

Shaking Up Shakespeare Episode 8: Crippling Shakespeare

Hope Van Der Merwe: Hello everyone and welcome back to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*, the podcast where we investigate and expose Shakespeare's enduring presence in Canada and abroad. Through interviewing over 30 theatre professionals, educators, students, and more, this podcast functions as a critique of Shakespeare's cultural dominance and interrogates the ways in which his works have been used as a tool for colonialism, ableism, sexism, racism, and more.

I am Hope Van Der Merwe and I host this podcast alongside Dr. Marlis Schweitzer and Liam Lockhart Rush.

This podcast was written and recorded in Tkaronto, the traditional territory of the Anishinabe Nation, the Haudenosaunee Confederacy, the Wendat, and most recently the Mississaugas of the Credit. We would like to acknowledge the ways in which Shakespeare was used as a tool for colonialism and genocide, and encourage all listeners to continue to be critical of this enduring presence in so-called Canada.

Hope Van Der Merwe: In this episode, we will talk about Crippling Shakespeare -- Crippling, which here is used as a verb that means actively subverting and challenging ableist attitudes towards disability. In this podcast, you might also hear variations of "Crip" or "cripping" used in different contexts to explain different things. For example, the term "cripping up" refers to an able-bodied actor who puts on a crip or fakes a disability. I spoke with a few disabled artists about all things disability and Shakespeare for this episode. Two of them are dear friends of mine who also attended York's theatre program.

Rachel Arnold, Faith Andrew, and I have had countless conversations like the one you are about to hear about disability ableism because ableism is so rife in our industry and our world. Some of this episode will touch on disability in the arts as a whole more broadly. While some of it later will touch more specifically on disability and Shakespeare. Later in the episode, we will hear from Debbie Patterson, an actor, playwright, and theatre maker about her experiences as the first disabled actor to play Richard III in Canada, ableism and sizeism in the industry, and where we can go in the future to build more inclusive, equitable, and accessible rehearsal rooms for artists of all abilities.

Rachel Arnold: My name's Rachel

Faith Andrew: I am Faith Andrew.

Debbie Patterson: My name's Debbie Patterson

Rachel Arnold: I'm a student at York University I'm disabled

Faith Andrew: Primarily my focus is in playwriting I am a disabled, fat, woman of colour.

Debbie Patterson: I write plays, I act in plays, I direct plays, and, and I run a theatre company called Sick and Twisted Theatre and I'm a wheelchair user.

Hope Van Der Merwe: A point of contention that Rachel and I always talk about is how wrong we feel it is for able-bodied actors to take disabled roles. We feel that there isn't a way to ethically put on a Crip because in real life disability is not something you can put on and take off at will. And because when disabled actors can't even get cast in roles written for them, let alone roles that don't specify ability or disability, there is no way to justify able-bodied actors taking those roles at all. Rachel, a playwright who frequently writes about her experience with disability, talked to me a bit about her discomfort at the thought of an able-bodied actor playing some of the roles she writes, as well as able-bodied actors playing disabled roles more broadly.

Rachel Arnold: When I write plays that are based on my unique life experience, I don't really want some able bodied person playing my characters. Because that's not what the character's about, bro.

And they're not gonna, you do as much research on disability as you would like. And I encourage you to, but you're not gonna understand what it's like. You're not gonna get what it's like unless you have a certain proximity to it. If you walk in and you're able bodied and your family's able bodied and you don't know anything, why do you, you don't, you can't play that character to justice. You call yourself an actor because you want to play characters like real and raw. You're not going to be able to, you are not disabled. I feel like it's insulting to disabled people, and I feel like it's almost insulting to the art form because I think actors specifically have to take off every single layer of yourself.

