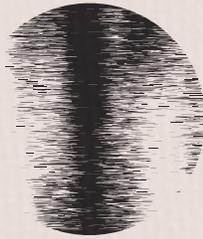


CREATIVITY



COMPASSION



FLEXIBILITY



COMMUNICATION



*A NEARLY COMPREHENSIVE GUIDE TO
CREATING AN ACCESSIBLE THEATER*

WRITTEN BY MELANIE MALSON

This guide is intended to help those in the theatre community learn about and develop actionable methods to make theatre more accessible to disabled people, both as artists and audience members. Accessibility and equity for disabled people is extremely complex and varied, and the solution to every situation definitely won't be explicitly listed here. For the most part, this guide will contain ways to find the solutions that your specific artistic community needs, and examples of problem-solving methods having a successful outcome from first person accounts, both published elsewhere and collected by me. If you have any additions to this guide in terms of personal or professional experiences with accessibility in the theatre, or want to contact me to discuss ways of improving this guide or advice about how you can apply it, please feel free to contact me at melaniemalson0@gmail.com. This document is completely free of cost, and can be replicated, excerpted, shared, and modified to work within your space. As long as the information is not altered to be untrue, anything included here is free for anyone to use in any way without payment or attribution to me necessary. You must, however, retain any attributions I have made for resources or testimony that I did not write.

Thank you to Kristopher Ingle for working with me to develop the cover design for this project. He dedicated his time and effort free of charge to create the textures you see on the cover to represent the four main principles of this work: flexibility, compassion, communication, and creativity. Each of these concepts is connected by a material we use in the theatre: wood, metal, paint, and light. Kristopher's design shows that these concepts are as essential to the theatre as the materials used to represent them, and that we can't have a successful theatre without compassion and creativity any more than we could without wood or paint. His explanation of his design is as follows:

"I chose lights for creativity because when I started theater, I didn't realize that a cue-to-cue would be triggering for photosensitivity. When I was told to accommodate that, it made me a better theatermaker because I was able to accommodate those needs without having to sacrifice my creative agency or anyone else's. For compassion, I chose metal because I think a lot about how the stairs in the Lisner Downstage, the theater where I work in college, are inaccessible. Because I couldn't change that environment, we have to change our behavior about it, and be compassionate enough to fight for a new space for our productions. I was told that those stairs limit people from participating in our theater, and it opened my eyes to how important accessibility is. I chose wood to represent flexibility because wood makes me think of building sets, and the physical toll that that kind of work can create. Our theater group tries to be inclusive of everyone, and when people want to do some kind of technical work, we ensure that nobody is pushed too hard, that we take breaks when anyone needs a break, and that we believe people when they say something is wrong. It reminds me of times when, during build week, someone was painting or building wall flats standing up and couldn't finish the flat because it was upright, and how we learned how to be flexible about things like that. Paint represents communication for the same reason: when we have been painting and someone has told me they need a break, I make sure we take a break, so that the communication is valued and listened to and accomplishes what it needs to. Because of that communication, we started painting them before we build the rest of the flat so that people get what they need now without having to ask."



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Introduction: ADA Requirements

After decades of work on the part of disabled activists nationwide, the Americans with Disabilities Act was signed into law in 1990. This act includes a multitude of legal requirements that federally and privately run spaces must abide by.

Though the scope of this guide will go far beyond the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act, this is the minimum that every public space must fulfill in order to obey American law. If you have worked with or visited a theatre that does not fulfill these requirements, please see the end of this section for resources and guidance on how to ensure that your local theater is following the law. All the information contained here about the ADA is as of 2021.

Title III of the Americans with Disabilities Act defines the ways in which public accommodations and commercial facilities must be structured in order to make them accessible to disabled people. ADA.gov summarizes this section of the law as follows:

“Title III prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in the activities of places of public accommodations (businesses that are generally open to the public and that fall into one of 12 categories listed in the ADA, such as restaurants, movie theaters, schools, day care facilities, recreation facilities, and doctors’ offices) and requires newly constructed or altered places of public accommodation—as well as commercial facilities (privately owned, nonresidential facilities such as factories, warehouses, or office buildings)—to comply with the ADA Standards.”

This essentially means that privately owned places open to the public, called public accommodations, must meet a certain set of accessibility standards in order to comply with the law. Every theater that is open to the public in America must obey these standards, no matter how old the building or how small the company. Some exceptions are made when they are determined by a public entity to be “structurally impractical,” but no public space is permitted to disregard all requirements because one cannot be followed. The accessibility standards are summarized below, and the link to ADA.gov’s full explanation of Title III will be linked in this section’s resources.

ADA Title III Summary

- All public accommodations must meet ADA non-discrimination requirements by March 15, 2012, with few exceptions. This means that any theater that currently does not meet these standards is likely breaking the law.
- Service animals, defined as animals trained to perform a specific service or set of services for disabled people, must be permitted inside theaters.
 - If you are unsure whether an animal inside of a theater is a service animal, you may ask only these two questions:
 - Is the animal required because of a disability?
 - What work or task has the animal been trained to perform?

