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**Staging Blindness: The Portrayal of Visual Impairment in Contemporary
American Theatre**

A Thesis Presented by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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The manner in which theatre depicts marginalized groups and individuals has become an area of major focus for me throughout my studies as a graduate student. What can this medium do to give voice and bring focus to those that are often overlooked or pushed aside by their own culture and society? Where does the medium succeed and fail in doing so? Perhaps these questions arose organically for me personally because I was raised in a household with a “disabled” parent. My mother is legally blind, with a strong likelihood that her vision will deteriorate even further. I placed the term “disabled” within quotation marks because that is how our culture defines her, but she does not define herself in this manner. After witnessing firsthand how one with a visual impairment accommodates her lifestyle and interacts with a world that continually fabricates incorrect assumption after insulting stereotype about what blindness indicates about personality and lifestyle, I turned to my artistic home, my solace: theatre. What is the medium I have devoted my life to providing for the visually impaired? How are we staging the subject of blindness in contemporary American theatres? What types of characters are being written? How are directors and actors portraying these characters? Is anyone even giving blind artists the opportunity to show the world their point of view? From here, this thesis was born: I find it imperative to firmly establish where we are before we have any hope of moving forward. After careful investigation of the statistics of the frequency with which blind characters appear onstage and on film and television, scouring dramatic texts for visually impaired dramatis personae in lead roles, viewing Broadway and Off-Broadway productions seeking guidance from the leaders in the theatrical field, and seeking out companies to make a difference, I believe I have now found a starting point for the blind community and theatre artists to begin a frank discussion about the future of their relationship.

*To my mother, Alice Sowers—the woman who inspires me to pursue my dreams,
and who shows me that true beauty transcends what the eye perceives.*

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Introduction

The contemporary American stage holds for its artists and audiences some of the most dynamic, challenging and groundbreaking material in the world of live performance. Artists constantly push their own boundaries as well as those of their collaborators and audiences. From the tame to the tumultuous, nary a stone is left unturned by today's theatre artists. Playwrights are investigating culture and technology, crime, love, familial relationships and any other topic that may spark their interest with complete freedom of creativity and voice. The access to research for anything a writer or director chooses to stage is ready and available—dramaturgs can find mountains of information to share with collaborators to bring a play to life. The greatest challenge for audiences when selecting a performance to take in (aside from their personal definitions of prohibitive costs) proves to be a matter of narrowing personal taste, aesthetic and mood. The American theatre, despite what some pessimists and economists may argue, is hitting a rather strong stride as it enters the 2010 decade.

With so much to see on these stages, it is quite staggering when one realizes how rarely the theatre addresses those who cannot see. Moreover, the treatment of characters that are visually impaired often leaves those tied to the blind community frustrated, even insulted. In a period in which the performing arts are able to transcend boundaries of language, race, religion and politics, it appears to sputter when addressing disability, particularly visual impairment. Characters are few and far between that possess a degree of visual impairment

in theatrical texts, and even sparser are those that are well-developed, dynamic and defined by something outside of their impairment.

Why does the contemporary American theatre treat blindness with such little care and attention? Is it lack of knowledge of the lifestyle of blindness and the visually impaired communities? Other marginalized minority groups and characters appear onstage with greater frequency than the blind; efforts have been made to reach those communities. Perhaps playwrights and directors feel that visual impairment is not a theme to which individuals will relate? However, many theatrical experiences throughout the country take advantage of darkness and abstract visual life to create a dynamic world for sighted audiences. One may speculate for hours—or years—as to the cause of the large-scale lack of recognition and representation of the visually impaired on the contemporary American stage, but like many questions about trends and problems in the theatre, this is one without a single or simplistic response.

Rather than devote attention to the cause of the lack of attention blindness is receiving upon the American stage, time would be better spent investigating the plays, productions and organizations that are bringing blindness to audiences. Which plays are being produced in the theatre capital of the United States, New York City, featuring blind lead characters? What new plays are being penned that feature prominent visually impaired dramatis personae? Which companies and organizations are breaking with tradition and blazing paths for blind artists to take to success in the theatre industry? It is only by defining the

positive parameters that the negative ones will begin to fade and a true picture of where the blind community stands in the American theatre will begin to emerge.

There is no need for extensive prescriptive monologue in such an overview. If change is to occur for the visually impaired community in the theatre, it will only occur through real-time, in-person dialog and actions rather than words. Investigations such as this are meant to investigate and support a discussion long overdue in the medium of theatre. The successes of those portraying the blind in a positive light are often well-known and acclaimed with little analytical discourse, and the failures are lambasted without acknowledgment of intention or perhaps where errors occur that cause such faltering. It is necessary to look more deeply at each element, from text to tech, and to question whether an honest attempt has been made to portray the blind community in a truthful manner. As with any other creative endeavor, it is necessary to first start with truth of spirit and intention. Staging blindness is absolutely no exception.

Contemporary Dramatic Texts Featuring Visually Impaired Characters

Perhaps the greatest struggle in bringing visually impaired characters to the contemporary stage is the lack of dramatic literature created that features them. For example, in the New Dramatists library in New York City—a prominent library boasting the manuscripts of plays by the strongest voices in the American theatre with an in-house collection reaching back into the mid-nineties (archives reaching back to the company's genesis in 1949 are held at Yale University's library)—the shelves hold one thousand seven hundred and ninety five manuscripts of new plays. After weeks of combing these archives, two plays serving the purposes of this study were discovered. Although it is difficult to determine when the inspiration for each play came to the playwright, original productions of each were staged after the year 2000. Despite the rather unsettling statistic that one tenth of one percent of a sample of the strongest writing in American theatre contains prominent characters who are visually impaired, the recognition that both plays are written by incredibly well-known playwrights and are receiving regular productions throughout the United States provides some hope and positive expectation for what is possible in the portrayal of characters such as these.