You have to be real and raw. Acting, I feel like is less so putting on a hat and it's more so stripping yourself. And it's like if you take it that seriously and you care about the craft that much, why are you continuing not to do it justice? I feel like the point of theatre is not to abide by the norm. So why are we still doing that? Why are we putting on the same plays the same ways a thousand times? I don't think there's any excuse for it in 2022 to be casting the way that we do. I think we need better casting practices, then what you have to do is you have to listen to the people whose lives are like those characters.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Rachel also talked to me about her experiences as an actor and assistant director working in rehearsal spaces. In our conversation, she emphasized how often there can be a lack of support and accommodation for disabled artists, because sometimes making the space to meet the needs of disabled artists is treated as an inconvenience to the rest of the cast and crew.

Rachel Arnold: You don't know what you don't know. And I feel like people are too uncomfortable to kind of consult things that they don't know. So if you don't know a lot about disability, but now you have a disabled actor, I feel like directors and cast members don't realize the perspective that they have of like, I'm so used to people not caring and not asking, and I don't wanna bring it up myself because that's uncomfortable and that sucks because most of the time no one gets it. And I've, this is also what I feel like I felt most uncomfortable in spaces too, is when people know that you're disabled and they won't ask what they can do to accommodate you.

They don't ask what you need. They don't, they don't talk about it. They pretend it's not there. I think it's stupid. Respectfully. I think it's dumb because disabled actors and artists already

are so neglected and overlooked. In the few roles that are actively written for disabled actors, characters, whatnot, why would you just then hire an able-bodied person? It makes no sense to me because I feel like the excuses a lot of the time will be, “Oh, well this character's not disabled, so I'm not going to hire someone who's disabled.” Okay, well now you have a disabled character. What's your excuse now? It's just that you hate people who are disabled.

Hope Van Der Merwe: I also asked Rachel about her opinion on what companies can do going forward to make the room accessible to disabled artists. Her answer, as you will hear, was resoundingly and at the bare minimum to open a dialogue to learn how you can best support the needs of your cast and crew.

Rachel Arnold: I think a lot of it starts in rehearsals. Because that is the time when it's least accessible. In my experience the only time that I've actually felt accommodated and valued was when I was working with other disabled artists. That was the only time that I felt comfortable when it came to being epileptic in any space.

I think what people don't understand about disability is it's up and down a lot. You have days where you're really, really good and you have days where you kind of, you kinda want to die a little bit. That's why I prioritize check-ins because I don't believe in leaving your shit at the door. And a lot of people do. I feel like people shouldn't have to disclose anything for you to accommodate them. You should just be like, “How can I best support you in this space?” So I think opening up that conversation should be the number one priority.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Also a good friend of mine, much of my conversation with Faith touched on the way in which never seeing yourself represented impacts what you grow up and believe you can be. Because the industry is incredibly racist, sexist, fat phobic, and ableist, Faith explained to me how she never dared to even dream of being an actor because she didn't see herself reflected in the actors she would watch at the Stratford Festival growing up. This lack of representation becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you don't see people in your community on stage, it's only natural to think that you and people like you don't belong there.

Faith Andrew: Growing up, there was never a point really where I was like, I'm going to go do this. I'm going to be an actor at Stratford. That never existed to me because I was like, Nope. And, and I think that's, that's been a lot of my experience in theatre. There's not gonna be a place for me and I don't want to spend my entire career playing, you know, playing the fat punchline, playing the mom, playing the sassy best friend. And I would like stories that I think will impact people more. I want to be doing something that's going to impact people and that's ultimately too why I switched into playwriting cause I was like, okay, I guess I'll make my own roles and my own stories because I got really tired of seeing where we were going because there are stories. I think that's the thing too. There are stories, there are things we can look at, we can find, that look at things in a better way. And we tend not to tell those stories, which is kind of sad. And I would really love to see that switch.

Hope Van Der Merwe: We also talked a lot specifically about sizeism in the industry and in Shakespeare. Have you ever seen a fat Juliet or a disabled Ophelia? I haven't, and I'll wager you haven't either. Why are we reinforcing the notion that only skinny able-bodied women are beautiful and deserving of love in our casting?

