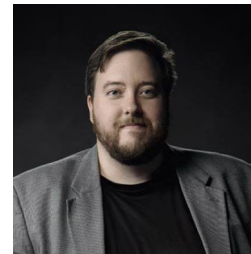
Lee-Anne Poole is an award winning writer & arts producer from Halifax. Lee-Anne's work has been seen in Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Fredericton, and Halifax. She was a 2014/15 recipient of the CFAT Media Arts Scholarship, RBC Emerging Artist Award, and a past winner of The Mayors Award for Emerging Theatre Artist. Most recently Lee-Anne wrote and performed, "Country Song" at The Queer Acts Theatre Festival in Halifax. Currently Lee-Anne is working on Pony Play, a homoerotic western about the love between a man and his horse. She is currently the Director of the Atlantic Fringe Festival.



April Hubbard (performer/Board Vice-Chair Atlantic Fringe Festival)

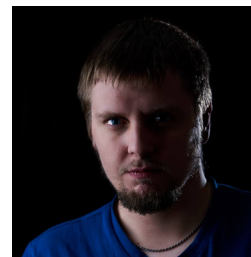
April has spent the past ten years working with the Atlantic Fringe Festival as a performer and coordinator. She is an advocate for disabled performers. Most recently she was awarded the Halifax NS Merit Award for Volunteer of the Year for her work in theatre.

Moncton NB – March 31, 2017 hosted by Hubcity Theatre



JB Vanier (Teacher/Director, Centre for Arts and Education)

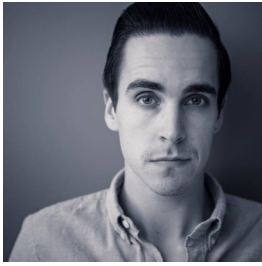
JB Vanier is a graduate of Bishop's University where he earned his Bachelor's in Drama with Honors as well as in Film, Media, and Cultural Studies. He's had the great opportunity to perform in pieces ranging from Shakespeare, Wilde, and other classics to contemporary Canadian drama and a host of independent work. He founded the student run Little Forks Theatre Company at Bishop's and was its Artistic Director for three years before graduation. He currently teaches and directs theatre at the Centre for Arts and Education.



Cody Bolton (Director/Actor)

Hailing from small Dow Settlement, NB, Cody has been acting onstage for over 15 years. With his B.A. & B.Ed from Crandall University, he also recently completed his Master of Divinity degree. Cody has served on the Board of Directors for Hubcity Theatre for three years. He directed Roomies for its Moncton NB debut and its Atlantic Region tour in 2016.

Crippled: Table Reads and Community Discussion Final Report



Steve Ryan (Actor)

Steve Ryan co-starred with Paul David Power in *Roomies* in 2015 in Moncton NB as well as the Atlantic Region tour in 2016. The friendship between an emotionally detached college student (Ryan) and his physically disabled roommate (Power) provided the plot for *ROOMIES* which was set at a fictitious college during the tumultuous late 1960s. Steve participated in a number of discussions and media interviews regarding disabled theatre during this

time. Steve also spent several seasons performing in Hubcity Theatre's *Shakespeare in the Park* in Moncton NB.



Mark McPhee (Board Chair, Hubcity Theatre)

Mark lives in Moncton, though he was raised in the village of Salisbury. He began his involvement with Hubcity Theatre in 2011, slowly moving through the roles of prompter, dramaturge, stage manager, assistant director, producer and director. He has held the position as Board Chair since 2014.