Eyes of the Heart

In Catherine Filloux's *Eyes of the Heart*, the playwright examines the functional blindness shared by many women living in Long Beach, California after leaving Cambodia and facing the war atrocities that occurred during the Pol Pot

regime under the Khmer Rouge in the 1980s. Rather than struggling with what it means to be blind in a sighted world, Filloux's play focuses upon the protagonist, Thida's, story once she has come to the United States after adapting to her loss of vision. Thida is not outwardly troubled by the accommodations she must make in order to adapt to her new environment in her brother's home, nor does she appear to desire help from her doctor in reversing her condition or regaining visual acuity. Rather, Thida's struggle throughout *Eyes of the Heart* is one of determining whether she shall persevere and create a new life for herself, take her own life, or live in silent solitude as a Buddhist nun.

The question of what it means to be without sight in a world largely governed by that which is perceived by the eye is raised by the characters surrounding Thida. In particular, Thida's brother, Kim, and ophthalmologist, Dr. Simpson, provide useful insight as to how visual impairment is often perceived by those who do not live with its effects. Kim and Simpson pressure Thida toward a recovery she does not desire. Upon Thida's arrival in the United States, she refuses to speak to anyone, and her brother and doctor have a great deal of difficulty accepting Thida's self-imposed vow of silence. They continually beg her to speak, to indicate to them what she can see as they run a myriad of tests on her eyes, all concluding that there is absolutely no damage to the organs themselves, the optic nerve, or the vision receptors in her brain. Kim and Simpson insist upon blazing a trail toward finding answers to the extent that as a reader one begins questioning whether their concern is truly for the interest of Thida or whether they are more focused upon making themselves more

comfortable with the situation at hand. They cannot ask her to see, but they can ask her to speak.

The manner in which the other characters in the play shelter Thida is additionally noteworthy. Although she does have many other concerns outside of her blindness (a traumatic past come back to haunt her, a stranger to a new city, emotional disturbance, etc), many family members and those close to the family are most protective over Thida due to her blindness. They fear for her safety when she ventures out into Long Beach alone largely in reference to her lack of visual acuity in conjunction with the lack of safety the neighborhood provides; however, the overall impression granted by the panicked exchanges by those searching for her is that she could not possibly understand where she is travelling.

What makes Filloux's work in *Eyes of the Mind* exceptional is the fact that she quite consciously is utilizing all of the commonly stereotypical worries about the visually impaired and juxtaposing them against a protagonist whose blindness is, to her, a mere footnote in the story of her life. Thida becomes frustrated that others insist she speak before she is ready, and explains to the audience via inner monologue (Filloux creates a rather dynamic effect in these instances using microphones to differentiate between dialog occurring in the character's own mind versus that which is spoken outright) that all she can see are the last image she has of her family intact as well as the last moments she shared with her husband and daughter. Thida's internal asides are often witty and acerbic, and she is able to take in a great deal of her environment simply by

existing in it. She does not ask for help, nor does she turn it down. Once Thida begins speaking, she makes abundantly clear her desire to be left to her own devices to recover from what happened to her and her loved ones in Cambodia. Ultimately, Thida refuses to continue with retinal scans, MRIs, blood analysis, and other forms of Western medicine and begins living her new life with her loved ones with a manner of acceptance and curiosity.

What makes this play particularly fascinating is the almost contradictory thematic treatment of blindness that ultimately achieves an ideal sense of balance in its portrayal through the character of Thida. Filloux's other plays address the repercussions and non-death casualties of war. Interpreting the work from that angle, it becomes less important that Thida is blind and focus shifts to the fact that she is forever changed as a person because of the atrocities she witnessed against her own daughter during a political rebellion. The play closes with a projection reading,

"At least 150 Cambodian women living in Southern California have functional blindness, a psychosomatic vision loss linked to what they saw in the years of Khmer Rouge rule." *The New York Times* August 8, 1989. (88)

By including this projection at the close of the play, Filloux makes clear that the pain and suffering these women endured was not the loss of their vision, but rather the lives they were forced to leave under the rule of the Khmer Rouge. The ensuing blindness was their coping mechanism; it was the only way in which they could continue to function in a world whose sights, for them, held nothing but the potential of fear, pain, and continued suffering. In the character of Thida, Filloux illustrates that recovery for these women is emotional and spiritual, and that their

ocular condition is merely a byproduct of circumstances beyond their own control.

Blur

Conversely, Melanie Marnich examines the life of a young woman losing her sight in her time-bending drama *Blur*. Taking place over the span of approximately nineteen years within thirty scenes, this play addresses what it means for a young person to lose not only one of her senses, but also her perception of life as she knows it. A tightly knit, compact piece of theatre with a small cast, *Blur* combines the classic coming-of-age story of the American teenager with an exploration of disability in a dreamlike world where time is relative and fluid (a signature of Marnich's more recent work). In addition to questioning the process of losing a sense, this play examines what the effect impairment can have on family and loved ones.

The story closely follows Dot DiPrima, a teenage girl who learns she is suffering from a sudden but gradual loss of vision. Although Dot is compelling and drives the story, her mother is a character of particular interest in this piece. A nameless character beyond "Mom," her hysteric codependence upon her daughter is evident from the opening moments of the play and continues until the final curtain. This woman has invested her entire life and identity in her daughter, and once Leber's Optic Atrophy (L.O.A.) begins to take her Dot's vision, Mom begins a downward spiral into near mental incapacity. In the earliest stages of Dot's disease, Mom discovers that she is the carrier of the gene responsible for the condition and hides it from her daughter for fear of angering her. As Dot

forms bonds with a friend and boyfriend, living a somewhat rebellious but otherwise “normal” (the term is used within a cultural rather than medical or sociological context) teenage existence, her mother is left in anguished solitude, calling parents of children with various impairments (autism, deafness, etc.) at 1-800 numbers. In the case of Mom, the parental guilt prevents the character from truly connecting with her daughter until their relationship is all but destroyed. Mom chooses to focus upon the negative effects of the impairment instead of the fulfilling possibilities her daughter’s life still holds.

Another character deeply affected by Dot’s sudden onset of visual impairment is her priest, Father O.O’Hara, often referred to by Dot as Father O.O. Already an unorthodox spiritual leader, particularly where Catholicism is concerned, Father O.O (one cannot help but notice the effect his initials with a period between them create on the page—something resembling an internet emoticon wearing rather large glasses) begins to lose his faith in the God to which he has devoted his life upon the revelation of Dot’s imminent blindness. The holy man has great difficulty accepting that sensory perception is being taken from someone he considers a good person, and her youth exacerbates the tragedy. Due to his inability to cope with Dot’s ever-decreasing visual acuity, Father O.O becomes derelict—he begins drinking heavily, gets into arguments with a Bishop, leaves the Catholic Church and becomes homeless, leading his “church” first out of his car, then off of his bicycle once the car is stolen. Dot eventually must save the priest, taking him into her home and helping him find a new direction in his life.