Faith Andrew: We have very specific roles for who can play leading ladies who play matrons, who play like mom characters. But specifically in Shakespeare -- I think it's interesting because I don't think a lot of it has to do with necessarily age, which is what you would think it would be to do with, right? I think a lot of it is to do with look and body type and more focus on that which I don't think is fair, but I also think is extremely common and accepted in the theatre world.

So when it's put into Shakespeare as well, I think in general with Shakespeare, because it's so much older, right? We kind of allow ourselves to backtrack a little bit more there, I think in terms of what we think is more acceptable body type and different things. It's nice to know that disability is slowly making its way into Shakespeare because that is not something I have ever seen. I don't -- I can think of maybe one or two performances where I've been able to see disabled characters portrayed. And then it's a smaller handful of those that are actually disabled playing those characters.

Ultimately all of those stories, for the most part, once in a blue moon, it's, you know, different. But for the most part it's told by an able-bodied person or it's told by a neurotypical person and that, you know, we as a society like to see disability and we like to go, "Oh sweetie, honey, baby, poor, pitiful, little life." I think especially with disability and Shakespeare, it's kind of like the Disney villain thing. And this is a bad person and they're limping. I think that's where a lot of it stems from is ultimately people want to see, people want to be told it's okay, right? People want to see a certain thing. They don't want to be called out in the movie theatre, which there's a lot to call out.

As someone who's done a lot of stuff on disability and with like fat phobia, I mostly call out my audience. It is not for the able-bodied people in the audience. It is for people who actually wanna see an authentic story and for people who don't get to see themselves represented and I don't really care who it pisses off.

Hope Van Der Merwe: I also had the pleasure of talking to Debbie Patterson in June of this year about all things Crip and Shakespeare. Debbie is a Winnipeg playwright, director and actor who trained at the National Theatre School of Canada. She's a founding member of Shakespeare in The Ruins and a proud advocate for Disability Justice.

Through her work as founding and current artistic director of Sick and Twisted Theatre, she was honored with the United Nations Platform for Action Committee's 2014 Activist Award and the Winnipeg Arts Council making a Mark Award in 2017. Thank you so much for joining me here, Debbie. Can you talk to me about Sick and Twisted Theatre?

Debbie Patterson: Sick and Twisted is a disability theatre company, so we create work through a disability lens. Some of it involves training and development because so many disabled artists have been denied opportunities to train and are not given the same work opportunities. So we do a lot of skills development, community building among disabled people, disabled artists in Winnipeg. And we produce shows with integrated casts, sort of bigger, more ambitious with integrated casts, so disabled and non-disabled people working together, but it's always disability led. So it gives non-disabled actors the opportunity to work within a Crip space, and to get an understanding of what it is we're talking about when we talk about crippling the work.

Hope Van Der Merwe: You were the first disabled person to play Richard III in Canada back in 2016. Can you talk about what that process was like for you?

Debbie Patterson: I'm a founder of a company called Shakespeare in the Ruins. That produces Shakespeare plays in outdoors, promenade style in the ruins of an old monastery.

And there's a river nearby. There's a grotto, there's a field, you know, there's all these areas that we use. We climb trees, we run through fields. So I stopped performing in Shakespeare in the Ruins at a certain point when I couldn't run through the fields anymore, and then as time progressed, I was like: actually, no, I do want to perform. And so I learned the opening monologue from Richard III and it just felt so right to say it. It felt like I connected with it in a way that no one else I had ever heard do it had, you know? I wanted to do the play just because of that, that monologue. And so I actually approached the director.

And asked him if he wanted to work with me on it because he had had a temporary experience of disability. He had a spine situation that kept him in pain and bed-bound for about a year. So, so, you know, he was a disability tourist and I figured he had some kind of understanding of what that is when your body, you know, how accepting the body's change and working with the body you have.

So I approached him first. And then my colleagues at Shakespeare in the Ruins approached me about doing it with Shakespeare in the Ruins rather than doing it on my own with Sick and Twisted. So I did. And so this director and I had a lot of conversations about, you know, my lived experience of disability and how that affects my relationships. And how that affects the way I'm perceived, how I noticed that there's a difference in how I'm perceived. Things like the assumption that you're sort of broadly incompetent because you can't walk, not being able to keep up with people when they're, when they're moving through the world, not having a way to keep up.