ABOVE: The stage reading for "Crippled" in St. John's NL cast included (l-r) Paul David Power (Tony), Pat Dempsey (Evan), Gregory Clayton King (Carl), Janet O'Reilly (Karen/Nun/Woman/Tanya/ Stage Directions) and Kyle McDavid (Mike/Teacher/Mark/Stage Directions)

BELOW: The stage reading for "Crippled" in Halifax and Moncton cast included (l-r) Paul David Power (Tony), Steve Ryan (Evan), Cody Bolton (Carl), Rebecca Rideout (Karen/Nun/Woman/Tanya/ Stage Directions) and Mark McPhee (Mike/Teacher/Mark/Stage Directions)



Panel Discussion Outcomes

The following is a summary of the views and answers of panel participants at all three events (NL, NS, NB) in response to pre-determined questions posed by the discussion moderator. Moderators were Maggie Gillis (St. John's NL), Ryan Delehantey (Halifax NS) and Mark McPhee (Moncton NB)

Where are we right now when it comes to the representation of persons with disabilities in the arts? Nationally? Regionally?



Panelists and audience members highlighted a handful of theatre projects or groups that included or focused on a person/s with a disability in the Atlantic Region. For the most part, examples of current disability or deaf theatre, were initiatives taking place outside the region. These

examples included RealWheels Theatre in Vancouver, BC, plays seen at the Magnetic North Festival and recent casting in Shakespeare and off-broadway shows in New York. Specific to the Atlantic Region – current initiatives of which participants were aware included:

- Canada Council for the Arts new funding structure to ensure organizations with a mandate to increase diversity on our stages are supported as well as ensure our stages reflect our diverse society.
- Younger artists currently engaged in theatre focused university classes and programs including those living with various disabilities. Indicating diversity is still in its earliest stages but is changing with a younger generation.
- Along with his current initiative, “Crippled”, Newfoundland and Labrador playwright/actor/director Paul David Power most recently just finished an Atlantic tour of his play, “Roomies”- a comedy focusing on the relationship of two college roommates in which one of the roommates lives with a physical disability.
- The Bluenose Film Festival in Halifax, Atlantic Canada's only film festival showcasing disAbility culture. This festival is solely for film and does not include live theatre.

- Reachability, an organization in Halifax sometimes provides the Imagination Award, a \$2,000 award created by reachAbility to theatre projects. The award is for creative ideas intending to increase the inclusion of persons living with disabilities in their communities. This award is not regulated to just the arts. Theatre-related, “Crippled” panelist Josh Dunn received the award in 2014 for his one-man-play based on his life story living with cerebral palsy. Josh was also a recipient of a creation grant from Arts Nova Scotia for the project.
- The Arts Nova Scotia Equity Program – which includes a focus on supporting disabled or deaf artists is currently under review as of April 2017.
- NB has the Premier's Council on Disability which advises on disability policy on various issues – not just the arts.

Conclusion: Based on “Crippled” community discussions it appears there is not an organization in the Atlantic Region with a focused mandate to support and encourage disability and deaf arts – including theatre. While there are a handful of projects or initiatives people referenced, these seem to be random and individually led rather than supported by a central advocacy or production group.

Recommendation:

- A central resource (group, advocate or program) would prove to be very useful in the Atlantic region to inform stakeholders of current and future projects with a focus on disability or deaf arts.
- A central resource (group, advocate or program) to support and encourage the development of artists and projects focused on diversity would assist in expanding the representation of disabled and deaf artists and presentations/projects showcasing these artists.

2. What are some of the challenges in diversifying what we see on stage?

For most of the panelists, challenges could be put into two major categories: accessibility and attitude.

Historically, theatre has not done a good job in ensuring accessibility for artists who may live with a disability or who are deaf. This includes audition spaces, rehearsal spaces and ways of communicating. This inaccessibility is due to lack of awareness, physical resources and financial resources.



For most theatre projects in our communities, groups must find creative spaces to gather and even perform based on financial challenges. This usually results in auditions or rehearsals taking place in older venues/structures that do not meet accessibility guidelines. This is a major deterrent for artists living with a disability to come out

to auditions or to take part in rehearsals or workshops. It has created a sense of accepted exclusion. As some audience members shared during our discussions – persons with disabilities assume audition calls are not inclusive – especially if these events are taking place in an inaccessible venue.

