“My mother said that it’s some kind of freak show,” says Damian Bright near the end of Disabled Theater, an hour-long performance created by the French choreographer Jérôme Bel in collaboration with the actors of Zurich’s Theater HORA. “But,” Bright quickly assures us, “she liked it a lot.” This striking bit of meta-commentary on the still-in-progress performance is delivered in the dry, matter-of-fact style that has long characterized Bel’s work.

The black-box proscenium stage at New York Live Arts (where I saw the work in November, as part of the 2013 Performa Festival) is empty save for a semicircle of 10 black chairs occupied by the work’s 10 performers. The lighting remains uniformly neutral and bright, and the actor, dressed in an oversized T-shirt and blue jeans, stands in front of a microphone and addresses the audience directly, as himself. Such a studiously unadorned environment would hardly seem to be the stuff of the freak show, the luridly spectacular genre of popular performance that has its roots in premodern fascinations with deformity and monstrosity. And yet Bright’s words send a perceptible shiver of recognition rippling through the audience: some of us, it seems, have been thinking along the same lines as Bright’s mother since the show began about 45 minutes ago. Does hearing our silent worry about the performance, expressed onstage by one of the subjects of our concern, let us off the hook, as if to say, “Stop worrying, we’ve already thought of that”? Or are Bright’s words instead meant as a rebuke to the pious impulses of audience members overly hung up on the ethical and political implications of what we’ve been watching, and even enjoying?

Founded in 1993, Theater HORA is a company made up of performers with various cognitive, intellectual, and learning disabilities.1 Disabled Theater, which premiered at the 2012 Documenta Festival in Kassel, Germany, consists of 10 Theater HORA company members performing a series of simple tasks devised by Bel: standing silently center stage; introducing themselves to the audience and discussing their disabilities; performing brief, self-choreographed dance solos. Yet in spite of its simple construction and unflashy mode of presentation, Disabled Theater makes for a complex and often charged viewing experience. Never less than watchable, and often quite funny, Disabled Theater also represents a subtle challenge to the normative conventions of theatrical spectatorship. At the same time, the political and ethical hazards it courts remain far from transparent or easy to parse.2

1. I will use the unsatisfactory term “cognitive disability” to signal a range of atypical mental conditions, states, and modes of being that have been variously described in cognitive, neurological, psychiatric, and moralistic terms. For an illuminating discussion of the challenges of naming and discussing disabilities of the mind, see Margaret Price (2010).
2. For more on Theater Hora, see Petra Kuppers article “Outsider Histories, Insider Artists, Cross-Cultural Ensembles: Visiting with Disability Presences in Contemporary Art Environments” in the previous issue of TDR.—Ed.

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As the performance begins, a casually dressed young woman, Simone Truong, takes a seat at a worktable set up in the exposed stage-left wing, opens her laptop, and begins to address the audience in slightly accented English. Truong is Disabled Theater’s only non-disabled performer. She introduces herself to the audience, explaining that she has been hired as an assistant and translator for the piece we are about to see, because “the actors speak only Swiss German, and Jérôme Bel does not.” She then tells us that the first thing Bel has asked the actors to do is enter the stage, one at a time, and stand silently facing the audience for one minute. Truong then repeats her phrase, in German, presumably so that the performers gathered backstage can understand her.

After a pause, the first performer, Remo Beuggert, enters from the upstage wing and positions himself at the center of the stage. He’s a tall and somewhat imposing figure, wearing a baggy T-shirt and jeans; a black cargo vest is zipped up over his broad chest and a black-rimmed cap covers his shaggy haircut. His face is unsmiling, shy, but also gentle, and you can tell it takes him some effort and concentration to gaze at a single point in the audience for...how long exactly is hard to say, but it feels long: we in the audience are still settling into the quiet ambiance and slower rhythm of the performance, and the transition from buzzy preshow chatter to this new atmosphere of contemplation is dramatic. Soon enough Beuggert pivots on his feet and exits the stage the way he came in. After another pause, a second performer, Sara Hess, enters and walks to the same spot: she’s shorter than Beuggert, perhaps in her early 20s, and wears chartreuse pants and a black T-shirt printed with a wolf’s head, of the kind favored by slightly nerdy young people everywhere. Her gaze is harder than Beuggert’s, more concentrated, but she seems just as focused. She lingers onstage a little longer than her counterpart before turning and leaving the stage.