Those that are most accepting of Dot's ever-decreasing visual acuity are her best friend Francis and boyfriend Joey. Francis, a young woman Dot meets at her special education school (Marnich does not specify that this is a result of L.O.A., however it can be inferred that Dot transferred as she needed more accommodation for her changing eyesight) is covered in piercings and leads with a tough attitude in order to cover her insecurities about her damaged facial features. This young woman was born with a cleft palate that was operated upon by a quack surgeon, leaving her more scarred than the palate itself. After Dot proves nonplussed by Francis' appearance and tough-as-nails disposition, the two become close friends. Francis introduces Dot to Joey, and the young man is immediately enamored with Dot. The two become emotionally and physically involved rather rapidly, creating a deeper rift between Dot and Mom. As Dot becomes frustrated with her home life, she decides to share an apartment with Joey. Despite a few conflicts throughout their romance, the relationship between Dot and Joey remains stable and solid. They become a small family of their own and eventually take in Francis, Father O.O and Mom.

Of course, the character of most importance to examine in *Blur* is Dot herself. This particular character shifts in a matter of seconds from a young adult leading a "normal" life to an individual dealing with the struggles and repercussions of vision loss. Marnich very carefully pens a simple yet powerful scene of revelation in which Dot realizes at Thanksgiving dinner that she cannot see her own feet or her mother's face. From here, the character is taken on a rather fascinating journey. Although she is deeply upset by the revelation that

she will lose her eyesight, Dot maintains her composure and asks educated questions as her own mother falls apart at the seams and begins behaving incredibly irrationally in the doctor's office. Dot, although saddened by the future she will ultimately face, maintains her composure in order to comfort and aide those surrounding her. She trusts with absolute certainty. Mom fears that Joey and Francis are merely biding their time and entertaining themselves with "the blind girl"; Dot knows in her heart that the bonds she has formed with these two individuals is not false. Father O.O loses faith in the God that would choose to beset blindness upon such a person as Dot; she maintains belief that she can handle her vision loss (albeit a few moments of denial in which she hangs her hopes upon the slim possibility that she might retain a sliver of her visual acuity). Rather than wallow in self-pity, Dot begins learning Braille while she is still able to read regular text and indicates minimal distress as her glasses become thicker. The eventual breaking point for Dot occurs soon after she has received the last pair of glasses that can possibly help her, as the doctor tells her, "They can't make them any stronger. This is the last—I'm sorry." (80) Her only response to the doctor is that her birthday is the following day. On the birthday in question, Dot emotionally detonates, attempting to alienate Joey, Francis and Father O.O, screaming at them that they are attacking a blind girl for being upset when all she wants to do is see them. As she comes down from her outburst, Dot realizes that instead of running, her friends stood by her side as she broke down. With this realization, Dot understands that her loved ones will not leave when her eyes lose sight of them. She then ventures to her mother's house and insists that Mom

come to live with the rest of Dot's self-made family. In this case, the character losing her sight proves to be the one with the clearest perception of what is important in life and holds herself responsible for those she cares about. Her impairment, though a major component of her own story, is secondary to the emotional journey she takes to finding her emotional home.

Requiem in Blue

Taking a blind protagonist in an entirely different direction is playwright Daniel Ho in his yet-unpublished manuscript, *Requiem in Blue*. In this play, an elderly man that has lost his sight due to illness contemplates suicide on a regular basis despite efforts by his daughter and a young friend to continually inspire him to lead a more fulfilling life. Unlike *Eyes of the Heart* and *Blur*, *Requiem in Blue* attempts to emulate the blind experience for the audience and the actor. Ho insists in his notes to the production that most of the dialog is pre-recorded voiceover and very few characters are seen live onstage. Rather, the actor playing Hal, the blind elderly gentleman, must pantomime his surroundings, props, and interactions others in a majority of his scenes. The weight of dialog and speech is taken away from the performer as his dialog is piped in from earlier recorded sessions. It appears that Ho is utilizing this technique to illustrate Hal's feelings of loss of control over his own existence and day-to-day life. Perhaps this choice would become clearer in staging, but as it stands in the text, it comes across as incredibly contrived, complicated and self-indulgent.

The reaction others have to Hal's visual impairment differs greatly from the reactions of those in the other texts discussed in this section. Although it is

clear that Hal's daughter Maggie, his friend Molly, and his abrasive Nurse are not fully accepting of his fate, they are even less fond of the desolation Hal experiences as result of his loss of vision. Maggie attempts to talk her father into playing canasta and meeting other people his age, even though she is not sure what canasta is or how her father would go about meeting individuals with whom to build a social circle. Meanwhile Molly attempts to connect with Hal by visiting him often and talking about his wife, taking him to the Met (upon his request). Although she is abrasive, even Hal's nurse seems to encourage him to extend himself to new possibilities, reminding him that she is often the caretaker people have when they pass away—subtextually, if he is going to change his life, now would be the time to do so. As Maggie announces her decision to move to Chicago and leave her father essentially alone in New York, it becomes clear that the world around Hal is not going to stop for him and his blindness, as much as he may want it to but will not admit.

Hal himself is also quite different from other blind protagonists encountered in contemporary American theatre. Rather than working with or around his loss of visual acuity, he allows the change in lifestyle to overwhelm and consume him, leaving him desolate and depressed. On three separate occasions Hal pulls a gun to his head in an attempt to commit suicide (out of misery due to his visual impairment as well as extreme grief over the loss of his wife), but on each one he finds an excuse to delay his self-execution. Although he gets up every morning, shaves and puts on a tie and a vest, it quickly becomes apparent that Hal is convinced he has nothing left to live for. He

sightlessly fingers through an old photo album every day, remembering the life he had before he lost his wife and his sight. As his relationship with Molly gives him some hope, the audience might believe that Hal is beginning to turn a new corner emotionally, until he nearly takes his own life with her in the next room. This character allows his circumstances to govern his existence rather than choosing to alter the givens to create a new storyline.