Responsibility also falls on those producers, directors and companies in which accessibility is not included in their parameters of selecting an audition, rehearsal or performance space. For most it is not on their radar. Indeed, panelists and audience members admitted during this discussion process that they have not really thought about accessibility or disabled artists before the “Crippled” reading and panel discussion events.

Attitude among those casting theatre pieces is also an issue. Very rarely does a casting director think of casting a person with a disability if it is not called for in the script. For this reason, casting or auditions calls are usually not worded as an inclusive opportunity. This has a trickle down impact as then disabled or deaf artists do not come out for auditions.

Without these artists auditioning there is little opportunity to expand the frequency of disabled or deaf artists appearing in a work that is not disability-related.

“Living with CP [cerebral palsy] I feel I am perceived as less than human. It pisses me off. And there's not really chances [to be cast] because of that,”
- Josh Dunn (performer/comedian)

For many directors and casting agents – it is not only a time consuming investment to accommodate for a person living with a disability - but it's also met with unawareness and fear. This stems from lack of exposure working with persons with disabilities as well as very few opportunities to have viewed persons with disabilities performing on stage or screen. Because it is not the norm – casting a person with a disability is still a big deal. A big deal that many companies and directors do not want to take on.

Conclusion: Based on “Crippled” community discussions the major challenges in further diversifying our stages for disabled and deaf artists stem from accessibility of audition, rehearsal and venues. In addition, many directors, casting people and companies have little exposure, and therefore little understanding, about working with or accommodating for disabled or deaf artists.

Recommendations:

- **Companies, theatre creators and financial supporters must make a more concentrated effort in ensuring audition, rehearsal and performance venues are accessible for all artists.**
- **We must increase the number of opportunities for stakeholders to experience, view and work with artists living with a disability or who are deaf as a means to educate and expand the scope of casting.**



3. Is there a stigma or misconceptions about artists who are deaf or living with a disability?

Many panelists and audience members shared their views that directors and companies have pre-conceived notions about the ability of performers who are deaf or living with a physical disability. It is assumed these artists cannot perform in the venue or set as it stands. Many directors or companies choose to exclude these performers rather than work to accommodate.

A few audience members shared their stories about being cast in a show and then injuring themselves after the fact and having to use crutches. When this happened two different reactions occurred by their directors. In one scenario, it was expected the actor would drop out of the show as they were no longer physically able to do their role based on set, venue or current blocking. The second reaction was more positive with the director opting to accommodate for the injury by changing blocking or adding the physical element, in this case crutches, as part of the character.

When to cast someone with a disability was also highlighted as a misconception. Mostly the challenge is to move beyond only casting someone who may live with a

disability when the script calls for it.

As panelist April Hubbard pointed out during the conversation in Halifax NS, she would like to see more everyday roles going to persons with disabilities. For example, why can't the bank teller be a person in a wheelchair? Casting roles with persons living with a disability or who are deaf does not need to be regulated to those pieces making a statement about disability. To better reflect our society – our diverse Canadian mosaic – we need to move towards diversity in all roles.

Conclusion: Unfortunately, the theatre world reflects everyday society when it comes to casting – if not on our stages. There are those who can look beyond the disability to see the ability of performers. However, pre-conceived notions about persons living with a disability – namely the performer's physical ability – are still alive and well. As well, going back to lack of representation or frequency, many disabled or deaf artists are only considered or thought of if the role calls for a disability. Blind casting is still a very new notion in the Atlantic Region.

Recommendations

- Further work must be done to educate theatre makers and stakeholders about the ability and value of artists living with a disability or who are deaf.
- A concentration on casting persons with disabilities in variety of roles – not just when it is a disabled character in the script – must take place through encouragement, awareness and example.
- A stakeholder (advocate/group/company) needs to take the lead in raising awareness and work with established arts stakeholders to educate and raise awareness.

