

# TRANSCRIPT

*For Listeners Who Are Deaf or Hard Of Hearing*

*Please Contact me for Past Episodes! I'm trying to figure out a better way to do this!*

I would love to introduce this episode as the first of I hope many in reviewing particular shows as well as looking into the accessibility of the theatre it is performed at the Public Theatre.

Today I'm going to talk to you about Dark Disabled Stories written by Ryan J. Haddad. It is the perfect way to round out Cerebral Palsy Awareness Month in my opinion as Ryan has this condition. It is playing at The Public Theatre in New York City until the 9th April. It's second extension actually. Dark Disabled Stories is a play featuring the very personal stories of Ryan and two other performers - Dickie Hearts, who is a deaf actor who not only interprets every single show into American Sign Language but "plays Ryan alongside Ryan who is also playing Ryan", and Alejandra Ospina, who uses a powered wheelchair and also is the audio describer for every single show.

It feels a little odd to say that..."every single show"...because your typical Off Broadway, and even less so Broadway, doesn't do that. Audio Descriptions and Sign Language Interpretations are usually for a single performance only during the runs and from what I've seen as the humble usher it is almost always the matinee so it does feel wonderfully odd and fantastically refreshing to not have to go into the theatre, a place that should be welcoming to everyone, and be treated as an afterthought. You as a disabled person are the forefront of their minds.

So this show isn't really what many think of as a play as it is a collection of personal stories the actors have put together and sprinkled in some theatre magic and that feels great too because it feels I've been invited to listen not just to actors but to real people. And that's where it hits home. I'm an usher so I've seen this show a few times now and it is always so heartbreakingly refreshing to see these actors really relive these stories every evening. I don't know if I could do that. These stories are like really personal. While yeah you have stories of two women screaming expletives on the bus to each other over how one of the women sneering that a man in a wheelchair better not run

over her feet as he tried to get off the bus you also have intimate stories that I can't get into too much detail about because I really want to keep the content warning on this marked as "Clean". How someone ran off with Ryan's money on a Grindr brunch, how Alejandra has to memorise the accessible stations on the subway map or how someone Dickie was texting for about a year couldn't even be bothered to learn the ASL alphabet while training to run the New York City Marathon...and if he can run 26 miles then that dude could learn 26 letters.

This show isn't meant to make you feel good. It isn't inspiration porn for people who want to put down other able bodied people. This show exists so you know that this world is not made for the disabled or the chronically ill. It doesn't strive to make you feel comfortable. Quite the opposite. Honestly moments that stuck out for me nearly every show are Dickie speaking about a bondage situation in really real police handcuffs and since he communicates in ASL I cannot begin to imagine how that would've felt having your tools restricted. How sex is it's own language and hell yeah do I understand that. Another is how Alejandra is often trapped in underground stations because the lift isn't working and next to that how Ryan may have to abandon his walker at the bottom of the steps and climb the stairs himself if he can't find a kind stranger to help. I feel that...I've had days where I slowly have also had to cling onto the railing with two hands and use the stairs because the elevator was out or doesn't exist. But I haven't had the issue Alejandra has. I have options. She does not. I cannot imagine being stuck underground and MTA staff telling me to call 911 because I'm an insurance liability. I am constantly frustrated by how inaccessible the MTA is and how slow they are to try and upgrade but at least I can cling to the railing of the stairs or have a friend hold my bag or hand.

This show also shows how embarrassingly easy it is to think of the disabled community when it comes to putting on a show. I don't know why an audio describer isn't hired for every performance. Why not Broadway? Is a recording insufficient? Is it too much money to hire one or two more people? I thought you are striving for equity and equality? What about sign interpretations and captioning devices? Now we know that captioning devices can empower actors to call someone out from the stage without even speaking to the House staff but why aren't they more easily obtainable? Assisted Listening Devices (ALDs) are often given out mostly to elderly patrons as are T-Coils so I'm not sure why more houses can't take down seat locations as

often done with ALDs and can be used if the production gets antsy about the possibility of filming the show. Which I know is an issue and it is against Actors Equity rules as well as it being piracy but then actors need to hold these devices and get to know them. As well as communicate with the Stage Manager who will speak to the House Manager who will alert ushers in the house. I assure you we know what we are looking out for and can handle this. I do know that the Front of House ASL team for Dark Disabled Stories has been a little expensive for The Public but with other shows, especially the big ones like Hamilton, Hades Town, Wicked, The Lion King et al what is going on there? Are captioning devices available? Can Sign Interpreters shows be a weekly thing? Not only does it make shows more accessible but it gives more job opportunities and isn't that a good thing?

Unfortunately the technology used in the show has been a little unreliable to start but that isn't on the team. It's on society to make this technology better and more reliable. The team obviously wants the screen to work because they want to welcome in the disabled community members that need it and the rest of society should want it to work more. Again this show is just showing how little the community is thought of! Also there is a movement space that audience members can use throughout the show, and me because I asked, as well as an example of the set for people to touch and explore.

If you want to think about how inaccessibility is systemic I invite you to go and watch an opera in French or Italian or German and see how they have little screens in the chairs that translates it all into English? The technology exists...it's time to use it properly

The Public Theatre I've seen does really try when it comes to accessibility. There are braille Playbills, they brought in Front of House sign interpreters, there are accessible entrances to the Newman Theatre. The Delacorte is being upgraded soon so they can welcome more patrons in wheelchairs and walkers. I don't think I can find a fault with their efforts. Like every theatre we do run in to the issues with audio descriptions, captioning devices and sign interpreted but that is a Broadway issue that we need to be in conversation about with everyone.

To round out this review and conversation about accessibility I'd love to just mention something Ryan said about if he wanted a cure for his Cerebral Palsy and only in one situation he would. If he fell badly and was alone in his

apartment. And it makes me wonder if I want a cure for Hypermobility Spectrum Disorder or Ehlers Danlos Hypermobility Type. And I do love my body even with its faults, even with its lack of collagen and its tendency to fall apart more often at a certain time of the month but I don't love it at the same time. I'm in a lot of pain constantly, I have moments where I walk in a way that doesn't allow me to pass as well. I would want a cure. And does that make me unloving of my condition? Maybe...I'm going to leave you with a comment I got from one, likely able bodied, audience member, my own dark story

"Oh" said he, "are you disabled?"

"I am chronically ill" said I, uncomfortable with such a personal question and describing that disability can also exist on a spectrum,

"How appropriate!" He said, "And you're pretty for a cripple"

Until next time friends.