Analysis of *Requiem in Blue* proves incredibly difficult, however, in that its offensively stereotypical portrayal of the daily life of the visually impaired detracts from the human story at hand. As Hal walks the audience through his daily routine, which he practiced for years before losing his sight and has been continuing to execute in the year since the surgery that rendered him blind, he mentions counting the steps from one place to another within the apartment he has occupied for a majority of his lifetime. Stage directions also indicate that Hal often gropes around looking for doorways and cannot tell when other characters have entered or exited a room. The treatment of Hal as a complete incompetent in these respects is not only poor research on the part of the writer; it is offensive to the visually impaired community. In one's own home, muscle memory and a sense of ownership eliminate the necessity for counting steps and feeling for doorframes. Sighted individuals are able to navigate their homes in total darkness before their eyes "adjust" without a second thought—why should this experience prove more difficult for a visually impaired individual?

Perhaps the biggest stretch Ho makes in penning this play is assuming that Hal does not know when other people enter or exit a shared space. In one

scene, his nurse takes him by surprise by not knocking when showing up in his silent home. At the conclusion of the same scene, Hal assumes she has left and vulgarly insults her before she announces that she remains in the apartment. He becomes embarrassed. In yet another scene, Hal does not realize his daughter has brought her son with her to visit him until he hears the child running around his home and preparing to leap into Hal's lap. At the conclusion of this same scene, Hal cannot tell if Maggie has left yet or not, and must ask if she remains. For Ho to imply that the visually impaired/blind cannot tell when they are accompanied by another human body/bodies in space is absolutely ludicrous and inappropriate. Without other senses being "heightened" due to vision loss, which is a common myth, it is possible for nearly anyone to detect another person in his vicinity without the use of sight. (Green 12)

Another stereotype relied upon in a few instances in *Requiem in Blue* is the feeling of facial features of another person with the fingertips to confirm identity. Although this practice is not entirely unheard of in the blind community, it is not nearly as prevalent as culture and mass media may lead one to believe. This type of contact is invasive to those not accustomed to it and does not provide much insight for the feeler as to the appearance or identity of the felt (Green 83). Despite the fact that Ho creates a rather touching moment of reflection between Molly and Hal, first when she runs her hands over her face so he will recognize her once his sight is gone, then once again when they are reunited after the onset of Hal's blindness, the indulgence of the moment and

complete improbability of both moments undermine the playwright's intentions.
(Ho 66, 83)

There is no doubt that Ho intended to create a play examining the final days of an elderly man's life as he contemplated the life he left behind, especially as that life began leaving him before his body began dying. However, the playwright's complete lack of attention to detail and inadvertent insensitivity to the community about which he is writing completely detracts from any hope he had of creating the world he envisioned. The play serves as a caricature of blindness with a meandering intention and lack of focus. Perhaps since this play is one of the newer ones on the contemporary American theatre scene and yet unpublished, a revision is on the horizon that will allow for greater awareness of the world of the blind and clearer sense of purpose on the part of the writer.

Synthesis

The promise seen in writers that are penning the newest plays in American theatre and including visually impaired characters—protagonists, no less—proves rather refreshing for many seeking a more inclusive world on the stage. The characters in Filloux and Marnich's plays struggle with disability in a manner very close to life, although their plays are full of magic realism and a vibrancy that can only writers of their caliber can achieve and that can only be created on the stage. Writers such as Ho are coming from a place of good intention and missing the mark by a significant margin, which begs the question: should the writer be encouraged for bringing the disability to light even if he does so in a manner that is erroneous? Perhaps a director with a strong sensibility

could take Ho's text and shape it into something that reaches the audience in the same manner that *Blur* and *Eyes of the Heart* do on the page. However, how much of that responsibility should fall to the director? For each playwright, the core question to be asked when dealing with visual impairment is whether he/she wishes to tell a human story or illustrate what it means to live with an altered state of visual acuity in America today. In the case of either answer, attention must be paid to the effect one is having upon his/her audience and how actable a particular play might be. Marnich and Filloux have brought the theatre tremendous gifts with their works. Ho's play needs to be returned for repair before the theatregoing public is granted an opportunity to experience Hal's story.

The Portrayal of Visually Impaired Characters on New York City Stages

Within the month of March 2010, New York City was the home of two major professional productions featuring characters that possessed a degree of visual impairment at a given point onstage. Rattlestick Playwrights Theater, an Off-Broadway house located in the heart of the city's West Village boasted a world premiere of Craig Wright's *Blind*. Wright's piece is a contemporary meditation on what may have happened between Oedipus and Jocasta in the interim offstage period in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* between the revelation of the familial relationship between the two and the subsequent suicide of wife/mother and self-blinding of husband/son. A short subway trip away, Circle in the Square Theatre, a commercial Broadway company, revived William Gibson's *The Miracle Worker*. Known for decades as a landmark piece of American theatre, Gibson's play explores the first three weeks of interaction between Helen Keller and her teacher Annie Sullivan as the two establish their relationship and desperately seek the breakthrough needed to begin Keller's communication with the outside world.

Blind

Wright's *Blind*, although a retelling of the Oedipus myth and Sophoclean tragedy, ironically tends to remove blindness as a major element of the production. Tiresias, while mentioned, does not actually appear onstage and is continually referred to as a complete and utter hack. The probability of coincidence is strongly highlighted throughout the interaction between Oedipus and Jocasta, and Tiresias' credibility is all but nullified as the king and queen

continually perpetuate their own state of denial. Although Wright reveals all scenes as written by Sophocles between Oedipus and Tiresias through exposition, the role of blind seer is reduced to less-than-peripheral in this retelling.

Thematically, Wright slightly justifies his titular choice. Both Oedipus and Jocasta spend a large portion of the play vehemently denying that which they unequivocally know to be true. As they scream and rant (which unfortunately monopolizes a greater part of the eighty minute production), their willful ignorance to their fate becomes glaringly apparent. Oedipus in particular decries Jocasta and accuses her of complicity in the incestuous web in which they find themselves trapped. The protagonist becomes so focused upon his rage that he essentially forces a Maid to admit her suspicions about the couple's familial bond (whether or not she possessed them before this moment is unclear and perhaps irrelevant, as she is mercilessly bullied by Oedipus into such a statement). Jocasta continues to deny not only her acceptance of the blood relationship she shares with her husband, but also any foreknowledge she may have had of such a connection.