- Mobility aids, like canes, wheelchairs, electric scooters, and crutches, must be permitted in all places where customers are allowed to go.
- If a customer needs to communicate with an employee in a theater and verbal communication is not useful to that customer, forms of communication such as written notes or gesturing towards a sign or product are required to accommodate the way that customer communicates.
- Theaters must answer calls made through the ADA's telephone relay service, a service that allows d/Deaf and hard-of-hearing people and others to send a written message to be voiced over by another person as a phone call. The communications assistant at the relay service can help explain the system if necessary, but calls placed through the relay service must be answered and treated the same as any other phone call.
- Businesses must remove structural barriers for disabled people if the removal is "readily achievable." For example, if your box office has a single step up to the ticket window, this step must be replaced with a safe ramp.
- If your theater has a parking lot, one out of every six parking spaces must be van-accessible. If your theater has fewer than six parking spaces, one of those spaces must be van-accessible.
 - Snow, construction debris, and other debris cannot block these accessible spaces.
- Theaters must have at least one wheelchair-accessible entrance, meaning no steps or barriers to the door. The door must be wide enough for a wheelchair to fit through. If the theater has more than one entrance and only one is accessible, signage must be placed on the inaccessible entrance(s) to direct patrons to the accessible entrance.
- Routes through the theater, including to audience seating, the box office, and the restrooms, must be at least three feet wide and not cluttered by objects.
- Theaters are required to make 1% of their audience seats accessible, meaning they must have clear floor space and larger dimensions than standard seats, and are able to be accessed by someone using a wheelchair or other mobility aid.
 - These seats must be distributed proportionally throughout the venue so that disabled people have the option to purchase tickets at multiple degrees of closeness to the stage, different sightlines, etc. Accessible seats must have the same options as non-accessible seats. [To learn more about ADA requirements for accessible seating, visit the ADA's compliance page for assembly areas.](#)
- Theaters are required to sell tickets for accessible audience seats through the same hours and methods of purchase as non-accessible seats.
 - Theaters are also required to provide accessible tickets to third party vendors if they provide non-accessible tickets, and those vendors must abide by the ADA requirements.
 - Tickets for accessible seats must be the same price as tickets for non-accessible seats in the same seating section.
 - Theaters cannot ask for proof of a disability when selling tickets to accessible seats.

- If your theater has a more affordable section where patrons stand rather than sitting and chairs are unavailable there, a proportional amount of accessible seats must be made available for the same price.

If Your Space is not a Public Accommodation

What if I host performances in my private home, or in a public space where I don't control the environment, like a park or university?

- If you host performances in your private home, you are not legally required to abide by these rules, but you can certainly work with the resources you have!
 - Make sure passageways to and from your bathroom and wherever audience members will sit, and where performers will perform, are uncluttered by objects or furniture. If the structure of your home is not wheelchair accessible, make sure potential participants and viewers know this in advance of making any commitments or purchasing anything.
 - Try to clear enough space inside your bathroom for a wheelchair user to get out of their wheelchair and onto the toilet, and to have access to the sink from their chair. If this isn't possible, make sure potential participants and viewers know in advance.
- If you host performances in a public space you have no control over that is not ADA accessible, they are likely not following ADA requirements! See the section below for an explanation of how to file a complaint. If the complaint does not fix the issue, try to seek another available space to perform that is more accessible.

How to Report an ADA Violation

If your theater is in violation of these legal requirements, you can file a complaint online, by mail, or by fax, whether you are an audience member or a theatre practitioner working with the theater. Make sure to include information on how to communicate effectively with you when you file a complaint in any format. If you need large print or Braille paper documents, or communication by voice or video call, the Department of Justice must provide this for you, so make sure you let them know you need it. Keep a copy of your complaint form and originals of any relevant documents for your own records.

To file online, visit [the Department of Justice website](#) and fill out the online form.

To file by mail, send this completed [ADA complaint form](#) to:

U.S. Department of Justice
Civil Rights Division
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
4CON, 9th Floor
Washington, DC 20530

To file by fax, fill out the [ADA complaint form](#) and fax it to (202) 307-1197.

If you are unable to communicate through any of these forms, call the ADA information line, 1-800-514-0301 (voice) or 1-800-514-0383 (TeleTYpewriter), to schedule an appointment to have your complaint transcribed over the phone or video call.

For more information about what happens once you file your complaint, please visit the [ADA's complaint page](#) on their website.

Note: As I am a theatre practitioner based in America, the information here is very specific to American laws and American theaters. For more information about the basic legal requirements for accessibility within other international legal systems, please visit the [United Nations' compiled list of laws](#) around the world concerning disabled people.

Section I: Accessibility for Audience Members

In order to create a truly accessible theater, every aspect of the audience experience must be as accessible as possible. As in all the sections of this guide besides the introduction, some of what is outlined here may be financially impossible for your theater or performance group, or it may be irrelevant to the spaces and practices you use. This guide is meant to be a starting point, one where theatre practitioners can take what they need and leave what they don't to create the best environment they can for disabled people who want to take part in any aspect of theatre. If you are already doing these things on select performance dates, include more dates on that list! Many of these services and modifications are costly, but they are essential to creating a theater where disabled people are welcomed as audience members, so please prioritize them in your budget.

Accommodations for Auditory Components

One important aspect of audience accessibility is ensuring that all audience members are able to experience the dialogue and other auditory components of a performance. There are two ways to ensure this, and a number of factors like budget, intended audience, and artistic considerations can help to decide which is the best option.

1. CART and other types of captioning: CART, which stands for Communication Access Realtime Translation, is a type of open captioning where a person or people listen to live audio and use a stenography-type machine to provide real-time captions for the event. This service benefits anyone who can read, which means it can accommodate for the needs of a broad audience. However, it does require some technological equipment and can be expensive. [Click here for more information and frequently asked questions about CART captioning.](#)
2. ASL interpreting: ASL, which stands for American Sign Language, is a language where hand movements are used to communicate. An interpreter can be hired to translate the verbally spoken audio from the production into ASL. This is only helpful to people who speak ASL, so the audience reached may not be as broad, but it doesn't require any special technology. However, it is important that the interpreter is well lit and placed onstage so that audience members can see them. If you want to start the search for an ASL interpreter, [the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf's hiring database](#) is a great place to start.

Accommodations for Visual Components

It's also important to ensure that all audience members are able to experience the visual elements of a performance. There are two options to ensure this. Each fulfills a different aspect of the visual experience, and they also work well together!

1. Audio description is a great way to make sure that everyone, even those with low or no vision, can experience what's going on visually onstage. Audio description usually consists of a single earpiece or headset for the audience member, where they can hear

a trained audio describer speak between lines in the play to describe action onstage and entrances and exits, as well as describing set, costumes, props, and other visual elements before the show and during intermission. [Click here for more information about audio description, and a list of theaters in the United States that offer audio description at some performances.](#)

2. Touch tours are an excellent opportunity for people with low or no vision to experience the design elements of a production. This usually entails inviting audience members to the theater at a time when a performance is not currently happening, and allowing them to interact with the sets, props, and costume pieces so they can get a sense of what the design elements are and integrate that into their experience of the show. It usually works best when the touch tour happens before the performance so audience members can have an understanding of the design elements already when they attend the performance.

