

Summer 7-2018

The Tragedy Zone: Ableism in Entertainment

Linnea Sumner

Honors College, Pace University

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses

 Part of the [Counseling Commons](#), [Counseling Psychology Commons](#), [Developmental Psychology Commons](#), [Other Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), and the [Personality and Social Contexts Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sumner, Linnea, "The Tragedy Zone: Ableism in Entertainment" (2018). *Honors College Theses*. 190.
https://digitalcommons.pace.edu/honorscollege_theses/190

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Pforzheimer Honors College at DigitalCommons@Pace. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Pace. For more information, please contact rracelis@pace.edu.

The Tragedy Zone: Ableism in Entertainment

Linnea Sumner

BFA Musical Theatre

Advisor: JV Mercanti

Pace Performing Arts

Presentation Date: April 27th @ 8pm

Abstract

Ableism, or discrimination towards individuals with disabilities, is pervasive in our society. The entertainment world and the media are largely responsible for shaping the way the general public views minority groups. The topic of disability is incredibly popular on screen and stage, but very few actors and writers with disabilities are being hired in comparison to the amount of work that is being produced on the topic. A startling percentage of best actor/actress Oscar winners have won for portraying a character with a disability of some kind, but only two actors with the same disabilities as their characters have been awarded. In discussions about diversity, the issue of disability representation is often overlooked. When stories about disability are told from an ableist perspective, there are various harmful tropes that commonly arise. These tropes and trends writers fall into can have a negative effect on the lives of people living with disabilities. True disability representation in entertainment calls for platforms for writers, artists and actors with disability to have voices.

As a writer with a newfound physical disability, I wanted to write a play that indirectly captured my experience and educated my audience. I was able to incorporate knowledge I gained from research with my personal experience to write my play, titled *The Tragedy Zone*. By giving the audience the opportunity to see microaggressions through the lens of someone with a newfound disability, the play aims to educate them on the impact tiny ableist interactions can have on relationships and individuals.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Entertainment and Society.....	3
Oscars for Disability.....	4
Ableism and Entertainment.....	5
Personal Disability Background.....	6
Disability Tropes.....	8
<i>The Tragedy Zone</i> /Microaggressions.....	9
Works Cited.....	14

In the United States, the entertainment industry is incredibly influential and has the power to shape the general public's perception of the subjects it depicts. Many works of film and theatre helped spearhead social change by bringing perspective to those who may not have been otherwise exposed. When one thinks of where entertainment is most influential, the first thought may be major cities like New York and Los Angeles because they are considered hubs of creativity. In these cities entertainment is everywhere, and the culture generally tends to be more liberal and progressive than other parts of the country. City residents are exposed to a vast multicultural experience that is not found in smaller cities, towns, or rural areas. In areas that are less diverse and more isolated, film and television play an even bigger role in public perception than cities where residents are already surrounded by a wide variety of cultures and perspectives. In places that are more culturally cut off, ideas and views of other ways of life are almost entirely shaped by entertainment and the media. When done well, good theatre and film expands the horizons of audiences, allowing them to see another person's life and experience from their perspective. The performing arts are a powerful force and are capable of doing a lot of good, but unfortunately they can also serve as a vehicle for perpetuating harmful ideas and stereotypes. Shows that dehumanize and perpetuate problematic ideas about a culture or group of people can have massive influence as well, and the entertainment world is full of them.

In recent years, a demand for diversity has led to broader representation in many forms of performance. While the progress that has been made is good, most of the conversations centered on racial diversity and failed to address issues of disability representation. It is wonderful that we

have made strides towards more racial diversity in entertainment, but the push for true representation of disability is somewhat stagnant. This doesn't mean that people with disabilities are not being portrayed on screen. In fact, in the history of the award 13 of the winners of the Oscar for best actor and 14 of the winners for best actress were awarded for playing a character with a disability of some kind (Pripas Kapit, 2018). The majority of these actors did not have the disability themselves. In fact, the last performer to win for portraying a role with a disability they actually had was deaf actress and advocate Marlee Martin in 1986 for *Children of a Lesser God*. The only other actor with a disability that has won an Oscar was Harold Russell, a WWII vet who lost his hands in combat, who won twice in 1947 for *The Best Years of Our Lives* (Anderson, 2017). Since then the topic of disability has grown in popularity, but the entertainment industry continues to hire and award non-disabled actors for the roles.