In a turn the audience may not see coming, Oedipus and Jocasta quite suddenly share shocking information. Perhaps the strongest illustration of blindness Wright places in *Blind* is the moment in which Jocasta first admits her long-suppressed suspicions that she and Oedipus could be mother and son. Shockingly, Oedipus follows suit with a quite similar confession of his own. The voluntary, calculated ignorance on the part of both characters proves a rather

clever contemporary interpretation of blindness to the truth. As Jocasta unravels her tale of piecing together that the father of her three children was himself one born from her, it becomes abundantly clear to the viewer that the lack of sight in this particular case was protective: this woman felt as though she had no alternative and elected to ignore that which she inherently understood to be true. Ironically, Oedipus' acknowledgment of his own awareness in the situation feels entirely different—rather than protective of his home and family, Oedipus seems to possess an attitude that he is destined to meet his fate, so he ought to meet it in a position of power and authority as King. Although both parties' confessions leave them equally guilty of essentially the same crime, Jocasta's willingness to be blinded by love leaves her in a higher standing in the audience's eyes than Oedipus' singular sights for power and authority.

However, the most literal and disappointing element of Wright's *Blind* is the scene in which Oedipus loses his eyes and must quickly adapt to functioning without sight. Along with the elemental changes Wright makes to this pivotal scene—the violence occurs onstage (during a rather graphic sex scene, no less), Jocasta blinds Oedipus mid-coitus, Oedipus strangles his wife/mother as both reach orgasm—the aftermath of Oedipus' blinding is disappointing and rather jarring. Clearly very little time was spent with actor Seth Numrich in rehearsals on dealing with a loss of eyesight. Even with the most forgiving audience member simultaneously suspending disbelief while cognitively understanding the emotional repercussions of what Oedipus is going through (the plague outside his home, he has just strangled the woman he loves, he is in immense physical

pain, he has no idea what to do next, etc.), one cannot help but notice the glaring inconsistencies in Numrich's five-to-ten minute portrayal of a visually impaired individual. The shock of becoming blind would undoubtedly place Oedipus in a state in which he may need to feel around his bedroom to navigate—however, the actor would grope the bed for life to find his way around it, yet run with ease up two stairs placed at an angle upstage center. Even with absolutely no training in living as a visually impaired individual whatsoever, one would hope director Lucie Tiberghien might at the very least indicate to Numrich the fact that Oedipus is far likelier to injure himself on marble stairs than a down bed.

In another moment, Oedipus calls for assistance from the Maid he earlier threatened. As Danielle Slavick attempts to make her entrance, the door of the set becomes stuck, and it is clear she is pulling with all her might from the other side. The walls are even shaking. Out of absolutely nowhere, a very “blind,” bloody Oedipus rushes across the stage with surefooted agility to open the stuck door for the Maid. His hands find the doorknob with ease after he dashes across a room he only moments before needed to crawl to navigate. As soon as the Maid is inside, Oedipus returns to his desolate, crawling, fumbling state—feeling his own face as if he doesn't know it belongs to a human, let alone himself. Instances like a stuck set door occur frequently in theatre; it is the very nature of live performance for such elements to go awry. However, Tiberghien's lack of focus on Numrich's performance as a visually impaired individual came to the surface and boiled over in this singular moment. A panicked actor undertrained in functioning without his eyesight completely abandoned a major given

circumstance for his character's physical life in a moment of theatrical mishap that could have easily been avoided with a simple ad-lib and commitment to the physical life he had already (supposedly) created as a visually impaired individual.

The Miracle Worker

Conversely, the work by Abigail Breslin as Helen Keller in Gibson's *The Miracle Worker* proves consistent and committed. Although many members of the visually impaired community were outraged that a sighted celebrity was cast as perhaps the best-known member of the visually impaired community in the modern era (Healy), it quickly becomes quite apparent that the young Hollywood star was primed and properly trained for her portrayal of a deaf/blind child half her age. The extreme tantrums Gibson writes into the text that are often portrayed as either bratty or animalistic by many actors not understanding the world in which Keller lived before her breakthrough with Sullivan were delivered with purpose and control by Breslin. They are clear attempts to communicate frustration and pain rather than excuses for the performer to flail about the set making offensively stereotypically "deaf" vocalizations. The young actor balances using the hands as a means of taking in her environment with an inherent understanding of familiar spaces such as her home and garden (Green 47). The angle taken by Breslin as well as director Kate Whoriskey is one of Keller as a bright child who has been put at a disadvantage due to her parents' constant coddling, who lives in fear of that which has not been explained to her because the time has not been taken to illustrate anything beyond complacency, who tests

and takes advantage of limits because she so desperately desires them. Within this world, Breslin creates a rather stunning portrayal of a young Keller—intelligent, impish, charming, and aching to communicate with a world that doesn't realize what she holds within her.

Despite the careful consistency with which Breslin portrays Keller, one must also examine the often-overlooked staging of visual impairment in the character of Annie Sullivan. Keller's teacher contracted trachoma, a bacterial infection, at very young age that left her blind. In Sullivan's case, however, several surgeries—records indicate approximately nine—restored her sight, but left her photophobic--extremely sensitive to light (Helen Keller). It is mentioned throughout the course of the play that Sullivan wears dark glasses and used to be blind, however, she rarely dons the glasses during performance and exhibits no outward indication of discomfort when her extremely sensitive eyes are exposed to light that others find comfortable. Although photophobia is by not often a disease that affects visual acuity or lifestyle (as is the personal experience of the author of this document) it is certainly a condition that can require a certain amount of adaptation or accommodation on the part of the patient. Actor Allison Pill removes her dark glasses twice onstage without acknowledgement of how this action affects her sensitive eyes. There are also many instances in which Sullivan appears outdoors in daylight sans eyewear with apparent ease and comfort. To a lay audience member, this likely would not raise suspicions or second thoughts, but to the visually impaired community and those with knowledge of the experience of photophobia, this is an odd oversight

indeed. A patient with no history of ocular disease or impairment other than photophobia would cringe at the thought of bearing outdoor light without a pair of tinted lenses; Annie Sullivan would certainly be dealing with a great deal of squinting, tearing and pain exposed to the light on the Keller homestead. While understandable on the part of Whoriskey to remove the sunglasses to keep Pill's expressive face visible to the sighted audience members, this dramaturgical oversight undermines the careful portrayal of Keller. By neglecting to illustrate another point on the spectrum of visual impairment outside of Keller's total blindness, Whoriskey (one supposes—and hopes—inadvertently) leads her audience toward the belief that blindness consists of total lack of vision.