“On the writing level, the creation and dream level, there are a lot of people who are really open minded to writing disabled characters or just having a disabled person on stage to play their characters. I think where we see more challenges is in funding levels and the overall societal acceptance of it.”

- April Hubbard (performer, Board Co-Chair Atlantic Fringe Festival)

4. How can a director or producer prepare or expand their scope?

Panelists and audiences agreed that there needs to be a concentrated effort to expand opportunities for disabled or deaf artists. And this concentrated effort begins with some tangible real-life actions.

First and foremost is to create a welcoming atmosphere when it comes to casting and auditions. This not only includes ensuring audition, rehearsal and performance

venues are accessible. It's also taking the effort to reach out to a more diverse audience in new ways. Often through our busy schedules and day-to-day

activities we maintain the status quo. We stick with how we have done things in the past because shaking up our approaches takes more effort and time. However, it's imperative we change how we are doing things if we are committed to diverse representation in our theatre scene.

Panelists suggested reaching out to those groups who may have particular influence or communication channels to reach persons with disabilities. Include these resources in regular communications when it comes to auditions, workshops, classes and performances. When distributing physical posters, signage or messages companies can ensure they are at eye level to those who may be in a wheelchair. Companies can also utilize other means of communicating such as audio, sign language, larger text to capture a more diverse audience.

It's also imperative that directors and producers keep an open mind when it comes to hiring cast and crew. Again, bringing up the idea of preparing rather than reacting for diverse attendance to auditions or interviews. Ensuring accessibility and a welcoming atmosphere for all those who may be interested in submitting their names for consideration for a position.

Panelists all agreed that it's not enough to just say you want to be more diverse. Companies and artistic leaders need to make that concentrated effort to connect to that more diverse audience. Historically auditions, workshops, theatre shows have not displayed an inclusive culture for physically disabled artists. It will take a concentrated effort and action to change that norm or perception.

Conclusion: Change management must occur to further diversify our theatre scene in the Atlantic Region. This change will begin with tangible actions by current theatre-creators and stakeholders in the region. It is not enough to agree we should have more diversity on and off our stages. This notion must be coupled with a commitment to make it happen.

“Generally speaking, what we've seen on professional theatre stages across the country up until very recently – and still – is the majority is white, straight, able-bodied.

There is very little representation outside of that. It certainly does not reflect the scope of our society. One of the responsibilities we have as theatre makers – people engaged with the public – is to change that scenario.”

- Robert Chafe, writer and Artistic Director of Artistic Fraud in Newfoundland and Labrador

Recommendations:

- Educate current theatre stakeholders and leaders on alternative ways to communicate with persons with disabilities or who are deaf.
- Identify community resources and groups that currently reach persons living with a disability or who are deaf that can assist in communicating and promoting theatre arts opportunities.
- Create a more inclusive atmosphere for auditions, workshops and performances through communication strategies and initiatives focused on reaching persons living with a disability or who are deaf.
- Increase opportunities for persons with disabilities and who are deaf to compete for roles both on and off our stages.



“I do think it is necessary to intentionally engage in programming that facilitates visibility. If you look at other marginalized groups, what happens is this cycle of starting with a place of intention and then areas of standards evolve and we start to identify what is required to prepare a stage, a film set for a wheelchair for example. And then what happens is plays, screenplays, characters - all become more diverse. When that visibility is first intentionally created, over time it becomes normalized.”

- Leah Lews (PhD, Instructor at Memorial University, Artist)

5. Do we need disabled theatre? Do we need special auditions? Do we need “disabled artists” or are we headed further towards segregation?

This was one of the most discussed and thought provoking topics at each of the community discussions. There was a consistent enthusiasm and resounding yes to special initiatives to promote diversity among panelists and audience members.

The proof for the need of such special initiatives stems from the low number of projects and known artists living with a disability or who are deaf. Clearly, as one panelist put it, more needs to be done.

Many equated the situation to the struggle and challenges of the GLBTQ community. About 20 years ago there was little representation. If a character was gay it was a supporting role – and if a story delved into gay or other sexual orientation issues it was taboo – or a big deal.