Accommodations for Mobility

The ADA requirements are great guidelines for ensuring audience members with varying levels of mobility access to performances. Here is a quick overview of the best practices:

- Passageways should be at least three feet wide and not cluttered by objects of any kind in order to ensure wheelchair users are able to traverse the theater.
- Make sure wheelchair accessible seating is available and meets ADA standards.
- Any kind of mobility aid must be permitted anywhere audience members are permitted. If someone using a cane or walker cannot fit their aid in their standard seat, offer them an accessible seat or a safe place to put that mobility aid during the performance if they prefer not to move.
- Doors in the theater should be push doors, or have an automatic open button at wheelchair height. If this is not possible, prop these doors open while audience members need to use them. Doorways should also be at least three feet wide and uncluttered.
- Counters at the box office, concession stands, etc. should be an appropriate height for a wheelchair user or little person to see over. If this is impossible, provide a clipboard or similar for any paperwork that needs to be filled out, and step outside of the box office to personally converse with that patron, so they can see you and hear you properly.

Sensory Friendly Performances

For autistic people, those with sensory processing disorder, and many others, some traditional elements of the theater may cause stress and prevent them from enjoying the performance. In order to welcome people with sensory processing difficulties into audiences, some theaters have developed sensory friendly performances, where some elements of the performance are altered in order to make them easier to process. These are also sometimes called relaxed performances. There are a number of things that one can do to make a performance more sensory friendly.

- Talking and moving are permitted during the performance. This takes the pressure of being completely still and silent off of audience members. Not only does this make

performances more accessible for autistic audience members, those with Tourette's syndrome, and others, it can also enrich the communal experience of live theater. In the words of dramaturg and writer Alix Rosenfeld, "I felt encouraged to see more of the space, talk with my neighbors, and lock eyes in moments of solidarity with fellow theatregoers during the performance."

- House lights are dimmed rather than completely black.
- Lighting effects will be made less intense or slower, and sound effects may be quieter or slower. Generally, any element of the production design that may be startling or overwhelming should be slowed, quieted, or altered to make a smoother, slower transition between different sensory inputs.
- Designated quiet areas will be created and clearly marked throughout the theater for patrons who feel overwhelmed or want to take a break from the performance.
- It is usually best if crowds are kept to a minimum, which may mean reducing the size of the audience depending on how many seats there are in your theater.
- Providing sensory tools like pen and paper or fidget toys, or noise-reducing headphones, can be very helpful for those with sensory processing issues who want to enjoy the theater. See [The Goodman Theater's sensory friendly performance page](#) for more information about providing tools to help patrons enjoy the show.

Promotions

In addition to the accessibility of performances and spaces, the accessibility of promotional and informational materials like websites, programs, and ticket purchasing are essential to welcoming disabled audiences. If your theater space is fully accessible but your website is unusable with a screenreader, disabled people will likely not be able to make it into your theater in the first place. Here are the basics of accessible promotional and informational materials for theaters:

- Offer Braille and large print paper programs. Additionally, or if the extra printing is financially impractical, provide digital programs instead. Not only does this allow blind and low-vision people to read the programs, it is also better for the environment and likely cheaper than printing on paper.
 - Use [this guide from McGill University](#) to make sure your digital programs are screenreader accessible.
- Use dyslexia-friendly fonts in all of your typed material, whether it is digital or on paper. In general, dyslexia-friendly type is sans-serif, and uses bolding rather than underlining or italicizing for emphasis. For a list of free dyslexia-friendly fonts, please click here!
- Include a comprehensive know-before-you-go in an email to those who have purchased tickets and on your website so people can read it before they purchase a ticket. See the section below for more information.

Know-Before-You-Go's

There are a lot of difficulties that disabled people face in the theater that could be avoided if they were informed beforehand about certain aspects of a production or theater space. For this

reason, a 'know before you go' email, in addition to a clearly marked webpage, can be immensely helpful. What should be included in the know before you go depends largely on the show you are producing and the space you are working in, but there are some common examples:

- Content transparency or content warnings: The theater is a place to address difficult topics, connect with others, and spark discussions, but it is also essential that people are informed about the content they will experience in any given performance. If your show includes mentions or depictions of difficult content like violence, abuse, substance use, death, weapons, or any number of other potentially triggering topics, make sure that potential audience members are aware of this before they arrive at the theater, and before they ever purchase a ticket. Make sure that in addition to considering the content in the script, warnings are provided about sound cues like gunshots or screaming. These warnings should be specific in nature, explaining when the potentially triggering content will begin and end.
 - If you are concerned about spoiling a pivotal moment of the show, place the content warnings under a clickable link, and clearly mark that parts of the plot will be revealed under that link. For example, DC's Woolly Mammoth Theater offered a complete sensory guide, including content transparency, for their show *Hi, Are You Single?* where the spoilers are placed in a separate PDF file that can be reached through a link on their website. This particular webpage is only available to those who bought tickets, so I can't link it directly, but I recommend making this type of information available to all potential audience members, even before they buy tickets.
- Warnings about technical and design elements: In addition to transparency about the content addressed in the show, it is important to warn potential audience members about technical and design elements that may pose a physical risk to some people.
 - Photosensitivity warnings: For people with epilepsy or other conditions that cause photosensitivity, the use of strobe lights or other flashing or quickly changing lights can cause seizures, which are painful and sometimes life-threatening. If there are any strobe lights or other lighting elements that change brightness or color rapidly, make sure this is advertised before tickets are purchased, and that warnings include specific information about when and for how long these lighting effects will occur.
 - Warning about sudden loud noises: For autistic people, those with PTSD, and many others, sudden loud noises can be frightening or even physically painful. Make sure this is advertised before tickets are purchased, and that warnings include specific information about when the noises will occur.
 - Smoke machines, herbal cigarettes, and other similar elements: For those with asthma or other lung conditions, the presence of a smoke machine or cigarette smoke, even from a non-tobacco cigarette, can be painful and even dangerous. If these elements will be used in your production, make sure this is advertised before tickets are purchased, and that warnings include specific information about when and for how long they will be used.