Now that I'm in a wheelchair, I find the conversation happens way above my head and I can't always hear what people are talking about because I'm not actually at the same physical level to be part of conversations. So it excludes you just because of the way you move through the world. And unless the people you're with are very conscientious, they will leave you behind. So thinking about Richard in that context, that he and his brothers have fought this war to defend the crown, and to remain in power. And now his brothers have power. He doesn't, his brother is king, and he's not, and he's not even part of the celebration because his body is not welcome in this celebration. So I'm kind of moving on to talk about how I see Richard, but I think at the beginning of the play he's talking about getting his brothers to hate each other so that they'll both be dead and then he'll have the power.

He says, "When they're gone, then must I count my gains, right?" So that's his plan at the beginning. "I'll get rid of my brothers who have used me and then rejected me and who've betrayed me." And so it's a revenge play, right? "I'll get revenge on my brothers, then I'll have the power." It's not like, "I'm gonna kill everyone until I get all the power from me. I'm gonna get rid of my brothers, then I will have the power." And what he finds out once he has the power is that he can't stop there, that everyone else is trying to get the power from him. And so he has to keep killing. And it costs him, and you see what it costs him by the end of the play. So he's not, you know, he's not like an evil villain from the get-go. He's gonna get rid of

his brothers and he is going to marry Anne, who he needs to stay in power. And then he is going to have power and he's going to rule.

Hope Van Der Merwe: In the summer of 2022, there were several productions of Richard III happening at the same time around the world, one of which took place at the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford upon Avon in the UK, which featured Arthur Hughes in the title role making him the first disabled actor to play Richard III at the RSC.

I was lucky enough to see this production in July of 2022, and one of the things that struck me most about his performance was how nuanced, quick, charming, and truly funny. Richard III was. This differed from other performances I have seen of Richard III, all of which have featured able-bodied actors in the title role.

Each of their performances seemed to be more about faking a convincing Crip rather than delving into the very complex psyche of the conniving king. One of the other productions of Richard III that took place last summer was here in Ontario. The Stratford Festival also produced the show. Instead featuring Colm Feore, an able-bodied actor in the title role.

Debbie was brought on as a disability consultant for this production, and I was curious to know about her experience, especially having performed the role herself several years prior.

Debbie Patterson: At first I was resistant to taking it on cause I was worried that I was going to just be like window dressing to make it okay to do what they were doing. You know, if you put my bio in your program, then it's all fine.

Right? And so I was clear that I wasn't interested in that when Anthony first approached me and he was very clear that that's not what he wanted. That he wanted to understand the lived experience to bring authenticity to the portrayal of the character and the world the character lives in. So that was great and he and I had a great relationship through that production. He sent me the cut script and I sent it back to him with lots of notes around where I saw, you know, where I saw Cripness emerging in the script, even in stage directions or different moments of things that, that Richard says that spoke to me as a disabled person that might not speak to someone else who doesn't have that lived experience.

A lot of the work I had to do was with the other performers because Richard becomes the king through the course of the play. Nobody expects him to become the king at the beginning of the play. They think he's kind of useless, almost like a mascot or the house pet of the family. He has no status. And so that status is endowed by the people around you and so they had to work to make Richard as low status as possible through the first half of the play, so that his rise to power took them all completely by surprise.