Fast forward 20 years and our culture is much more exposed to GLBTQ issues, characters and stories in our mainstream media and entertainment options. Most audience members and panelists agreed much more work still has to be done – but felt this “marginalized group” is much more a part of the “norm” when it comes to mainstream entertainment. It's no longer a “big deal”. Panelists and audience members expressed the need for persons with disabilities in mainstream media to follow the same pattern – and hopefully in twenty years representation of persons with disabilities in mainstream entertainment will no longer be a “big deal”.

In each of the discussion locations – panelists and audience members agreed that the movement has to start somewhere. With this in mind, everyone seemed to agree there is a definite need for concentrated efforts to make our theatre world more inclusive. These efforts include special groups, highlighting inclusive auditions and possibly even measurable percentages related to grants, financial supports or other incentives.

Tokenism was also brought to the forefront. Panelists expressed their views that we should be moving toward the goal that the best performer/artist should be awarded a role or position – whether they are disabled or not. An artist should not be cast because they are disabled – in addition – a disability should not be a component for someone not being cast.

For this reason panelists highlighted the need to make a concentrated effort to provide training and experience opportunities for artists living with a disability or who are deaf. We can't expect these artists to compete in general audition processes if they cannot gain the performance opportunities to put them on equal footing when it comes to experience and developed skills.

A concentrated effort to provide experience opportunities would also help to increase the frequency of disabled and deaf artists seen on our stages. This would further “normalize” the occurrences for audiences and theatre decision makers.

Panelists and audience members also spoke passionately about casting persons with disabilities when it is called for in the role – highlighting the need for identified “disabled artists”.

Namely, discussion participants agreed that when a role calls for a disability – every concentrated effort should be made to ensure a disabled actor is put in place for that role. Some equated doing anything less is parallel to casting a white person to play a black role. Persons with disabilities who served on the panel and who were in the audience also mentioned famous disabled roles played by able bodied actors – and admitted it was a hard pill to swallow sometimes. This also brought the debate back to tokenism – is the person in the role because they are the most talented and suited for the role or because they are disabled? Overall, the discussion was split – but most agreed persons with disabilities have the life experience to bring to a role or character that an able bodied person does not.

Conclusion: It is clear a great deal of work has to be done to better represent persons with disabilities both on and off our stages. When it comes to marginalized groups, the representation of persons with disabilities in our theatre scene is behind the times when compared to such groups as LGBTQ and ethnic groups. That's why a concentrated effort must be made to increase opportunities. It's these focused concentrated efforts that will start the cycle experienced by other marginalized groups that will move disability theatre from the exception to the norm.



Recommendations

- Create opportunities for persons with disabilities to gain experience, skills and opportunities to showcase their talent.
- Create important links between artists living with a disability or who are deaf and mainstream theatre artists, teachers and decision makers.
- Develop a group with a mandate to further the experience, skills and opportunities for emerging and established theatre artists with disabilities or who are deaf.

“It's something we just don't think about – and we need to start thinking about it more. So if we are doing a production, if we have someone come to an audition who is physically disabled we need to be thinking ok – what has to change or be done to make sure it's accessible.

And we need to be doing that in advance – not when the situation might arise.”

***Cody Bolton,
Director of
Roomies***



6. Are our arts presentations (theatre/dance/visual art etc...) accessible? How can we improve accessibility?

Simply put – no. In Atlantic Canada accessible venues are more the rarity than the norm.

Again, it comes down to out of sight – out of mind. Perhaps the biggest challenge is defining accessibility when it comes to attending arts presentations. For most venues that call themselves accessible it means they have a limited number of seating areas for persons in a wheelchair or using other mobility aids. More often than not, this seating is regulated to the very back of the theatre or

the very front. Those audience members living with a disability do not have a great deal of options when it comes to seating choices – or how they may enjoy a performance.

