

Bring up the bodies

Does disability make a difference to art – or does art transcend disability? *Selina Mills* reports

The moment you invite friends to some new ‘cutting-edge’ disability theatre or film, most swallow paroxysms of social anxiety. What if it’s dull? Am I allowed to yawn? What if I hate it? How interminably politically correct will it be? Do I want to think about ‘disability’ on a fun night out?

While most objections can be overcome by a convincing performance, it is interesting to ask whether disability makes a difference to art, or does art transcend disability? If the current crop of plays and films, not to mention disability production companies, is anything to go by, the answer is yes to both, and we should want more of them. Art is informed by the world it is created into and represents, and given that one in four of us will be disabled at some point in our lives, surely disability must be part of our creative lives as well.

The British and Russian co-production *In Touch* at the National’s Dorfman Theatre last month showed difference with magical ingenuity. The play follows the lives of various deafblind characters, and at first you are certainly aware of ‘difference’ because you behold an entire ensemble (both disabled and non-disabled) touch-signing on stage. It was akin to watching tai chi – movement and communication

in perfect synchronicity. But as the play progresses, disabilities fade, and life stories become the focus. Who knew about Olga Skorokhodova, a leading Soviet scientist and researcher who was deafblind and whose life story is rendered beautifully by Jenny Agutter and the surrounding ensemble. Ultimately, this was an ode to communication, and it is a great pity that it was in town for only two performances.

Jenny Sealey, who co-directed the show and is the artistic director of Graeae, a disability-led theatre company (and who also, by the way, co-curated the opening show for the London 2012 Paralympics), is unapologetic in using her own ‘difference’ – she is deaf – because, she says, it gives her a unique perspective. ‘The thing that people forget is that theatre is about having different experiences, so it’s all about using this as part of the artistic process. Difference, of any kind, informs art.’ Jenny says that more and more mainstream theatre companies, such as the RSC and the Globe, not to mention the National, are turning to disabled directors and actors in order to find new ways of collaborating and thinking.

And there is a lot of new theatre led by disabled actors out there. Of course, not all productions will suit everyone’s palate, and this is because not every play can suit

everyone. Mind the Gap’s *Mia: Daughters of Misfortune* (premièred at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe this year, and about to go on tour), about the sexual rights of learning-disabled people, is deeply poignant but a show perhaps best aimed at a more alternative crowd. So, too, is Graeae’s *Reasons to be Cheerful*, a raucous musical based on Ian Dury’s songs at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, which, if you like Ian Dury and his politics, is a fun night out, particularly if you want to learn how to sign ‘sex and drugs and rock and roll’.

Occasionally, the standard of acting is mixed. ChickenShed’s production of Marlow’s *Dr Faustus* stars the impressive and charismatic Ashley Driver as Dr Faustus and the brooding Paul Harris as Mephistopheles, but the rest of the cast were uneven. At moments there was the whiff of a sixth-form production, despite the recorded tones of Derek Jacobi playing the old man pleading for Faustus’s soul.

I was impressed by the theatre group of blind and visually impaired actors called Extant, whose production of Ionesco’s *The Chairs* last year was surreal but totally understandable.

Film, too, is bringing some new ways of telling disabled people’s stories. *Whirlpool*, a short, rather oddly named film about the



François Cluzet as paraplegic billionaire Philippe and Omar Sy as his carer Driss in *Untouchable* (2011)

adult life of Helen Keller, is currently doing the rounds at international film festivals. It tells the story of Keller's life not as inspiration porn, but through flashbacks and an interview with the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* in the 1900s. Given that there are more than 25 films about Helen Keller's childhood, it is odd that this is one of the first to engage with her outspoken views about civil liberties, particularly in South Africa, and her romance with Peter Fagan, which her family firmly thwarted.

Of course, I am not saying that we should all be cheering every production that centres on disability simply because it's about disability. There is a lot of saccharine, badly acted and quite frankly boring drivel out there, particularly in film, and the trend for non-disabled actors to play disabled characters, or 'cripping up', does not always work. Out at the moment, for example, is *Breathe*, which stars Andrew Garfield and Claire Foy and follows the life of Robin Cavendish, who, after being paralysed by Polio, invented, with his loving wife and mates, gadgets that would allow him, and others, to live far more mobile lives. While

for many this will be a life-affirming story, it oversimplifies the challenges that Polio can present (Garfield seems to grin inanely throughout the film) and you come away with the sense that he never had a bad, miserable, difficult day.

Blind, starring Alec Baldwin and Demi Moore, in cinemas last month, goes for the pity plot with knobs on. The performances are appalling and the film presents blindness as the most catastrophic, static state ever,

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softened only by seriously expensive wine and a beautiful, flawless woman. If only.

Don't get me wrong, disability can be a brilliant plot device. It can be a pivot by which a hero or heroine must undergo change (just think of *An Affair to Remember*, made in 1957, with Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr). And it can provide humour. The box-office hit *Untouchable* (2011) told us the true story of a paraplegic French billionaire who hires a down-and-out to care

for him. For many, it was a reminder that disability is not about pity, but about living the best life you can — though again having a nice fast car seems to help. In *Kills on Wheels*, out now in selected cinemas, two Hungarian kids in wheelchairs find solace in zooming around as gangsters, which, you know, might be fun.

What will frustrate me for a little bit longer is that while there are some really interesting new plays and films out there, most stories about disability still represent disabled people as being either trapped in their bodies, able to be rescued only by healthy, happy people, or as people we can pity, exalt or laugh at, rather than laugh and live with. What is important about the National Theatre's *In Touch*, and other new productions, is that we are shown the authentic complexity of people's lives, not the melodrama and presumed victimhood surrounding their disability. 'Nothing about us, without us!' was the battle cry of disability activists in the 1990s, and it seems that in theatre and film, to some degree at least, this is becoming a reality. Let's hope it continues.