Now, something that was interesting that I heard from other people who saw the show or I was interviewed by a journalist -- they would ask me about coaching Colm Feore on the physicality that he was using to represent Richard. And they thought that my job as a disability consultant was about helping him fake a Crip rather than helping him understand lived experience of disability. Which is crazy because that's the one thing I didn't have to do when I played Richard. You know, but like when I was playing Richard, I was like, this is a really hard job. I'm really glad that I'm disabled and I don't have to like layer that on top of

everything else I'm doing because that would be really challenging. You know? Like that's the one thing I don't know how to do is fake a crip. So why anybody thought that that was my job is completely, it's just so, so ableist, right? I found that very funny.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Debbie also talked to me about the utmost importance of representation in the industry because our beliefs and the stories we tell shape our actions much like what Faith said earlier in this episode. Having witnessed the first disabled Richard III at the RSC last summer, I was also curious to pick Debbie's brain as to why Canada seems to be so far behind in terms of representation, equity, and inclusion for disabled artists, but also in terms of representation for people with different bodies more broadly.

Debbie Patterson: About six or seven years ago, there were gatherings that then National Arts Center sponsored to address - gatherings of disabled theatre artists. And prior to that, I didn't really know any other disabled theatre artists. I didn't think it was a thing I could do. You know, when I started to become disabled, I stopped performing because I thought I couldn't do it. You know, all my training at theatre school was very, very physical, right? And I thought that I needed complete control of my instrument in order to be an actor. And it was a long process to figure out that that was not actually the case, you know? We're moving towards it at our own pace right now.

It's getting better all the time. I don't know why Canada's so far behind other countries in terms of representation. And it's not just about ableism. I mean, it's across the board. When I started, if you were not a gorgeous, skinny woman, you wouldn't get cast. It was [a] very, very specific body type for, for women on stage. And that's changing now, and it's so freaking great. To see real bodies on stage, and it's so respectful of women in the audience to represent real women's bodies on stage, right? It's our understanding of what it is to make a theatre. It's becoming less, less fantasy, artificial, idealized world and more of a representation of the actual world. And at the same time, I think the stories we're telling are from a broader range of perspectives.

You know, it used to be a big deal if a theatre programmed more than one play by a woman in a season. You know, that was like some kind of gold medal for that theatre company. And now that's, you know, it's unacceptable to not consider gender. And race and all these other factors of identity as equally important in the stories we're telling. And I think that makes our work stronger and more, more beautiful and more resilient and, and more interesting, than, than this steady diet of straight, white, able-bodied men telling us their impressions of the world, you know? It's important because stories shape our beliefs and our beliefs guide our actions. And so we're constantly telling stories that, you know, only thin beautiful women deserve to fall in love, for example, will change the way we women who don't consider ourselves gorgeous, participate in the world. You know, when we constantly see film and TV where women speak only 20% of the time will believe that we should only speak 20% of the time.

Don't get me started on all the tropes around disability in popular culture, the belief that if you have a disabled family member, then you're somehow forgiven for some, some sort of, you know, some sort of fault or, or failing moral failing on your part. Like, we see that all the time. That's such a trope in film and television. You wanna make a slightly problematic character, more sympathetic, give them a disabled family member, and that'll just do the trick, right? And so you see people who have family members who are disabled, who think they get

a free pass, you know. Our stories shape our beliefs and beliefs guide our actions. So the stories we tell and the perspective that we're telling them from are vitally important to our world.

Hope Van Der Merwe: We also talked about how capitalism plays a large role in shaping the way society views disabled people. Because, as you will hear Debbie say, our worth under capitalism is determined by how much money we can make.

Debbie Patterson: You have to earn a living to be a worthwhile human being, right? You have to contribute to society, and by having a job at which, you know, and the irony is that usually having a job means creating wealth for someone who already has more than enough. The idea that your worth as a human being is based on your ability to make money is completely messed up. We are relational beings, not transactional beings. We, you know, our value as humans is in our ability to love and maintain relationships and connection with other human beings, you know? The money we make is something we do in between those moments of connection, how can we base our worth on our ability to make money? It's just such a scam. And it's ableism and it hurts all of us.

Hope Van Der Merwe: Why do you think it is still somehow acceptable for able-bodied actors to play disabled roles? Like why are we not outraged about it like we are about other issues?