Entrances are also debatable when it comes to defining appropriate accessibility. Many venues also herald themselves as accessible when they can offer any kind of entrance to the performance venue.

Often these entrances include a back door, freight elevator or out of date wheel chair lift. Many patrons cannot attend a performance without assistance from venue staff. Often, this assistance is less than ideal with awkward lifting

or placement that makes the patron feel less valued or respected as compared to able-bodied audience members. These “standards” of accessibility deters many persons living with a disability from attending or taking part in arts events. The lack of accessibility adds to the feeling of exclusion by disabled or deaf patrons and artists when it comes to actively taking part in our arts community.

As one table read audience member described – having a person with a disability have to enter a venue through a freight elevator or back door completely disengages them from the suspension of disbelief of the performance. Often these entrances give the audience member views into backstage or holding areas that other patrons do not see. It diminishes the overall experience for the audience member.

Obviously, there are a number of factors pertaining to accessibility that are not just unique to performance venues. In Atlantic Canada many structures were built long before accessibility standards were created. Depending on provincial or municipal standards these venues may or may not be responsible for ensuring proper accessibility. During the discussions it was questioned who was actually responsible for accessibility. Is it the venue, the performance company, the city, the province? There doesn't seem to be any clear answer – and thus – no one takes responsibility.

During a panel discussion in Moncton NB, Paul Power who toured his production of *Roomies* throughout the Atlantic provinces in 2016 described the frustration in booking appropriate venues. *Roomies* is a play that includes a disabled character. Part of the marketing of this piece was to reach out to those living with a disability who would like to see a character reflecting their own life experiences on the stage. However, many times this opportunity was denied due to lack of accessible space.

Theatre companies and productions are consistently financially challenged when it comes to affordable venues. For this reason many productions are performed in alternative venues rather than mainstream government funded locations. While this is a good economic solution – these venues do little to encourage participation of persons with disabilities as either a performer or an audience member.

Conclusion: Panelists and audience members all agreed accessibility to performance venues in Atlantic Canada need to be improved. However, when it came to how to do that or who should take responsibility there was little reference to current solutions or resources to address the issue.



Recommendations:

- Performance venues in each province should be assessed for accessibility by persons with disabilities and provided results of those assessments to raise awareness.
- Theatre venues and companies should be made aware of provincial, municipal or even federal standards and resources available to improve their accessibility standards.
- Grants or other financial supports should include incentives for productions or companies who are making an effort to perform in accessible spaces which may be more costly than cheaper inaccessible venues. This would hopefully encourage other venues to improve their accessibility if space bookings were decreasing due to the issue.
- Grants or other financial supports should include incentives for companies and venues to improve their accessibility standards.
- Municipal, provincial and federal representatives should be made aware of the need for further accessible performance venues through a petition or letter writing campaign.

7. How can we encourage and mentor future generations of people who may be living with some form of disability to get involved in the arts?

Again, the general message from panelists and audience members was we need to work towards making the representation of persons with disabilities in the arts more of the norm than the exception. This can be achieved by leading by example.

If persons with disabilities see their peers on mainstream stages – on their screens – it would help in demonstrating our arts community and opportunities for artistic expression is inclusive. With more diversity in our works those living with a disability or who are deaf would feel more encouraged to get involved either backstage or come out for auditions beyond just those roles where a disability is called for. They would see reflection of their selves and their life experiences on the stage – solidifying the notion that mainstream theatre opportunities are possible and for everyone.

It's also important that we foster the development of our artists of tomorrow. As mentioned previously, theatre artists need to develop their skills not only through instruction but also through tangible experience. It's imperative we give new or emerging artists opportunities to develop their craft and their skills. This includes experiences working with various actors, various works of theatre (classic, contemporary) and various directors. To do this we need to actively create these opportunities in our communities. It is not enough to say it's a good idea. It's creating opportunities through inclusive instruction, workshops, audition processes and casting. It's also clear as part of these tangible actions that a concentrated effort needs to be made to inform, invite and include persons with disabilities to participate in our arts community. This means reaching out to individuals and organizations beyond our regular theatre makers audiences.