This pattern continues until all 10 of the performers have stood before us: 5 men and 5 women, varying considerably in shape and size, comportment and gait. After a few iterations of the pattern we become more attuned to the
small details of each performer’s presence: what they do with their hands (some clasped in front of them, others straight at their sides); their calm stillness or evident impatience; the flicker of a smile or an eye roll. A few avoid eye contact entirely, looking instead at the floor or a point just above our heads; others stare at us intently, blinking in the face of the audience’s uncomfortable silence. Freed from theatrical pretense or distraction, the work’s first 15 or so minutes—dominated by the silent parade of performers doing nothing but standing before us, returning our gaze—give us no other choice but to stare at the performer’s bodies.

After all 10 of the performers have stood in front of us in succession and the stage is again empty, Truong—still visible at her worktable—again addresses the audience, telling us that the second thing Jérôme Bel has asked the actors to do is to enter one at a time, stand stage-center, and report their name, age, and profession. Truong repeats the instructions in German, and again (in the same order) the actors enter and begin the task. The performers range in age from early 20s to mid-40s, and each identifies his or her profession as “actor” (schauspieler or schauspielen, in German). Truong patiently translates the performers’ words, a repetitive process that lends this section of the performance an almost ritualistic feel. Some of the performers speak fluently, others haltingly and with much effort, or with noticeable speech impediments that are amplified by speaking too closely or loudly into the microphone. This time, after each actor has had a turn, he or she takes a seat in the semicircle of chairs, so that by the end of the sequence all 10 performers are sitting in front of us.

Truong again addresses the audience, telling us that Bel has next asked the actors to name their “handicap.” She calls each performer forward by name. Some describe their disability in the medicalized language of “syndrome” and “genetic disorder,” while others offer their own interpretations of their conditions. Bright, who has Down syndrome, explains, “It’s called as well Trisomy-21. That means I have one chromosome more than you in the audience.” Miranda Hossle, tall and shy, reports that she is “a little slower than so-called normal.” Tiziana Pagliaro simply approaches the microphone and says, “I don’t know.”

In the following section, Truong reports that Bel asked each actor to choreograph a solo dance to music of their own choosing, and then selected seven of the solos for inclusion in the performance. Remo Beuggert’s dance, presented first, is an amusing riot of head-banging...
and fist-shaking performed to the propulsive strains of a German techno track. Matthias Grandjean offers a sweetly awkward soft-shoe performed to a big-band piece, a shy smile spreading across his face as he skips and dashes to the music’s syncopation. Julia Häusermann puts on a sparkling white glove and offers a witty take on the moonwalk as Michael Jackson’s hard-hitting 1996 single “They Don’t Care About Us” booms over the sound system. Lorraine Meier has perhaps the most exuberant solo, to ABBA’s “Dancing Queen”: alternately spinning in place and flinging her compact body across the stage, Meier’s cheeks redden with effort and her hands gesticulate playfully as she channels the joyous energy of the Swedish pop anthem.

The dance solos that make up the main part of Disabled Theater invite us to set aside the usual measures with which we are used to viewing and judging dance and other types of theatrical performance, particularly those associated with technical virtuosity and skill. The performance is not seeking to display how capable the performers are of “overcoming” their disabilities, it is rather concerned with the expression of individual particularity through movement. Watching from their seats, the other performers smile and occasionally laugh along with their colleagues’ individual dance moves. At times they whisper to each other or nod along to the beat of the music. Since its premiere, the group has performed the work well over 100 times, and there’s clearly a well-developed sense of camaraderie among them.

In the final segment of Disabled Theater, Truong calls upon the actors to report their own feelings about the work in which they are performing. It is here that Damian Bright tells us about his mother’s concern about the work being a freak show. Hossle avers that she enjoys doing the piece because “in this show my job is to be myself.” Pagliaro again simply approaches the microphone and says, “I don’t know.” Häusermann tells the audience that she’s a little tired of doing her Michael Jackson solo, and so she decides to perform a sing-along with Justin Bieber’s song “Baby” instead. Matthias Brücker reports that he was hurt that Bel had not selected his dance solo for inclusion in the original show. Truong then tells us that after hearing from the performers, Bel decided that the show should close with the solos of the remaining three performers, and so it does: there’s no grand finale, just three short dances and then applause and bows.

