

THEATRE ACCESSIBILITY

UNION COLLEGE a study on accessing theater with a physical and/or mental disability
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Theatre Accessibility was initially proposed under the title “Disability Theatre” with the goal of writing a humanities paper on the experience of having a physical or mental disability in theatre and an action plan presentable to the Union College Theatre Department. While these objectives stayed the same, the global pandemic caused some methods to change: interviews were moved online and visiting inclusive shows was removed entirely. In place of these missing portions, the effects of COVID-19 on theatre accessibility was briefly studied. The results were an understanding of how theatre can make itself more accessible to different careers and aspects in the practice.

ACCESSIBILITY refers to the understanding
or ease of access of a space

VS.

INCLUSIVITY refers to the active pursuit of
including marginalized people

Theatre administration, meaning playwrights, directors, managers, and otherwise, often do not speak up about disabilities that they have due to a fear of stigma or bias against them. Making theatre administration inclusive involves education and open communication: informing employers on how to respectfully acknowledge an employee’s disability as well as their work is essential. Additionally, a domino effect exists around inclusivity in theatre administration. If more plays are written for or about disabled people, jobs for disabled actors will open up, and disabled audience members will be more likely to attend the show.

Theatre performers, including dancers and actors, face difficulty in existing shows that do not account for their disabilities. Two methods of inclusivity for performers exist: the creation of new shows accounting for actors with disabilities, or alterations to existing shows accounting for actors with disabilities. The former includes examples such as *Lesbian Pirates!*, where actors with missing limbs or senses are encouraged to audition, while the latter includes productions such as Broadway’s *Oklahoma!* revival, which recreated Ado Annie’s role to allow Ali Stroker, who uses a wheelchair, to perform in the many dance segments.

Theatre audiences are often shunted away from viewing live performances because of a lack of accommodations in theaters. More costly accommodations may include structural renovations such as new elevators; however, elevators also support audience members who are elderly, have children, or even are just tired from walking. On the other hand, many cheap accommodations exist, such as handout fidgets and large-print or braille programs, which are easy to make and stock. Creating an experience accessible to audience members with physical and mental disabilities overall calls for creative problem-solving that benefits audiences as a whole.

WHY IS THIS IMPORTANT?



Theatre is an artform built around the concept of growing community and empathy.

Historically, theatre has consistently changed to be more inclusive to different groups of marginalized people. By continuing this trend through accessibility for

members of the theatre community with physical and mental disabilities, theatre makers will be forced to foster creativity in innovative ways, and revenue and profits will increase based on larger audiences.

Costliness is sometimes a defense against inclusivity in theatre. However, one-time costs like the development of dynamic seating or recurring costs like keeping wearable audio vests stocked are offset by the revenue brought in by disabled audiences. With a larger population available to attend shows as well as the trend of bringing additional attendees with them, ticket sales will increase per individual shows, and regular attendees will buy tickets in the future based on these good experiences.

Positives and negatives exist in changes **COVID-19** has forced theatre to go through. Many people employed in the theatre industry have been furloughed or fired as a result whether they have disabilities or not, and all actors are having trouble finding work with few shows open. However, COVID-19 has also proven that online solutions are possible. Programs and shows produced over the internet relieve members of theatre with mobility issues or mannerisms that may be disruptive to a large audience, such as the need to move around or talk. Additionally, online shows and programs allow for individual use of accommodations, such as a heightened or lowered volume setting or closed captioning. Maintaining this newer version of theatre will offer new inclusive prospects to theatre as time goes on.