5

Convivial theatre: care and debility in collaborations between non-disabled and learning disabled theatre makers

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Over the last century, while the labels used to identify learning disability have frequently been reviewed, intellectual impairment itself has remained resolutely wedded to the concept of care. In the UK, for example, the 1913 Mental Deficiency Act, which legislated for the coercive institutionalisation of people with learning disabilities in asylums, was built on the Royal Commission for the Care and Control of the Feeble Minded, which had presented its report to Parliament in 1908. At the other end of the twentieth century, the collapse of the asylum system in the UK in the 1970s led to the Thatcher government's policy of community care, as set out in the Mental Health Act of 1983 and refined in the NHS and Community Care Act 1990.

Academic attention in America has also been preoccupied with care, as Patrick McDonagh suggests: 'For years, the only available histories of idiocy and related concepts were works such as Leo Kanner's *A History of the Care and Study of the Mentally Retarded* [...] and Peter Tyor and Leland Bell's *Caring for the Retarded in America*' (2008: 10). This centrality of care reflects the medicalisation of the learning disabled field in the nineteenth century, which superseded a period of interventions by educationalists who had sought to develop teaching methods that would liberate the developmental potential of people with learning disabilities; the medical model, by contrast, emphasised individual deficiency over capability and defined learning disability as an unimprovable condition requiring lifelong care, especially medical care. The medical model remained dominant until challenged at the end of the twentieth century by the social model, which reimagined disability as the product of an inaccessible social environment rather than individual difference. Agendas of care also began to widen at this point, from the institutional regimes of medical care, linked (as in the 1908 Royal Commission) with control, to personalised care with the educational aims of offering support and nurturing potential. Theatre with learning disabled

actors, which emerged alongside community care in the 1980s, continues to cater for the dependencies of learning disabled actors, while also seeking to develop accessible training and aesthetic forms that liberate capacity and engage with the actors as artistic collaborators.

Ellen Feder and Eva Kittay have recognised that dependents, as well as their caregivers, are excluded from the public sphere by 'models of social and political life' which, under a liberal worldview, are 'fixated on interactions between autonomous equal agents' (2002: 2). They have accordingly argued for 'the need to reintegrate care into a paradigm of just moral and political arrangements, but one that acknowledges those dependencies that call for care and support' (2002: 3). Kittay's own radical assertion of the social value and necessity of care is grounded in reflections on her personal relationship with her profoundly disabled daughter Sesha and her observation that 'the inclusion of people with mental retardation may well be liberalism's limit case' (2002: 258). In developing her 'dependency critique of equality' (Kittay, 1999: 4), Kittay acknowledges that she starts from 'the case of a dependent who is unable to reciprocate' but does so 'not because [she] assume[s] it to be the most typical case, but because it is the case most in need of consideration if one is asking about the social responsibility to the caregiver' (1999: xiii).

In examining this especially heightened example of dependency, however, Kittay (1999) is clear in adding two key caveats: that the relationship with Sesha is still a reciprocal and mutually caring one in which Kittay is also dependent on her daughter; and that all people in a complex society are dependent, even though some forms of dependence may not be apparent. Through exploring the dynamics of care and dependency invoked by learning disability, therefore, Kittay proposes that '[r]ather than denying our interdependence, my aim is to find a knife sharp enough to cut through the fiction of our independence' (1999: xiii).

In this chapter, I will pick up these concerns to consider how the dynamics of dependency, equality, interdependence and care play out in two performances in which ensembles of actors with learning disabilities collaborate with non-disabled directors: *Disabled Theater*, produced by Theater HORA and directed by Jérôme Bel; and *Contained*, produced by Mind the Gap theatre company and directed by Alan Lyddiard. Through a cross-reading of the two performances, I will argue that new ways of reading *Disabled Theater* can be opened up by acknowledging the hidden mutual dependencies and 'attitude of care' (Kittay, 2002: 259) that are made more explicit in *Contained*. To extend the analysis of these performances as political theatre whose dynamics of care contest the foundations of liberal, and neoliberal, principles, I will connect Kittay's project with Jasbir K. Puar's 'push for a broader politics of debility that destabilizes the seamless production of abled-bodies in relation to disability' (2009: 166). Adopting Puar's concept of 'conviviality' (2009: 168), I introduce the term 'convivial theatre' to identify performances in which the politics and reciprocal dynamics of care are operative and palpable.

Disabled Theater

Disabled Theater, first produced in 2012, is a touring production by Theater HORA, a Swiss company of learning disabled actors established in 1993 by non-disabled director Michael Elber. For this production, the company invited the celebrated French choreographer Jérôme Bel to direct, and the resulting performance is often perceived as belonging primarily to Bel's repertoire rather than Theater HORA's. Gerald Siegmund (2017) proposes that Bel's collected work constitutes an ongoing critical interrogation of dance itself, a discursive project in which Bel sets the parameters for a theatrical examination of the dancing body as culturally produced. Everything that happens within these parameters therefore participates in 'the discourse "Jérôme Bel"' (Siegmund, 2017: 12).