- Information about the atmosphere of your theater: In addition to performance content, the atmosphere of the actual building can be very important to allow people to prepare for the performance or decide whether it is safe for them to visit your theater.
 - The seat size of the theater often correlates with the size of the crowd at each show. Large crowds can be overwhelming to some, so potential audience members may want to know if they will be in a large crowd if they come to a performance.
 - The temperature of your theater. Extreme temperatures can cause sensory discomfort or induce uncomfortable symptoms of some conditions, so if your theater tends to feel very warm or very chilly, let your patrons know.
 - Perfumes, colognes, and other scented products in your theater. If you have no notices or rules banning perfumes and other scented products in your theater, including for audience members, please let your patrons know, as these can cause allergic reactions or aggravate sensory conditions. I recommend requesting that your patrons don't wear perfumes, scented lotions, or any other products with a strong scent.

Addressing Accessibility Concerns

If you are trying to improve the accessibility of your theater but are worried that there are areas where your theater is falling behind, try designating someone specific within the theater who can receive and inform about concerns from patrons and other staff members and artists. In order to ensure the comfort of people reporting violations or struggles they have had, provide the option for complete anonymity of the individual making a complaint or suggestion. Creating an online form to fill out where identifying information is optional is an excellent way to provide anonymity. Additionally, make sure that this person's role and how to reach them is well advertised on your website and other materials. The point person in your theater should be familiar with ADA requirements and with best practices in general for creating a welcoming space for disabled individuals.

Questions to Ask:

1. Are the processes to receive accommodations hard to understand or time consuming?
2. Is access to the accommodations we provide advertised and clearly labeled?
3. Is there information that isn't being advertised about our production or our space that people might need to know before they decide to purchase tickets to a performance?
4. Does there need to be a separate process or request for all of the accommodations we provide? Should they be considered accommodations at all, or can we integrate them into our practices?
5. Would people benefit more from some or all of our available accommodations being provided to everyone without a special request?
6. What kinds of people do we want to see in our audiences, and are we effectively creating a welcoming space for those people? If not, what are some steps we could take to change that?

7. What artistic value could be added to our performance by considering accommodation and accessibility from the start rather than as a last-minute add on?
8. Are there artistic choices in our show that make it inaccessible that we can alter or remove without compromising our artistic integrity?

Section II: Workplace Culture and Spaces

Making sure your theater is accessible for audience members is only one aspect of creating an accessible theater. It is essential to offer services to a diverse audience base, but if your rehearsal rooms, board meetings, and production teams are made up entirely of able-bodied people, you may still have work to do. Ensuring that all parts of your theater, from the lobby to the lighting booth, are physically accessible is an important first step, and should be guided by the above section, as well as more specifics in this one. However, there is much more about the broader structures and practices of theaters that need to be changed to ensure effective accessibility for everyone.

Accessible Spaces for Theater Practitioners

In addition to following the ADA and other guidelines outlined above for the spaces in the theater that are open to the public, it is essential to ensure that all areas of the theater are accessible within reason. While it may be impossible to make lighting catwalks and ladders wheelchair accessible, there are some easy changes in structure and mindset that can be made to allow a more diverse staff of administrators and artists to thrive in your theater.

- There should be at least one wheelchair accessible dressing room in your theater, equipped with mirrors that allow the full body to be seen when sitting and standing if possible.
- The lighting and sound booth should be wheelchair accessible and have room for a wheelchair, powerchair, or walker. This may not require renovation, even if your space is small. Rearranging or removing objects stored there can sometimes turn an inaccessible space into an accessible one. Sometimes, it can be as simple as removing a chair or a box of equipment for the duration of a show. Try also to make sure that the sound and lighting boards can be reached by a wheelchair user in their chair if the surface they are placed on is not a standard height.
- If your theater has administrative offices, make sure the offices and the pathways to them are also wheelchair accessible. If there are structural limitations such as a second floor office space with no elevator, explore options like bringing tables and chairs into a lobby or onstage when they are not needed for performances or rehearsals and hosting meetings there.
- Make sure the box office is wheelchair accessible both for patrons and for employees.
- Step stools and places to sit should be available anywhere people will be congregating for long periods of time: rehearsal rooms, offices, costume and scene shops, etc.
- Allow for both digital and paper access to notes, as well as options to take notes either digitally or on paper.
- Make scripts and other important documents available digitally and on paper.
- When possible, make informed choices about the building and cleaning materials used in your spaces. People with environmental allergies are often prevented from entering public spaces due to the building and especially cleaning materials used in them. When renovating buildings or crafting sets, try to avoid known allergen materials, like epoxy

resin, and cement and mortar that contain chromates. Additionally, seek hypoallergenic cleaning products when possible.

Radical Vulnerability and Interdependence

One of the best ways to make your theater environment better is to truly recognize the humanity of your colleagues. Every theatre practitioner benefits when the complexities of each individual life is considered in a theatrical space, and better art is created. Art is about vulnerability, emotion, and the aspects of life that we rarely have access to in other public venues. If these aspects are not respected as much in the process as they are in the product, not only will it be a less ethical and more taxing process for those involved, it will also be harder for artists to bring their vulnerability and creativity to the table. When this happens, we cannot depend on each other as colleagues, artists, or fellow human beings. In the words of Debbie Patterson, Artistic Director of Sick + Twisted Theater, “When a culture of interdependence is established, suddenly everyone’s vulnerabilities can be given space: the stage manager whose kid has a fever and can’t go to daycare, the insomniac who needs a quiet space to nap on breaks, the service dog who needs to go out for a pee, and all the invisible conditions that we theatremakers spend our professional lives hiding in order to get through the twelve-hour cue-to-cue days. Suddenly all these things are manageable, all these things are welcome, all these things can be supported.”

- Radical vulnerability refers to being open about the struggles you are facing, and honestly stating your limitations and needs in a given situation. It is not complaining or oversharing, it is simply bringing your whole self, both the best and the most challenging parts, to your theater space.
- Interdependence refers to the fact that in the theater process, we all depend on each other’s various roles to play, both onstage and off. In the same vein, we should all be able to depend on each other for support and compassion when we need it. Because none of us can create theatre by ourselves, nobody should have to shoulder the burdens that come with it by themselves either.