Debbie Patterson: Disabled people have been denied opportunities to train and develop. So it's hard to find disabled actors who have the training and the skills to do the role, and fair enough. It's true. It's hard to find them. So what are you doing about that? is the first question, right? And then there's a belief that if you are disabled, you are sort of empirically inferior rather than, you know, we understand that. That sexism is wrong, that men and women are equal, that racism is wrong. All, you know, all races are equal. But with disability, you actually can't do stuff, so you're actually not as good. Right? And, I know there are things I can do that most bipeds can't, you know, there are things I can do that lots of bipeds can't, that have nothing to do with disability. You know, they're just like, I just have other skills.

And because you don't have those skills to set me, you're empirically inferior to me. You know, we're all, we all have our gifts, we all bring our gifts, but there's this belief that because you're disabled, you are, you know, that it's, that's, it's a justifiable bigotry, you know? so there's that enduring problem of people thinking that disability is inferior. And I blame capitalism on that one big time. And then the other thing, the reason we celebrate actors who crip up or women who make themselves ugly is again, ableism that you have the courage to present yourself in a less than perfect way in front of people. You know, you were so courageous for playing that role where you gained 30 pounds to do it, you know, and for us all to see you being so horrible and so repulsive.

And that is courageous as an actor. And that is entirely rooted in ableism. That idea that allowing yourself to be repulsive is courageous. But it's a safe admiration because we know they're actually pinnacles of beauty. That we know these actors are actually able-bodied and, and gorgeous. So it's okay if they be courageous and show themselves as ugly because, you know, it's not actually true.

Hope Van Der Merwe: How can we continue to make the space accessible to disabled artists in the rehearsal room? What would you say to other artists?

Debbie Patterson: Working with disabled people can be scary cause you don't know what you're allowed to ask. You don't know what you're allowed to do, so you're going to make mistakes.

Right. And you're probably going to say the wrong thing at some point, and that's okay. Right. It's okay to get it wrong. It's okay to sort of fuck up and you just have to own it, you know? And so much of my experience at Crip is about being in a space that doesn't quite work and things fuck up.

And so I have to step back, figure out another way and try again. Right? And so if you want to work with disabled people, just rest assured that we know what that process is. You know, we understand that you'll try something, it'll fuck up. So we'll step back and try again. And we're with you on that journey. It's okay to recognize that disabled people have been denied opportunities to train and develop and to make that part of your process. It's okay to recognize that, with consent, you know, that there can be some, some coaching or some support for disabled artists to be part of a production to make sure that they are able to participate fully, right. That's totally okay. It's okay to look at disabled bodies. I know we're afraid because we're told not to stare. We're told that the freak show is offensive, but it's okay to look at disabled bodies, just like it's okay to look at any other bodies. You can put these bodies on stage and it's not offensive.

Hope Van Der Merwe: This concludes our episode for today. Thank you so much for listening, and I hope you have gained as much valuable insight from hearing these artists speak as I have from talking to them. As Rachel, Faith, and Debbie have all articulated, it is incredibly important to turn our gaze to disabled works and invest in disabled artists so we can build a future where Crippling Shakespeare, and witnessing disabled actors on stage is celebrated. And where rehearsal halls are accessible to all artists.

Thank you for joining us for this week's episode. I hope you will join us again next week for the penultimate episode of

Liam/Hope/Marlis: *Shaking up Shakespeare.*

Marlis Schweitzer: This podcast is part of *Resetting the Stage*, a five year project that seeks to situate debates about theatrical representation and the politics of casting in Canada within a broad historical context, advancing dialogue with directors, playwrights, actors, educators, students, and other creators who are actively transforming professional Canadian theatre and university level theatre training.

For more information on other aspects of the project, please visit castingcanadiantheatre.ca. Interviews for this podcast were conducted by Marlis Schweitzer, Jeff Ho, Liam Lockhart-Rush, and Hope Van Der Merwe. All episodes written and edited by Marlis, Liam, and Hope, with dramaturgical input from Jeff. Sound mixing and levels by Maddie Batista. ASL Translation by Dawn Jani Birley. Original Music by Faith Andrew. Special thanks to

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Thanks for listening to *Shaking Up Shakespeare*.