There are some cases where the argument can be made for an able-bodied actor to be cast as a character with a disability. In *The Theory of Everything* able-bodied actor Eddie Redmayne portrays Stephen Hawking throughout his life with Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS), which is a degenerative disorder that progressively gets worse (McCarten, 2014). In this case, an individual who actually had ALS would not have been able to fulfill the requirements of the role because of the varying levels of physical ability the character displays in the film. The recent Oscar winner *The Shape of Water*, however, features a character who is deaf and mute but the actress herself was neither (Del Toro, 2017). This is an example of a role that could have featured a deaf actor and been a great opportunity but instead the story was used and acted out by able bodied people. These Oscar bait films make millions off of telling the stories of people with disabilities while simultaneously blocking them out of the process (Pripas Kapit, 2018).

The disability narrative in entertainment and the media often falls into a series of ableist tropes. Ableism is a specific type of discrimination that individuals with disabilities experience based on the presence of their disability. Similar to other social problems like racism and sexism, there are many subtle ways in which ableism manifests, but it all comes down to the concept of a group of people being “other” in some way. Researchers Keller and Galgay state that ableism operates with “...an able-centric worldview, which endorses the belief that there is a ‘normal’ manner in which to perceive and/or manipulate stimuli and a ‘normal’ manner of accomplishing tasks of daily living. Disability represents a deviation from these norms” (Keller, Galgay, 2010). Ableism is prevalent in our society and impacts people with disabilities in almost every facet of life, systematically, economically, socially, and personally.

Many of the stories that are told in entertainment and the media are centered in the idea that a disabled existence is lesser than an able-bodied neurotypical one, and a disability is by definition something to be overcome. Actors are often celebrated for their portrayal of a character with a disability because it is considered “brave.” The idea that it takes courage for an actor without a disability to take on a role of that nature is indicative of the problematic idea that disability is a lower state of being. The concept of bravery is a response to fear. This type of praise for these actors reveals the fear many able-bodied individuals have of disability, since it is seen and portrayed as a worse existence than their own. Phrases like “they weren't afraid to go there” imply that disability is another plane of existence that is frightening to even pretend to lower oneself to. Unlike other minority groups, anyone has the potential to become disabled in some way. This definitely contributes to the simultaneous aversion and fascination many able-bodied/neurotypical people have for the experience. It also explains why the entertainment

world is so hooked on producing stories full of tropes to prey on fears and incite emotional responses in audiences.

Since I am a writer and performance major I was drawn to the idea of writing a play for my senior thesis. To fully understand the process I went through to write the attached work *The Tragedy Zone*, it is important to know my background with the subject of disability. In the fall of my junior year I hurt my back in a production of the musical *American Idiot*. After the injury failed to heal on its own and started to impair my mobility I discovered I had a genetic connective tissue disorder called Ehlers Danlos Syndrome. After a month of trying to finish my senior year I was forced to take a medical leave of absence because I was having trouble staying upright without considerable pain.

Ehlers Danlos affects the connective tissue of the body, causing widespread symptoms that vary greatly from person to person. There are no obviously visible physical markers for people who don't use disability devices, and because it is an invisible illness it is theorized that it is underdiagnosed despite being considered a rare condition. Many people live with it without knowing they have it. I went 22 years without realizing the seemingly unconnected and unexplained health problems I was having were the result of an invisible disability. There are six types of Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, and type III, the one I have, is characterized by hypermobility. The joints of the body are supported 50% by muscle and 50% by connective tissue like tendons and ligaments (Muldowney, 2015). After my back injury I spent a lot of time in bed from the pain and cut down on all physical activities. This sudden change in activity caused my muscles to atrophy, resulting in loose, unstable joints that are prone to dislocation and subluxation, which is like a mini dislocation that eventually rights itself (Muldowney, 2015). If regular connective

tissue is a rubber band, Ehlers Danlos tissue is an old, brittle one that lacks elasticity. After being weakened by the bedrest from the back injury, my muscles could no longer compensate for the flawed connective tissue and would knot into spasms to hold my joints together. When the spasms gave out then joints would slip out of place (Muldowney, 2015).

I am a visual artist and have been for most of my life. It is intrinsic to my identity. The decreased mobility was difficult to deal with, and when my hands started giving out on me I went through a massive emotional upheaval that taught me a lot about myself and the role of disability in our society. After a long process of seeking out and finding specialized treatment I was able to improve my mobility to an extent but I am still managing the chronic pain and various problems that come with my disability and will probably never get back to where I was before.

Coming back to school and being asked to write a thesis I was compelled to find a way to represent my journey over the past year as an individual, artist, and intellectual. Because my BFA is in Musical Theatre I wanted to do something theatrical so it corresponded with my major. As a writer with a newfound disability, I felt it would be an interesting project to try and write a play with a story that is reflective of my own without being my literal experience. I wanted to try and create a piece on the subject of disability that could move an audience without falling into the major tropes that are often seen on stage and screen. I began to take notes of the ways people around me reacted to my disability so my personal observations could inform the piece. I read articles and anecdotes from the community about common microaggressions and their implications so I could write from an informed perspective.