The best way to encourage radical vulnerability in your space is to practice it yourself. If you are struggling with something personal, like acute illness, access to childcare, or transportation issues, be open about that struggle rather than giving a more traditionally acceptable excuse for lateness or absence. Leading by example and being honest when you struggle may allow your colleagues to feel comfortable doing the same. In the theater, we often prepare ourselves to be ready for anything when it comes to the theatrical practices and processes, but are often underprepared for the real lives that all of our colleagues juggle on top of their theatrical careers. In order to create an accessible theater, we as theatremakers must truly be ready for anything; not just a costume quick change or last minute reprogram of the lights, but also the humanity of everyone in the theater, onstage, backstage, and everywhere else. Though there may be growing pains for you and your workplace, with dedication, a change can be made over time that allows you and everyone you work with to receive compassionate and adequate accommodation for their struggles and challenges.

- For example, if your child is spiking a fever and needs to be taken to the doctor, rather than scrambling to be in two places at once, simply let your colleagues know what is

happening and ask for their help in finding a solution that allows your child to get the care they need and for the theatrical process to progress. This may involve other colleagues splitting up the work for you for the day, delaying the start of a meeting or rehearsal and using that time for a different task, or even asking to join the meeting or rehearsal virtually from the waiting room at the pediatrician.

- None of these solutions are perfect, but over time, your work environment will develop resilience and problem solving skills that allow everyone involved flexibility and grace in the face of unexpected issues. Finding that rhythm and being dedicated to respecting the needs of others can make a huge difference for everyone in the theater, disabled or not.

What We Can Learn from COVID

The coronavirus pandemic has altered almost every aspect of life, including every part of the theatre. When in-person gatherings were completely impossible, though, theatre practitioners continued their work as artists, modifying traditional practices and patterns to adjust to their new circumstances. The creative thinking and dedication that allowed theatre to continue even during the pandemic is exactly what disabled theatre practitioners need from their colleagues and peer artists. During the pandemic, we all had to modify the way we worked in a number of ways that could be useful to working with disabled theatre practitioners later.

- Virtual access to meetings and productions: Throughout the pandemic we have all learned to adjust to meeting, creating, and performing digitally to various degrees. Though we are all anticipating a return to live theater, virtual access to meetings, rehearsals, and productions can be extremely helpful to disabled individuals, both for those who cannot make it to an in-person space and for those who have intermittent episodes of needing to stay at home despite usually working in-person. For example, if your performance space is not wheelchair accessible but you would like to work with a costume designer who uses a wheelchair, providing virtual access to production meetings and tech week rehearsals can be an excellent workaround.
- Flexibility: The coronavirus pandemic has, in many ways, forced people to confront the personal lives of their colleagues in a way that they haven't before, which has made space for flexibility in workplaces and schools that wasn't previously present. Holding onto this recognition of everyone's humanity and personal needs after the pandemic is over would be an immense help to all theatre practitioners, including disabled people.

Though they are not usually understood this way, the changes we have made to the theatre and its processes throughout the pandemic are accommodations for the situation we are all in. The accommodations that disabled people need are just as legitimate and necessary as those we have made in order to keep creating theatre throughout the pandemic. We have all learned how to accommodate and how to deal with unexpected or unfamiliar circumstances through this experience, and taking those tools with us as the situation continues to change will be invaluable.

Sensitivity Training

Sensitivity training is an excellent first step to altering the culture of your workplace, especially if most people you work with are unfamiliar with disability.

If you are a leader in a theater and you want to add sensitivity training to your workplace, please do not ask a disabled colleague to create a curriculum for you or to lead the training. This is insensitive and assumes that because of their life experience they will have both the knowledge and the desire to lead such a course. Instead, seek the services of someone who teaches sensitivity training courses professionally, and pay them fairly. If a disabled colleague of yours offers to lead or assist with the training and it is not within their job description to do so, please compensate them for their time and effort.

Additionally, sensitivity training should not be offered only once and then forgotten about, or viewed as a complete solution to the issues that prevent disabled people from engaging in theatre. Offer sessions regularly as budgeting allows, and make sure it is one part of a larger initiative to increase access.

No More 10 out of 12s

No More 10 out of 12s is a campaign that encourages reallocation of hours and restructuring of the theatrical process, particularly during tech week, in order to alleviate pressure on theatre practitioners and remove 10 out of 12s from the tech week schedule. [Visit their website](#) for more information about the hows and whys of removing 10 out of 12s from your theater's schedules.

Overall, the brutal hours and pace of work during the average theatre tech week limit members of any marginalized group from being able to take part in theatre, including disabled people. Disabled people, and all people, need rest, time to heal, and time to dedicate to their other commitments and responsibilities. Try reallocating hours so that nobody in cast or crew needs to work longer than an 8-hour day and see what happens! There may be some growing pains but good art is created out of fairness and compassion, not out of exploitation and unethical practices.

Questions to Ask

1. Are my basic needs met in the theatrical processes I work in? Are my colleagues' needs met? Why or why not?
2. Is the way that we have always done things actually the best way to do them?
3. Where can I create space for humanity in our process without sacrificing the success of our productions?
4. Do I hold my colleagues to unfair standards? Am I being held to unfair standards?

Section III: Material

The material we work with in the theater can be a very important way of welcoming disabled people, or a powerful way of showing that disabled people are not welcome. Considering the implications and history of the material you choose is essential to creating an equitable and accessible theater environment.

Material to Avoid

Actively choose not to work with material that maligns and marginalizes disabled people, or alter the material to remove the harmful plotlines or make the storyline one that serves disabled people rather than harming them. Some examples of work that does not represent disabled people accurately or fairly would be Shakespeare's *Richard III* and Winnie Holzman's *Wicked*.