Conclusion: We are in an interesting time where disability and deaf arts are being talked about and further supported. It's a cultural change that is slowly progressing. If we expand and strengthen this progression through further mainstream representation and further support of projects with a focus on disability arts and disabled artists, it is quite possible tomorrow's generation of artists will live in a world where the inclusion of persons with disabilities in our theatrical works is more the norm than the exception.

Recommendations:

- Formulate a community leader in the region (a group, advocate or program with a mandate to support disabled and deaf theatre artists) with a mandate to provide opportunities for disabled and deaf artists to develop their skills and experience.
- Educate current artistic leaders on the importance of diversity both on and off our stages as a means to increase representation.
- Create important community links to better reach and encourage disabled and deaf artists to train and get involved in theatre.

“I think we have to make an effort to focus on disability arts with special accommodations and special effort, in order for the doors to open and in order for us not to have to make a special focus in the future – it would be the norm.”

Danielle Irvine, Artistic Director of Perchance Theatre and Sweetline Theatre

Conclusion



The “Crippled” table reads and community discussions turned out to be a much more needed initiative in the Atlantic Region than first anticipated. It is clear that before these events, there has been very little opportunity in the Atlantic Region to bring the issue of diversity on our stages to the

forefront. Indeed, most panelist and audience members admitted they have not really thought about disability arts and disabled performers before these events. This includes accessibility and inclusion for both artists and audience members.

During the discussions, only a handful of examples were provided in which disabled or deaf themes, artists and projects have taken place in the Atlantic Region. Participants also highlighted this was the first time disabled artists and theatre leaders were able to exchange information and become aware of what activities are taking place in the region. This includes identifying disabled or deaf artists who are currently active in the region.

Throughout the table reads and discussions, the project was heralded and complimented by disabled artists, advocates and mainstream artists for providing the opportunity to examine the issue and putting disabled and deaf arts at the forefront of people's minds.

As noted in this report, the discussions represent, on some level, the current status of disabled or deaf theatre in the Atlantic Region. While the discussions certainly can't account for all demographics or communities in the region – there does seem to be a common thread that more needs to be done to support and strengthen the representation of artists living with a disability in the theatre sector.

This report is designed to continue the discussion with certain recommendations that the artistic community, decision makers and leaders can use as a tool when

“The challenge is companies are not willing to take the risk with diverse topics or characters as part of mainstream theatre – especially when you look at ticket sales. People of the majority are not use to having to empathize with anyone who doesn't look like them. If the characters in a show don't look like you it's very easy to go – at least subconsciously - oh that show's not for me.”

**Lee-Anne Poole
(Director, Atlantic Fringe Festival)**

determining future mandates, casting, projects and funding models. Some recommendations are long term while others can be attained in the short term.

Through all the discussions and recommendations it is abundantly clear the Atlantic Region could benefit greatly by a community leader, organization or group with a mandate to further diversity in the Atlantic Region's theatre scene. With the creation of an advocate focused on the issue much could be done to strengthen communications, awareness and opportunities.

The main action that should come from this report is to further explore how that community advocate can be created and how it would function. It is the hope this would be the next step in moving the Atlantic Region forward in theatre diversity. Interest is there. With the right advocacy approaches, the region could become a change leader when it comes to diversity in our arts community.

Finally, it would be a great disservice to not highlight those community advocates and organizations who made the “Crippled” table read and community discussions possible. Namely, the Canada Council for the Arts Equity Office. The events were also made possible with support from arts organizations and members at the local level, including the Resource Centre for the Arts in NL, the Bus Stop Theatre in Halifax NS and Hubcity Theatre in Moncton NB. The support of all these stakeholders is a testament to the interest in further diversifying our theatre scene, and what can be accomplished when we share our resources, experiences and talents.