In its presentational directness, Disabled Theater elicits (and, in so doing, insists upon) its audience’s fascination with bodily and cognitive difference. André Lepecki has suggested that in Bel’s previous choreographic efforts, theatrical bareness has functioned as “the ground for choreographic labor”: Bel’s pieces strip away the trappings of theatricality so that “the staging of bareness [...] sets up the scene for a critique of desire within our commodity-oriented culture” (1999:130). The recessively minimalist construction and presentation of Disabled Theater, however, seems to serve a different purpose: it magnifies the audience’s uncertain and shifting responses to the distinctive bodily presence of the performers. The work also implicitly references the ways in which disabled bodies have
historically been subject to regimes of medical surveillance, institutional custody, and eugenicist logics intent on managing, and in many cases eradicating, disabled subjects and disability as such. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has made the case that “When people with starable bodies [...] enter into the public eye, when they no longer hide themselves or allow themselves to be hidden, the visual landscape enlarges. Their public presence can expand the range of bodies we expect to see and broaden the terrain where we expect to see such bodies” (2009:9).

Viewed from this perspective, Disability Theater’s straightforward presentation of the unadorned presence of its performers might be understood as a mode of “desiring disability” in the sense offered by Robert McRuer and Abby L. Wilkerson, who use that term to describe practices that resist the pathologizing impulses of a health-obsessed culture and seek instead to “realize a world of multiple (desiring and desirable) corporealities interacting in nonexploitative ways” (2003:14). Indeed, the quietly playful and affectionate moments in Disabled Theater when the performers interact with one another hint at forms of sociality that can flourish beyond the margins of standard or typical cognition. Nodding along to the beat of the songs, offering quiet words of encouragement to the dance soloists, and in some instances lending physical support to one another, the unplanned and seemingly spontaneous gestures that flicker around the edges of the performance’s main “action” are among its most powerful and intriguing moments. They allow glimpses into a world where disability is treated as something other than an abject condition to be medically managed, controlled, or hidden from view, revealing instead that disability allows and often requires alternative forms of relationality and care to emerge.

And yet Disabled Theater is not a straightforwardly utopian project, nor is it a feel-good plea for the acceptance of the disabled by the supposedly more able-minded and bodied. There were ambiguous and even occasionally troubling aspects to the performance, some of which appeared to be intentionally provocative, while others seemed to elude the full control of the work’s creators. These largely had to do with an assumption that seems to have informed Disabled Theater’s creation and execution: namely, that Theatre HORA’s disabled performers possess a more immediately visceral “presence” than their nondisabled counterparts. Bel has stated this more or less explicitly in his published comments about the process of making the piece. In an interview with Gia Kourlas, for instance, Bel explains that in working with the Theater HORA performers, he “was looking for the presence of the performer, against the reproduction.” He continues:

I mean that the performer has to be as much as he or she can in the present, not in the reproduction of something which has been done before during the rehearsals. The actors of Theater Hora, because of their cognitive alterations, can do this easily. They are connected to the present in a way that others are not. And this theatricality was what I was looking for, because I knew this would be powerful and intense onstage. (in Kourlas 2013)

Bel’s comments are striking for a number of reasons, not least of which is his conjecture that people with cognitive disabilities somehow possess a more proximate relationship to “presence” and “the present.” But the comments are also illuminating for the insight that they lend to the affective experience of seeing Disabled Theater itself—which is, indeed, largely shaped by the cumulative effect of observing the idiosyncratic details of the individual actors’ “presence” onstage. As Bel suggests, a good part of the performers’ appeal might be described as their unself-consciousness, transparency, or “guilelessness”—at least in comparison with more conventionally trained or nondisabled dancers. This potentially patronizing assumption, however, leads the performance into tricky political and ethical territory, a fact that Damian Bright’s statement about his mother’s feeling that the performance was a kind of “freak show” seems to acknowledge but does not further engage.

Licia Carlson has written that cognitive disability constitutes “a philosopher’s nightmare,” posing a disruptive challenge to normative accounts of rationality, subjectivity, and moral agency (2010:1). In many ways, performance, and theatrical dance in particular, is an ideal place to explore the implications of such challenges, precisely because it is a sphere of
activity in which any dualism between body and mind is impossible to maintain for long. To what extent is the appeal of a performer’s presence—and her effectiveness in moving an audience—determined by an external assessment or judgment regarding the functioning of her cognitive faculties? The enigmatic relationship between physical gracefulness and mental self-consciousness (the latter most often understood as posing an impediment to the former) has been a concern that has perennially arisen at the intersection of dance and philosophy. It’s a paradox that can be traced back at least as far as the 19th-century German poet Heinrich von Kleist’s famous parable “On the Theater of Marionettes,” which relates the story of an adolescent bather whose effortlessly graceful comportment vanishes as soon as he catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror (Kleist 2010).