- If you still want to put up *Richard III*, try shifting the perspective of the play. Shakespeare in the Ruins' production of *Richard*, as described by Debbie Patterson, "wasn't the expected play about an evil twisted person with an evil twisted soul, a story that comes from "othering" people with disabilities. Instead, it was a disability revenge play—a story of an excluded, underestimated, and disrespected person who seizes power from the family that has held him down all his life."
- If you still want to put up *Wicked*, try altering the part of the musical that is disrespectful. It is okay for disabled people to be villains too, as long as they are still represented as whole individuals whose entire motivations for bad actions are not based on their disability. Rather than Nessarose putting on enchanted shoes and being "cured," she can simply wear sparkling shoes and make poor choices all while being a three-dimensional disabled character.

Material to Engage With

In addition to removing or changing material that is harmful to disabled people, it is important to actively engage with material written by and for disabled individuals. Disabled people deserve opportunities to tell their own stories and to see themselves represented on the stage. I will list a number of plays written by disabled playwrights below, but please do not stop there! Talk to people in your theatrical community and search for other amazing plays written by disabled people.

- Teenage Dick by Mike Lew
- peeling by Kaite O'Reilly
- Ultrasound by Adam Pottle
- Holy Water by Howie Seago
- The Rules of Charity by John Belluso
- No One As Nasty by Susan Nussbaum

The Fries Test

If you want to put on a play with a disabled character in it, but you aren't sure if it's a respectful representation or not, the Fries Test is an excellent tool to help make a determination. Kenny Fries modeled this test off of the Bechdel Test, which was developed by Alison Bechdel to analyse the role of women in a given work of fiction. The Fries Test is as follows:

- Does a work have more than one disabled character?
- Do the disabled characters have their own narrative purpose other than the education and profit of a nondisabled character?
- Is the character's disability not eradicated either by curing or killing?

If the answer to all of these questions is "yes," you have likely chosen a play that represents disabled people in a just and respectful way. If not, you may want to seek other work, particularly if the "no" comes from one of the last two questions. A good way to move forward is to figure out what message or issue you want to address with the play you have chosen, and seek another work that carries that same message without being disrespectful to disabled people.

Questions to Ask

- Are the shows we produce actively unwelcoming to disabled theatre practitioners? If not, are any of the shows we produce actively welcoming?
- Could we change something small about a play we feel passionate about producing to ensure it is not marginalizing disabled individuals?
- If we want to produce a play that is harmful to disabled people because of a different message it sends or topic it addresses, is there another play we could work with that accomplishes the same thing without harming the disabled community?
- Have we ever produced a play by a disabled playwright?
- Have we ever produced a play with a disabled main character?

Section IV: Casting and Hiring

Taking the steps to ensure your physical space and the culture of your theater are accessible is essential to creating a theater where disabled people are welcome, but if they aren't being cast or hired, they won't make it through the doors. Despite the general cultural view of disabled people, there is no job in the world that every disabled person is unfit for. Discriminatory hiring practices are against the law, and they make the theatre a smaller and less diverse place. If every section of your theater's staff is completely able-bodied, and so are all the casts of your shows, it may be time to make a space for more diversity.

Anti-Discrimination Laws

The ADA, in addition to requiring that public accommodations be physically accessible, forbids employers from discriminating against disabled applicants. See the [EEOC's Disability Discrimination page](#) for more detailed information and resources about disability discrimination in the hiring process.

- In the hiring stage, potential employers may not ask disability related questions, even about a visible disability, or require a medical exam as part of the interview. Disabled people are not required to disclose a disability in the hiring process, and if they choose to, potential employers cannot ask for more information than is voluntarily offered. Potential employers may only ask if the applicant can perform the job and how they would perform it.
- Once a job is offered, an employer can condition the job offer with certain disability related questions or a medical exam, but only if every person who has or is offered the job must answer these questions or pass the exam.
- Employers may only ask their already hired employees medical or disability related questions in order to obtain medical documentation to support a requested accommodation, or if the employer believes the employee cannot perform the job safely or successfully due to their disability.

How to Reach Out

If you feel that your theater is already a welcoming place for disabled staff and employees and aren't sure why the applications you receive don't reflect that, try creating inroads with local and federal organizations that provide resources for disabled people seeking work.

- Place job postings in places where disabled applicants are looking, for job opportunities big and small. See [this guide from the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission](#) for strategies to reach out to potential disabled employees.
- Try creating an internship or emerging artist program specifically for disabled people. [The Kennedy Center's VSA Emerging Young Artists Program](#) specifically works to help young disabled artists showcase their work and develop their career skills, which is an excellent way to help engage a population that is often neglected or not reached.

- Create inroads with local disability-focused organizations. This will make your theater a familiar face for those engaged in these groups, both as potential audience members and job applicants.

Disability Conscious Casting

If your theater wants to start producing work about disability for the first time, it is important to understand the significance of casting in telling these stories. Casting can be complex and rich with discrimination for disabled people, and if you are dedicated to casting your shows respectfully but aren't sure how, here are the basic principles:

- If you are casting for a character with a disability, able-bodied actors should not be considered. A blind character should be played by a blind actor, a character that uses a wheelchair should be played by an actor that uses a wheelchair, and so on.
 - This rule is not hard and fast for portraying characters with acute or terminal illnesses. If your character has a broken leg, or has terminal cancer, seeking disabled actors is still an excellent idea, but it's okay to cast a self-identified able bodied actor in roles like these.
- Even if none of the characters in the show are disabled, try to cast disabled actors anyway! There is no reason that a character who isn't specifically disabled can't be played by a disabled actor. It may require a few minor changes to stage directions or costuming, but it is important not to pigeonhole disabled performers.

Note for actors: If there is a casting call for a disabled character that does not specifically call for a disabled actor, don't audition for it. Help keep directors accountable and don't be a part of a production that asks you to put on a costume of disability while shutting out real disabled performers.

Questions to Ask

- Do we list job requirements, like the ability to lift ten pounds in an office job or have a driver's license, that aren't actually necessary for performing the job's responsibilities?
- Can we do more to welcome disabled people to apply for jobs or audition with us? Can we do more to hire or cast them once they apply?
- Have we ever cast a disabled person in a disabled role?
- Have we ever cast a disabled person in a role that isn't specifically for a disabled person?

Section V: Design

The way a production is designed can also have a big impact on accessibility for performers and technicians, in addition to their impacts on audience members. Some minor alterations in traditional design and tech elements can make it much easier for disabled people to participate fully in the theater experience, and these changes often enrich a show's depth and uniqueness if they are considered as an essential part of the process rather than added on as an afterthought.