Undoubtedly, Whoriskey's oversight on the part of staging Annie Sullivan is entirely accidental and forgiven by many audience members and groups. The lobby of Circle in the Square's theatre space holds a glass display case containing artifacts from the American Federation for the Blind and the Helen Keller Center—letters between Sullivan and Keller, early samples of Keller's writing as she learned to wield a pen and programs and photographs from the first Broadway production of *The Miracle Worker* starring Anne Bancroft as Annie Sullivan. The emotional quality of the performance and respect paid to the very real lives and stories portrayed in this play succeed in moving even the most stoic and scholarly of audience members. To find fault in the details of Pill's portrayal of Sullivan in no way indicates that Whoriskey's production is an overall failure or insult to the blind and visually impaired community. In fact, it proves to be very far from it. The observation of the oversight in regard to photophobia

serves as an illustration of the lack of attention and knowledge the sighted majority of the American population has of the world of the visually impaired.

Synthesis

The website of New York-based company Theatre Breaking Through Barriers states that 18% of Americans live with some sort of disability (their term, not the writer of this document's), "...yet only 2% of characters on television exhibit a disability and only 0.5% are allowed to speak. (web)" With this statistic facing the mass media, a single month in New York theatre features three characters (should one choose to include Annie Sullivan, and her photophobia certainly classifies her as one with a visual impairment) in major performance venues with a significant degree of impairment. What becomes even more noteworthy about these characters is that they are major, leading characters in their respective plays. Although the role of Helen Keller is not technically a speaking role, this is simply a result of history: the action of the play occurs before Keller developed the ability *to* speak. At the writing of this document, there are seventy-one professional productions occurring in New York City (data based on Broadway and Off-Broadway productions as defined by commercial theatre standards). At first glance, this seems promising: two productions out of seventy-one feature visually impaired characters. However, once the statistics are averaged, the number reaches the same dismal 2% that television reaches—and this is addressing productions featuring visually impaired characters; to count each character represented in each production and base statistics on these numbers would undoubtedly diminish the statistic even further. The saving grace

for the New York theatre scene in this circumstance is the amount of stage time these characters receive. Rather than invalids whose impairments are exploited for comedic event or overplayed to the point of sentimentality, or far worse: characters that are relegated to having as much influence upon the action of the play as the set dressing, Oedipus, Annie Sullivan, and Helen Keller are the focal points of their plots. Without them, the stories would cease to exist and there would be no play whatsoever. While this does not entirely compensate for the lack of presence of visually impaired characters elsewhere on New York stages, it certainly begins to atone for the lack of attention paid to visually impaired characters. These three characters are dynamic, complex and able to carry the weight of heavy subject matter on their capable shoulders.

Naturally, with subjects such as these occurring so rarely, directors are bound to misstep in their choices in the portrayal of visually impaired characters. Research is often devoted to period study, movement, antiquarianism, linguistics, familial structure, economics, and any other special circumstances the text at hand might necessitate. However, in the hands of a properly trained dramaturg, there is no reason a careful study of the experience of a visually impaired individual would not occur. In neither *Blind* nor *The Miracle Worker* was mention of a dramaturg to be found in the program or any literature about the play in its advertisements, lobby environment, or reviews. For productions such as these, it seems as though it would be logical and perhaps extremely necessary to bring on an individual whose sole responsibility is research—this could free the director focus upon her overall aesthetic goals while maintaining the proper verisimilitude

for the performers and audience. While the effect of blindness should never overarch the effect of the action, it becomes unfortunate when the errors in the portrayal of these characters detract from the potential of a production becoming truly excellent. As artists, theatre professionals often present themes and issues to their audiences that are new and/or unfamiliar. A misstep in the portrayal of an impaired individual can be misleading and instigate a domino effect of misperception that can be carried into the daily life of those uninformed about the condition they are witnessing.

Companies Featuring and Assisting Visually Impaired Performers

In addition to the portrayal of visually impaired characters on the American stage, one would be remiss to not acknowledge the handful of companies in existence garnering attention for their use of disabled performers. While these companies do not limit themselves to working exclusively with the visually impaired, their work with actors of varying types and degrees of disability gives audiences a new perspective on performance and “wholeness.” By working with artists that exist outside the standard of what is perceived as physically “normal,” companies and organizations such as Theatre Breaking Through Barriers, Open Circle Theatre and VSA push audiences and American culture as a whole to reexamine value systems and perceptions of those with disability. In creating opportunities for those that are often marginalized, these companies close the gap that often divides mainstream and disabled artists and audiences.

VSA

Perhaps the greatest influence in the movement for disabled and visually impaired artists is VSA. This organization was founded in 1974 by Ambassador Jean Kennedy Smith to give students with disabilities an opportunity to participate in the arts (Welcome). In association with the Kennedy Center for the Arts in Washington, DC, VSA --an acronym for Vision Strength Access (VSArts)-- As part of the Kennedy family’s legacy in support of the arts, Jean Kennedy Smith’s program provides opportunities to children with varying degrees of disability--physical, visual, auditory, developmental, learning, etc--access to arts education and experience.

In terms of theatre, VSA offers not only various opportunities for students with disability to witness live performance and partake in classroom learning activities pertaining to theatre; the organization also provides opportunities for students to gain hands-on practical experience in theatre and other fine arts-related fields (Welcome).