One of the ironic conclusions of Kleist’s story is that marionettes are more suitable dancers than humans because they lack the hindrance of self-consciousness, and hence are more capable of performing the movement dictated to them by the choreographer/puppeteer. Does Disabled Theater (and Bel’s comments about it) represent a contemporary reiteration of this trope—one that displays and, perhaps, exploits the supposed qualities of “presence” possessed by the performers by virtue of their cognitive disabilities?

The presumption that human consciousness and, more precisely, a normatively determined capacity for self-consciousness lies behind the regime of representation within which theatrical dance takes place points to a final set of concerns that Disabled Theater addresses. Bel has long been interested in disrupting the traditional role of the choreographer-as-author within the tradition of Western theatrical dance (his first piece of choreography, created in 1994, was called Nom donné par l’auteur, or Name Given by the Author). Bel’s previous pieces have employed spoken language in order to interrogate the way moving bodies are encoded by history, meaning, and signification: “Giving representation and speech to dancers, who are mostly silent, has always been the first artistic operation of my investigation with theater” (in Lebovici 2012).

Bel’s collaboration with the actors of Theater HORA can be understood within the context of his longstanding interest in the fraught relationship of movement to speech, of dance to rhetoric. Disability theorist Margaret Price observes that disabilities of the mind “are always and inevitably caught up with an individual’s rhetorical power” (2010:118); that is to say, cognitive or mental disability seems to implicitly involve a corresponding “disablement” of the subject’s communicational and rhetorical authority. It seems, then, important to note that Disabled Theater is framed by the direct-address speech of the work’s sole non-disabled performer (Truong), who mediates between the audience and the other performers by both translating their German words into English, and by more generally orchestrating the work’s proceedings. Truong also controls the placement of the microphone—a symbolically fraught stage device in this context—throughout the course of the performance, moving it first center stage before the segments that require the performers to speak, and removing it from view during the dance solo sections. The speech of the Theater HORA actors varies considerably: some, such as Damian Bright, display a witty and inviting facility with language; for others, the process of speaking seems labored, an ongoing challenge. Bel remarks that the communicational challenges that disabled performers face lend their dances a degree of eloquence and aesthetic power that nondisabled performers lack:

With mentally disabled actors, whose cognitive processes are altered, the articulation of speech is not too good but what makes me happy is that their dancing is so eloquent. For twenty years, I felt dance was not eloquent enough for me, and I moved to speech, using the discursive. With the disabled, the semantics are weak but dance starts to be eloquent again. It connects me again to dance. That was a big surprise for me! (in Lebovici 2012)

Bel’s encounter with cognitive disability would seem to have upended his understanding of the relation between dance and discourse in a way that allowed him to reconnect with dance. Yet Disabled Theater only obliquely acknowledges the ethical and political hazards that such a view poses: it seems to leave intact and
unquestioned the distinction between disabled and nondisabled, and Bel’s words veer troublingly close to romanticizing the Theater HORA performers and the less impeded access to dancerly eloquence he claims they possess by virtue of their cognitive differences. But perhaps it is asking too much of a single performance to expect it to resolve all of the questions it raises. "Disabled" is a multivalent word. As the literary critic Michael Bérubé has remarked, one of its meanings can be found in “the relatively ‘neutral’ way that a smoke detector or a function on one’s computer can be disabled” (2005:573). Disabled Theater might best be thought of as an attempt to momentarily “disable” the conventions of theatrical and choreographic representation that rely upon the unspoken and unseen authority of a (presumably rational, cognitively normative, and non-disabled) author, director, or choreographer. Disabled Theater encourages us, instead, to think more expansively about how various and multiply calibrated levels of cognitive capacity come together in performance, and (by extension) in the world.

References

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**Cédric Andrieux**

**With Bel, Benjamin, and Brecht in Vancouver**

**Peter Dickinson**

In January 2013, Vancouver’s PuSh International Performing Arts Festival partnered with the city’s Dance Centre in presenting Jérôme Bel’s *Cédric Andrieux* (2009). That the audience mostly knew what to expect from the choreographer whom André Lepecki has called the chief interrogator of “dance’s political ontology” (2006:45) can be traced to two previous Bel works that elicited much excitement and commentary when they premiered in Vancouver: *Pichet Klunchun and myself* (2005), programmed as part of the Vancouver International Dance Festival in 2009; and *The Show Must Go On* (2001), which opened the PuSh Festival in 2010.

At the start of the performance, Cédric Andrieux walks onstage in sweats; a gym bag is slung over one shoulder and he carries a water bottle. He strikes a dancer’s pose downstage: spine erect and elongated, feet firmly planted in first position. But before Andrieux moves, he speaks, and suddenly, for those of us in the audience, he is no longer solely a dancer whose primary technical instrument is his (mostly