Costume Design

Once a show is cast, make sure that any costume designs keep in mind the needs of the performers. For example, if a show is set in a time where women often wore hoopskirts, and one of your performers uses a wheelchair, make sure that their costume does not have a traditional hoopskirt, as they are extremely difficult to sit in and may not fit in the chair. In addition to making sure the costumes work physically for disabled performers, try incorporating mobility aids right into the costume design. Rather than considering them as an afterthought, make sure the mobility aid fits the character! It isn't always possible to make it perfect, especially when considering costs of recreating a period accurate wheelchair or the unsafe/uncomfortable nature of period accurate prosthetic limbs, but make sure that every part of the actor, including their mobility aid, is integrated into the overall production design (while of course still able to use their mobility aid safely).

Lighting Design

When designing lights, the main thing to consider is whether any photosensitive audience members or cast or crew members will be harmed by your lighting design. Strobe lights in general should be completely avoided, but also be wary of other types of flashing or quickly changing lights. If you know someone in your cast or crew is photosensitive, keep the lighting designs simple. Break down what you want to communicate with your lighting, then get creative and see how you can get that across with as little flashing, color-changing, or any other rapid lighting effects as possible. This also allows your show to be more sensory-friendly.

Set Design

If you will be crafting a set for someone with a mobility-related disability, make sure you are familiar with the construction of safe ramps that are on a gentle enough incline that they are safe to use with mobility aids, especially wheelchairs, scooters, or walkers. The ADA recommended incline for a ramp is as follows: every 1" of vertical rise requires at least 1' (12") of ramp length (5 degrees of incline).

Additionally, make sure your cast and crew are able to be around the building materials you use. Discuss with the stage manager, director, or someone else who might know whether anyone

involved in the production has allergies or sensitivities to particular woods, synthetic materials, or paints, and if so, brainstorm a workaround for those items!

Lobby Displays

Make sure that no aspect of a lobby display narrows a passageway smaller than three feet wide, so those with mobility aids are able to make it to the stage, the box office, the restrooms, and anywhere else they may need to go during tech week or during a performance. Also ensure that the lobby display is included in audio descriptions or is described in Braille in the programs.

Questions to Ask

- Does the production design of our show include the needs of disabled individuals as a fundamental aspect rather than an afterthought?
- Are there design elements of the show that could be altered to be more accessible while retaining the same aesthetic or functional purpose?
- Are there ways to convey the atmosphere, feeling, or message we want that do not exclude disabled people?

Section VI: Problem Solving

While all of the information in the above sections is essential to understand, in order to truly make your theater accessible, it's important to know how to solve problems when they arise within your own specific space and workplace culture. The most valuable tools in your toolbox as an advocate for accessibility are broad problem solving skills. Those skills are often two of the major things theatre already relies on: flexibility and creativity. When we take the skills we already have as theatre practitioners and devote them to creating an accessible culture of theatre, we can truly expand opportunities for disabled theatre practitioners and audience members, as well as creating a universally supportive and ethical theatre environment.

Flexibility

A great number of problems that disabled theatre practitioners face can be solved with flexibility and empathy for the situations of others. Disability can be unpredictable, and is often unfamiliar to able-bodied people beyond a surface-level or stereotypical understanding. The best way to solve almost all accessibility and equity concerns that come up for disabled theatre practitioners is through communication, and the best way to ensure that every member of a theater will express their own needs and respect the needs of others is to practice good communication and flexibility with every colleague and fellow theatre practitioner. Going into every situation with the intention to be reasonably flexible, understanding, and willing to both teach and learn will save a lot of time and energy in solving many problems that disabled people face in the theater.

The easiest way to implement this flexibility is often a shift in perspective. People's creativity and problem solving is often limited by thinking that because something has always been done a certain way, that is the best way to do it. When we try to think outside the constraints of the way things have always been done, very simple solutions can arise even to seemingly unapproachable problems. For example, it may seem impossible for a director with severe photosensitivity to check all of the lighting in her show in a cue-to-cue. However, rather than sacrificing her artistic integrity or making best guesses, the master electrician warned her every time the light would change so she could cover her eyes. This way, she was still able to ensure that the lighting for her show looked the way she wanted it to without experiencing a migraine or seizure. When a situation arises where the mechanics of theatre seem to be fundamentally incompatible with someone's needed accommodations, think outside the box, or sometimes, just think about the absolute simplest solution.

Compassion

Having compassion is essential to creating an accessible theatre. In order to make bold choices, tell hard truths, and address complex ideas, we need to be emotionally vulnerable and open to things that scare us in the creative space. The only way to do this healthily is with compassion for each other. A lot of accessibility problems we face in the theatre can be solved by approaching them with a mindset of genuine respect for the needs of others, without much more effort beyond that. It is easy to make little changes, like taking a few extra minutes during

a cue-to-cue to warn the director about the light cues coming up, or to alter the dress code in your office to better fit a coworker's sensory needs, when the desire to solve problems you come across comes from a place of genuine care.

Communication

Asking questions is an incredibly powerful tool for fostering accessibility. When you are ready to be flexible and you come to the situation with compassion, you are much more likely to be able to ask the right questions. And once you ask those questions, you have all the information you need to get the right answers. Asking your disabled colleagues what they need without othering them or making them feel like their needs are too much is an incredible way to make changes to your artistic space so that those accommodations can be built into the framework from now on.

However, communication can't stop with asking questions. It's also equally important to create an environment where you can get honest, vulnerable answers to those questions. When people feel that they are valued and respected, they will be able to share what they really need, what they can take and what they can give to make any situation function the best it can for everyone involved. An excellent way to do this is to truly embrace the tenets of vulnerability and interdependence that I reference earlier. Once you come to your creative space every day willing to give and take what you truly need and willing to offer your full, most vulnerable self to both the art and your fellow artists, you will become a person that others can turn to when they have a vulnerable question to ask, or a vulnerable question to answer.