One of the commonly seen disability tropes in entertainment and the media is what author and activist Eli Clare describes as the “supercrip” trope (Clare, 1999). This is based in the idea that a disability is a setback that is meant to be overcome. It falls into what activists jokingly refer to as “inspiration porn” (Liebowitz, 2015). These are stories or reports that are told through an ableist lens and constructed to incite pity and pride when an individual with a disability manages to “overcome” their state of being in some way. These stories make able-bodied/neurotypical people feel like they are supporting the disability community without having to address the systems of oppression that make disability difficult to live with in the first place. The narrative of a person being able to “overcome” their disability like it's an obstacle stimulates feelings of pride and then personal guilt in “inspiration porn” audiences, making them feel like their own obstacles are more doable in comparison to those of the “inspirational” individual with a disability. It also provides a more digestible idea of what disability is for able-bodied neurotypical audiences. If disability is something that one can overcome with enough effort, it creates the illusion that it is not a permanent and unavoidable state of being and therefore becomes less frightening and more “accessible” subject for the general public. It also shifts the blame onto the person with the disability for their place in society and state of being (Clare, 1999).

The “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” motto that our culture runs on allows systems of oppression to continue unchecked because the responsibility for prosperity is always placed on the individual regardless of what institutional disadvantages they may have working against them. This type of narrative emotionally fetishizes the disability experience and sends a harmful message to audiences with and without disabilities alike. Individuals with disabilities can

internalize these ideas and feel invalidated or inferior for not being able to “rise above” the way they are. These stories are often written by writers who are not disabled themselves and lack the perspective to create anything else.

I knew I wanted to write something about my experience of suddenly acquiring a physical disability and I wanted it to educate the audience while also ending on a hopeful note. I decided my main character would be an art student named Mae who gets hit by a bus and loses function of her dominant hand. I felt it captured the essence of my experience of a sudden physical decline while also being a simple enough medical concept for the audience to understand. The difficulty I faced was finding a way to avoid the “supercrip” trope while also leaving the audience with a positive feeling at the end. On the other side of that trope is disabled narratives that end bleak and hopeless like the death of Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck). Many of those narratives are through a darker ableist lens that views living with a disability as the ultimate tragedy. I wanted to find a middle ground between these trends by avoiding lightening the gravity of the experience of losing an able bodied existence while avoiding falling into portraying disability as a hopeless state of being.

I knew first off that my character’s physical impairment had to be permanent. I needed to avoid making the ending about her disability lessening or improving for audience satisfaction. This way I could avoid the first writing pitfall of disability being something to “overcome.” I wanted the play to be about the character's emotional arc rather than a medical drama about trying to fix her physical state. I wanted to make sure the show was about her rather than the disability. I limited the talk about the injury itself to the inciting incident hospital scene rather than tracking its improvement or decline throughout the show to help ease the emphasis off of

the medical side of things. I decided to make her mother a therapist to help justify the lack of another professional medical presence in the rest of the show. As I constructed scenes and characters, I kept in mind what insight I wanted to give the audience through each character and section of the show. I wanted Mae to be a window to see the impact tiny interpersonal interactions can have on the life of someone with a disability, especially a newfound one.

After the accident Mae is forced to move back home with her parents. I wanted to show how an upheaval in one person's life also affects the people around them. One of Mae's primary constructed character flaws is her refusal to see outside of her own experience and acknowledge how her accident and subsequent behavior affects others. I wanted to make sure I made Mae likeable to the audience without making her a flawless martyr. The people around her make mistakes that affect her negatively but she is not free from fault and has to grow as a person to adapt to her new life.

Mae's best friend and roommate, Steph, was present for the accident and fails to contact Mae for over a month after. Their relationship serves as an establishment of normalcy in the beginning of the play, and when they meet again after the accident the interaction is littered with mistakes on both sides. I started out their reconnection scene with a microaggression from Steph. According to a 1978 research study on the subject, microaggressions are "subtle, stunning, often automatic, and non-verbal exchanges which are 'put downs'" (Pierce, Carew, Pierce-Gonzalez, Willis, 1978). There are many tiny behaviors and phrases that are commonly brought out around individuals with disabilities that most people are not aware are hurtful. These microaggressions are a product of our ableist society and until people are taught what these interactions feel like on the other side there is no way for them to know they should avoid them.