In VSA's Playwright Discovery Program, middle and high school students are invited to "examine how disability affects their lives and the lives of others" through the medium of playwriting and live theatre. Both disabled and nondisabled students are encouraged to apply for this program. They may work in groups or collaborate; scripts can be dramas, comedies, musicals--no limits are placed upon the creativity of the voice of the playwright(s), aside from a length limit of forty pages. To further encourage the young writers to participate, the winning writer receives \$2,000 and a trip to Washington, DC to see his/her play produced at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts (Announcing). This program proves incredibly educational and useful for several reasons. First, the contest is limited to neither students with nor without disability. Additionally, the concept of disability is to be treated in a manner in which it is examined as an impacting element rather than a defining feature. Perhaps the strongest feature of this program is not the manner in which it does or does not highlight disability, but rather the straightforward manner in which it encourages students of all ages and abilities to express themselves through a theatrical medium.

For students in higher education, VSA offers a rather prestigious apprenticeship at the Williamstown Theatre Festival for undergraduate and

graduate students ages 19 to 24 with disabilities. In this program, students rotate through various departments and workshops within the festival as well as audition for minor roles in fully staged productions, learning how different departments of the WTF operate and collaborate to keep a professional theatre company running smoothly. Workshops with well-known industry professionals are also a part of the apprenticeship to give students an opportunity to discuss their questions, concerns and curiosities with some of the most successful names in the theatre business. Although Williamstown Theatre Festival offers seventy slots in the apprenticeship program each summer, VSA sponsors some students with disability to attend (they do not reveal the precise number of students sponsored by the program; however they clearly imply more than one may be sent annually). Sponsorship from VSA includes: application fee of thirty dollars; tuition, room and board at thirty-five hundred dollars, round trip airfare to and from Williamstown as well as ground transportation; travel, room and board for a personal care assistant (if required); and reasonable accommodation for the apprentice's disability (VSA).

In addition to the potentially staggering financial investment VSA is making in its commitment to the Williamstown Theatre Festival Apprenticeship Program, the opportunity provided to student artists is unparalleled. While no program should turn down an applicant based upon his/her disability, the financial strain such an apprenticeship can put upon a student in addition to the complications surrounding from the need for a degree of accommodation may prevent disabled students from applying to such programs in the first place.

Thanks to VSA, visually impaired students, as well as students living with other types of disability, are able to attend WTF's summer series to gain the experience they need--and desire--as budding theatre artists.

Theatre Breaking Through Barriers

For adult theatre artists, the New York theatre landscape has been changed and made more accessible largely thanks to the efforts of one organization and its artistic director. Theatre Breaking Through Barriers and its Artistic Director Ike Schambelan have been giving professional theatre artists (particularly actors) with disability an opportunity to make their mark on the Off-Broadway scene since 1979. Originally Theatre by the Blind, TBTB seeks to "develop blind and low-vision talent for theatre and film." Schambelan has run the company since its inception, expanding the repertoire of the company to include performers with varying types of disability. The shift occurred in 2007 when Schambelan made the decision to cast Anne Marie Morelli as Titania and Hermia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Morelli lives with multiple sclerosis and uses a wheelchair for mobility. As a result, Schambelan began rethinking the goals of Theatre by the Blind and chose to expand the company's mission and repertoire to include artists of varying disability (Horwitch).

With the inclusion of artists with varying types of disability, Schambelan maintains that TBTB's focus remains upon the visually impaired theatre professional. Much of the company's website remains devoted to the statistics of representation of blind and low-vision characters in mainstream television and media. Additionally, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers shares online some of

their techniques for working with actors whose visual acuity is not that of most actors working in the American professional theatre. For instance, visually impaired and low-vision performers are given scripts typed in extremely large font (typically sized at about forty points). Actors that are unable to see any printed type are given recorded text and learn text aurally, and still others that read Braille are given manuscripts in that format. Rehearsal periods are extended beyond the usual Off-Broadway standards in order to facilitate the accommodations necessary for all performers (and production staff. It is not unusual for TBTB to work with a visually impaired production team member, a stage manager in a wheelchair, etc). Additionally, the sets used by this company provide assistance and cues to the company's performers with such subtle techniques many audience members do not immediately take note of them, if at all. Since many of TBTB's performances are at the Kirk Theatre on Theatre Row, the need for an indicator of the edge of a proscenium stage has become necessary for both safety and aesthetic reasons. Scenic designers now incorporate a small ridge or raised lip just inside the edge of the apron so actors may feel when they are nearing the edge of their playing area without calling attention to the fact that they are doing so. Sets are also often designed in high-contrast color palates, making it easier for visually impaired performers to discern one scenic element from another. For actors working in wheelchairs, accessibility through wider doorframes and ramps is ensured in scenic and backstage design and construction (Theatre).

Each of the aforementioned accommodations sounds rather inconsequential on its own. One may wonder why Theatre Breaking Through Barriers garners so much attention for providing these simple changes to its artists. The fact of the matter is this: very few theatres are willing (or fiscally able) to provide these services to blind actors or actors with other types of disability. Schambelan's sole objective in creating TBTB was to give professional visually impaired actors a voice and presence in New York theatre. All resources and energy for the past thirty-one years have gone toward doing this. Just as other theatres throughout the country have devoted their time and funding to furthering their own artistic missions, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers has dedicated every iota of funding and energy toward changing the perceptions and statistics of blind performers in the American theatre. As the company continues to expand its horizons to include artists with different types of disability, TBTB will continue to evolve its programming and aesthetic. At the time this document is being written, the company is running *Bass for Picasso* by Kate Moira Ryan, directed by Schambelan at Theatre Row's Kirk Theatre. This is the company's first play to feature an array of disabled actors without any visually impaired cast members. Clearly, the face of Theatre Breaking Through Barriers continues to change moment-to-moment and season-to-season.