Creativity

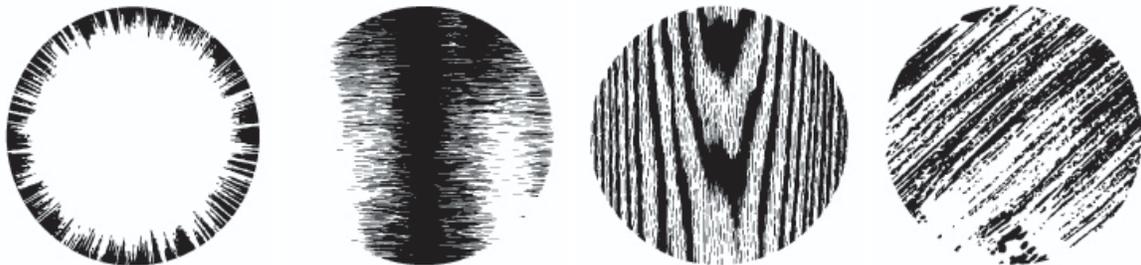
Creativity, of course, has its place in every corner of a theater. From the scene shop to the lobby, every aspect of the theater is colored by the creative work of the people involved in it. Don't let that creativity stop once the show is over. Finding solutions to issues of accessibility can be challenging, especially when you are constrained by budget, time, and space. But those constraints don't stop theatremakers from creating incredible art, and they shouldn't stop us from creating incredible spaces for artists. Use the creative thinking that makes you an asset to the theatre to be an asset to your disabled colleagues. Don't be afraid to think outside of the box, and don't give up when there isn't an easy answer. The fight for an accessible theatre is a fight for all of us that will benefit all of us. If you offer what you have to give, you will reap the benefits of what a truly accessible theatre has to offer.

Questions to Ask

Asking the right questions is the best way to get the right answers. In each section, I've included questions to ask yourself as a theatre practitioner. In this particular section, I will include questions with possible answers. None of these questions has a single, uncomplicated correct answer, but I want to show that reasonable, helpful solutions that support everyone involved are possible.

- Does this deviation from traditional or expected theatre practice actually harm our process?

- Problem: Our sound board operator is wearing clothing I consider unprofessional to rehearsal and performance. She is not seen by the audience, and the clothing is still all black, but I am bothered by the lack of professionalism. I ask her to wear something more formal to the next performance, and she fumbles with a sound cue. I become even more frustrated, because I don't know she is autistic with sensitivity to certain fabric textures, and I think she is just not devoted to her job.
- Solution: Shift your perspective rather than asking your coworker to alter her clothing choices for your comfort. Her clothing isn't actually getting in the way of the production, and is in fact enhancing it, as we all do better work when our needs are met.
- Is there something small I could change that would solve this problem in a fair way?
 - Problem: One of the actors seems distracted or bored during notes. They are shifting around and checking their watch while we all stand together at the end of rehearsal for notes. I perceive this as boredom, when in reality they are unable to stand for long periods of time.
 - Solution: Providing chairs so that standing is optional while giving notes.
- Have I asked the person or people involved if there is anything I can do to solve the problem?
 - Problem: The makeup artist for our show is missing our 8:00 AM production meetings and 10:00 AM costume team meetings regularly. I am afraid he will fall behind in his designs and his excuses for missing meetings are vague. I ask the stage manager to send reminder emails about the meetings, but this doesn't help the problem at all. The reminder emails are not effective because he is struggling to get out of bed due to a joint problem, but I do not know this.
 - Solution: Ask what would be helpful to him! A great option here would be to give the option for a virtual link to join the otherwise in-person meetings, or to reschedule them to a different time of day if evenings are more manageable than mornings.



Glossary of Terms

Able-bodied: This refers to a person who is not disabled.

Accommodation: A process, item, or structure that allows a person's needs to be met so they can participate equally with others who are different from them. Accommodations vary greatly, and can include anything from a sign language interpreter to an extension on a deadline to lowering the volume of music and SFX in a performance.

ADA: The Americans with Disabilities Act. This act defined requirements for a number of aspects of society to accommodate for disabled people in America.

ASL: American Sign Language. This is a language used by and for individuals who don't use verbal communication. It consists of hand and finger positions and movements that convey letters, words, phrases, or concepts.

Braille: A reading and writing system which uses small, raised dots that are touched by the reader. The dots appear in specific configurations to represent letters of the alphabet.

Dyslexia: A collection of conditions that make it difficult for people to interpret written words, numbers, and other symbols, but does not alter any other aspect of their perception, memory, or other cognitive functions.

Environmental allergies: Allergies to something in one's environment. Usually refers to seasonal allergies or allergies to dust or animals, but can also refer to allergies to materials used in buildings, cleaning materials, or other aspects of an indoor or outdoor environment.

Fidget toy: This is a tool that helps people process sensory input from their environment by allowing them to fidget with a small object. Examples include fidget cubes, fidget spinners, sensory chews, and countless others.

Mobility aid: This is a tool or device that someone uses to help them get around. Examples include canes, walkers, wheelchairs and powerchairs, crutches, and electric scooters.

Photosensitive: This refers to a sensitivity to light. Photosensitive people can experience migraines, seizures, and other symptoms when they experience flashing, color-changing, or excessively bright lights.

PTSD: Post-traumatic stress disorder is a condition caused by experiencing or witnessing a terrifying, traumatizing event or series of events. Symptoms include nightmares, hypervigilance, and flashbacks.

Radical vulnerability: Radical vulnerability refers to being open about the struggles you are facing, and honestly stating your limitations and needs in a given situation. It is not complaining

or oversharing, it is simply bringing your whole self, both the best and the most challenging parts, to the spaces you inhabit.

Screenreader: A screenreader is a software, device, or other kind of technology that translates text and images into auditory output.

Trigger/triggering: A trigger is a stimulus that reminds a person of a terrifying or traumatizing event. The term originated in psychological circles to refer to reminders of traumatizing events that interfere with the daily lives of PTSD patients.

Wheelchair user: Anyone who uses a wheelchair full-time, part time, or for a limited period. This word is used throughout the guide as opposed to “wheelchair bound” because wheelchair user is a neutral way to refer to someone who uses a wheelchair to get around rather than implying they are trapped or limited by it.

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