When Steph first sees Mae after the accident she hugs her very lightly and awkwardly, saying that she doesn't want to “break” her. This is an example of an infantilizing microaggression (Keller, Galgay, 2010). Steph treats Mae like she is not even capable of a hug as an offbeat joke and it does not land well. What could have been a relatively neutral interaction is now tense because of a microaggression. After some small talk Steph throws the conversation off again by saying something positive about Mae’s drawing ability and then over apologizing for the slip. Right afterwards she exhibits another microaggression by demanding Mae give her an update on all of the health issues she's going through. This is an example of what Keller and Galgay define in their microaggression study as a “denial of privacy,” which is an interaction that pressures someone to reveal personal medical information as if the presence of their disability entitles others to it (Keller, Galgay, 2010). After this the conversation begins to get aggressive on both sides. Though Mae's frustration is justified, I made sure that she wasn't perfect during the interaction to avoid falling into a “disabled martyr” trope. Mae becomes hostile with Steph and refuses to listen to her when she tries to talk about how traumatic the accident is for her as an upclose witness.

I created the character of Rita to serve as extra comedic relief while also demonstrating some more examples of microaggressive behavior. The moment she meets Mae she is immediately infantilizing her and denying her privacy. She insists on having her sit as if she is not capable of standing, which is an example of what Keller and Galgay classify as a “spread effect” microaggression. This is when a person’s disability is assumed to affect them in a way beyond the disability itself. Keller and Galgay use examples such as the assumption that blind individuals’ other senses are extra strong or associating deafness with a lack of intelligence

(2010). Rita assumes Mae's mental state is incredibly fragile and that she cannot stand without thinking of consulting Mae herself. The microaggressions keep coming. Rita withdraws tasks from Mae as if she knows what she's capable of better than Mae does herself. She is constantly interrogating her about her healing process and suggesting homeopathic solutions for a permanent medical condition. She even goes as far as to negate Mae's statements about herself. This is an example of Keller and Galgay's "denial of disability experience" microaggression categorization. This is when someone assumes they understand an individual's experience or reality better than the person with the disability does themselves (Keller, Galgay, 2010). This microaggression is actually the one that leads to the climactic conflict of the play between Mae and her new friend Jax, who up until that point had been an ally to her by challenging Rita's behavior and actively taking an interest in Mae's wellbeing.

Representation in the entertainment world is so important. We live in a society where many people's views of experiences that are different from their own are defined almost entirely by the media and entertainment they are exposed to. When all of these sources are pumping out content that is riddled with problematic ideas about disability, then ableist themes will continue to permeate almost every facet of our culture. The way disability is portrayed in film and theatre affects the systematic and social experience of people living with disabilities. There is a massive disconnect between the amount of content on the subject of disability that is being produced and how few people with disabilities are actually involved in creating it. The solution is representation. True representation looks like people with disabilities being able to tell their own stories, whether it's acting in a role or having their writing produced. Giving writers with disabilities platforms for their work will result in pieces that are nuanced and more likely to

avoid the pitfalls many able-bodied/neurotypical writers fall into when trying to write about the subject. Hopefully as awareness for this problem grows we will see a shift towards improving disability representation in the media and entertainment.

Works Cited

- Anderson, Tre'vell. "Marlee Matlin Remains a Champion for Disabled Actors, 30 Years after Winning Her Oscar." *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, 24 Feb. 2017, 1 Apr. 2018
<http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-marlee-matlin-oscars-20170202-story.html>
- Clare, Eli. "The Mountain." *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation*, South End Press, 1999.
- Del Toro, Guillermo, and Taylor, Vanessa. *The Shape of Water*. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.
- Kapit, Sarah Pripas. "Oscars 2018: The Shape of Disability Representation." *NOS Magazine*, NOS Magazine, 6 Mar. 2018, 8 Apr. 2018.
<http://nosmag.org/oscars-2018-the-shape-of-disability-representation/>
- Keller, Richard M, and Galgay, Corinne E. "Microaggressive Experiences of People with Disabilities ." *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact*, edited by Derald Wing. Sue, John and Wiley Sons Inc, 2010, pp. 241–264.
- Liebowitz, Cara. "Explaining Inspiration Porn to Non-Disabled People." *The Body Is Not An Apology*, 24 Sept. 2015. 2 Apr. 2018.
<https://thebodyisnotanapology.com/magazine/explaining-inspiration-porn-to-non-disabled-people/>
- McCarten, Anthony. *The Theory of Everything*. Working Title Films, 2014.

Muldowney, Kevin. *Living Life to the Fullest with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome: a Guide for a Person Living with EDS to Achieve a Better Quality of Life*. Outskirts Press, 2015.

Pierce, Chester M., et al. "An Experiment in Racism." *Education and Urban Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, 1978, pp. 61–87., Accessed 1 Apr. 2018.

<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/001312457701000105>

Steinbeck, John. *Of Mice and Men ; Cannery Row*. Penguin Books, 1987.