Open Circle Theatre

An eight-hour drive south, Suzanne Richard's Open Circle Theatre in Rockville, Maryland also strives to create career opportunities for disabled theatre artists. Open Circle's mission since its inception in 2003 with its premiere

production (Christopher Durang's *Laughing Wild*) has been to cultivate the talent and passion of artists with disabilities by giving them opportunities to participate in professional theatrical productions. Richards founded the company in order to bring new light to texts well-known to the theatre community and its audiences, bringing awareness to disability by casting actors that are deaf, visually impaired, in wheelchairs, with crutches, and with a variety of other disabilities. Richards directs each piece, tackling hefty productions ranging from *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* to *Jesus Christ Superstar* (in Open Circle's production, Jesus was portrayed by Rob McQuay, who is in a wheelchair). By tackling standards, Open Circle is able to have the box office draw to lure mainstream audiences to its doors with the disabilities of the performers being afterthoughts at worst or often a new layer of consciousness added to the production audiences did not anticipate (Open).

Making Open Circle Theatre even more unique than many other companies, even TBTB, is that Richard and many of her collaborators and board members possess a disability. Richard herself was born with Osteogenesis Imperfecta (brittle bones disease), which has kept her on crutches for most of her life, but has not slowed her down in any respect in the rehearsal hall. She rushes around the theatre space, signing to her deaf cast members, checking theatre accessibility, leading vocal warmups and so forth with more energy than most of her nondisabled counterparts (Swain). As a result, Richard and her collaborators understand the artists and the community with whom they are working on an incredibly visceral level.

Open Circle Theatre proves incredibly inclusive in working with theatre artists and performers with a wide range of disability. As a result, very little is to be found about the company's work with low-vision and blind performers specifically. The company of course makes accommodations for all performers, and there is footage of a blind performer with Braille text working with Open Circle. However, it appears as though Richard's philosophy when speaking about her work centers more around principle than process—very little is discussed about how collaboration occurs (although observation leads one to believe the process is as organic as a well-organized nondisabled company might like to work). Rather, Open Circle prefers to focus their energy upon declaring that disabled artists are as capable and dynamic as nondisabled performers. For those that understand this is absolutely true, it can cause one to wonder why Richard does not open her process up for discussion. Emails to Richard requesting correspondence or a meeting have been unanswered at the time of writing this document; however, Open Circle is in the process of preparing a production of *Visible Language: A New Musical about Deaf Communication* by Mary Resing to open at the Kennedy Center for the Arts in May 2010.

Synthesis

Each of these three companies provides key opportunities for artists in different parts of the country at different stages of their careers a chance to take part in theatre they may not ordinarily feel welcome to. While attention must be paid to the phenomenal contributions provided to blind artists (as well as artists with other disabilities) by VSA, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers and Open

Circle Theatre, one must question why these companies must fight so hard to stand out for their exemplary work. In the year 2010, American culture appears to pride itself on an attitude of inclusion, progressiveness and of seeing a person before seeing his/her race, sexuality, religion, etc. This therefore begs the question: why must niche companies be created to make up for opportunities blind artists are losing in the theatre community at large? Writers are creating dynamic visually impaired characters. Both new plays and revivals are cropping up on the New York theatre scene featuring visually impaired characters. Moreover, Ike Schambelan has proven through his work over the past nearly four decades that audiences often cannot distinguish between sighted and visually impaired actors when they are working onstage with one another (Theatre). While it is no doubt a tremendous victory for the blind and disabled communities that companies such as VSA, TBTB, and Open Circle exist and are receiving such high accolades as they are, one must question what it says about American culture at large that companies like these must exist in the first place. At its root, the same lack of understanding demonstrated by Daniel Ho, Seth Numrich, and Lucy Tiberghien is bleeding into our audiences: the blind are so fundamentally different from "us" (meaning mainstream, nondisabled American culture) that their otherness makes them unrelatable and separate. Thanks to VSA, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers, and Open Circle Theatre, perceptions can begin moving away from the negative stereotype and toward a positive one of understanding and inclusiveness.

Conclusion

As evident from the texts, performances and organizations working with blind characters and artists, the American theatre is not entirely negligent in its relationship with the low-vision community. With that assertion however, it is of utmost importance to acknowledge and admit that the industry has a far way to go in order to create an aesthetic community of equals among sighted and visually impaired artists, audiences and communities. For every meticulously staged *Miracle Worker*, there is at least one carelessly blocked *Blind*. For every writer that brings the visually impaired experience to the page with depth and dignity such as Filloux and Marnich, there is another playwright that is lacking research like Ho. Unfortunately, when dealing with the statistics the blind community faces for representation in film and onstage, each artist that does not fulfill his/her responsibility to the medium or project at hand in turn harms the image the blind community struggles to uphold and improve on a daily basis.

The organizations bringing opportunity to blind and disabled artists can provide exemplary models of not only how to engage with the community, but how the community functions as a whole. VSA, Theatre Breaking Through Barriers, and Open Circle Theatre all operate from a vantage point of celebration and capability. Although they are founded to assist those defined by American culture at large by their "otherness," these organizations seek to make the necessary accommodations for their artists to create, but otherwise eliminate any indication that the artists they support are significantly different from those

working in mainstream theatre. Each has a unique voice and tremendous amount of talent—the focus lies here. Upon the individual.

Perhaps it is the loss of the acknowledgement of others (used in a larger cultural context in this instance and not referring to disability) as a culture more that creates the convenient excuse of marginalization of visually impaired performers. It may be easier for producers and theatres to believe that they do not possess the means or understanding necessary to accommodate artists that are visually impaired, and to bring a visually impaired character to the stage without allowing them an opportunity to engage with the community is irresponsible. While this argument appears valid on the surface, one can immediately begin questioning. The accommodations Schambelan and Richard have made for their artists are inexpensive and simple, and are easily researchable and accessible by production staff, artistic staff and the like. To shy away from staging blind characters due to lack of understanding or exposure to a community, while sounding noble, is entirely preposterous. Many actors will portray characters under circumstances they have not (and likely will not) experience. Could one of the true reasons blind characters are so rarely seen onstage be as simple as trepidation on the part of those producing the work? Fear that audiences will reject it? Worry over backlash from the community over staging something incorrectly?

As previously stated, speculation from a single individual rarely yields results in a collaborative creative field. The contemporary American stage will not reconsider its methods of staging blindness until very real conversations occur

among those capable of implementing the necessary changes. Transformation cannot occur until the American theatre as an art form and as a business is ready and willing to alter itself and change some of its current trajectories. To show the true face of America is to include the face that cannot see itself with the eyes it contains, but with the heart and passion that lie within.

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