Siegmund accordingly suggests that *Disabled Theater* attends to several recurring concerns within Bel's discursive project:

First, it analyses the features of a theater or dance production by reducing, isolating and displaying its constituent elements [...] Second, it cleverly [...] investigates and, above all, celebrates the role cultural codes and sign systems [...] play in producing subjects [...] Third, [...] it broaches the issue of the power relations at work in the theater and its apparatus. (2015: 14)

While maintaining these long-standing concerns, *Disabled Theater* also belongs to a particular phase of Bel's work, in which he extends the discourse 'by allowing amateurs or untrained dancers to take the stage' (Siegmund, 2017: 226). Although he frequently works with non-dancers during this phase, *Disabled Theater* is Bel's first experience of working with professional learning disabled actors.

Critical considerations of the production have often focused on the aesthetic and political significance of learning disability, producing tensions between competing claims that Bel's discursive project either grants agency to the learning disabled actors or exploits them. In outlining these tensions below, I propose that the discourse shaped by Bel fails to take account of the discursive dimensions of learning disability itself, undermining the political efficacy of his project. My subsequent analysis, which argues that such tensions can be alleviated through closer attention to the dynamics of care, is based on experiencing the show in two formats: a video recording of a performance at the Schauspielhaus Zürich in March 2014 and two live performances at La Commune, Paris in October 2017 as part of Festival D'Automne's Jérôme Bel season.

The staging for *Disabled Theater* is pared back and functional, with a single row of eleven empty chairs, one for each of the learning disabled actors, forming a shallow arc across the stage, each with a bottle of water placed beside it. This minimal setting establishes the actors as the focal point of the show, which is structured around six tasks that they are asked to perform individually: to spend one minute on stage before the audience; to state their name, age and occupation; to identify their disability; to dance

to a piece of music of their own choosing; to give their opinion of the show and to take a bow.

Downstage left, a technical desk is set up for the operation of sound, which is run in semi-darkness by the non-disabled 'translator', a role undertaken variously by freelance performers Simone Truong and Chris Weinheimer, employed solely for this production. The translator introduces each task for the audience, in French, German or English as appropriate, and then again for the actors in their native Swiss-German, as well as translating the actors' individual speeches. Beyond its practical function in international touring, this role also reflects the necessity of translation in the process between the actors and the French-speaking Bel. While introducing the tasks, the translators make the devising process explicit by using such phrases as 'Jérôme then asked the actors to'. This repeated invocation of the absent Bel, Siegmund proposes, 'does not refer to the actual person Jérôme Bel. Rather, it refers to the (depersonalized, structural) *function of power* that organizes the field of performance' (2015: 23, original emphasis). Bel's contribution, according to this reading, is to establish and authorise the discursive frame within which the performance unfolds. Accordingly, 'the program notes list Jérôme Bel as responsible for the concept, whereas all the performers are given credit not only for performing but also for creating the show' (Siegmund, 2015: 23). This neat compartmentalisation of the respective contributions is reflected in the performance structure, in which the translator impassively articulates Bel's commands from the dimly lit sidelines, separated from the space in which the actors provide the central aesthetic content of the show. Bel's authority, Siegmund observes, does not therefore extend to choreographing the performers and, within each task, the actors 'are given agency to speak and act in their own right' (2015: 19).

After announcing each task, the translator calls the actors forward one at a time to undertake it. Once they have all done so, the translator then moves on to the next task. The one interruption to this simple structure is in the solo dances. These are self-choreographed pieces, for which the actors – who have little or no dance training – have chosen their own music and shaped their own routines without any technical or artistic input from Bel. Originally, the translator announces, Bel selected the seven best dances for performance, and these are presented as task four. As part of the fifth task, however, while giving his opinion of the show, the actor Gianni Blumer complains to the audience that he has been denied the opportunity to present his solo dance. Consequently, before the final task of taking a bow, the translator informs the spectators that Bel changed his mind and, at this point, allows the remaining dance solos to be seen.

Blumer's challenge to the director's authority has precedents in Bel's earlier productions. In *Pichet Klunchun and Myself* (2004), for example, Bel (as the eponymous 'Myself') exchanges experiences and choreography with Pichet Klunchun, a Thai dancer working in the traditional Khôn form. Countering criticism that the performance maintains postcolonial forms

of appropriation, Siegmund points to Klunchun's open ridiculing of Bel's fame to argue that the French choreographer's 'discursive position enters into play and is now open for questioning, debate and criticism' (2017: 215). Similarly, Bel's directorial change of heart in *Disabled Theater* 'destabilizes not only his position of power, but also the stable position from which the audience judges what they see or hear' (Siegmund, 2015: 23). By allowing the spectators to observe the originally excluded dances, Bel opens up his artistic judgement, as well as his authority, for consideration.

The undermining of Bel's authority appears superficial under scrutiny, however. If the actors, for example, are 'given' agency, then the very contingency of this status suggests that they remain dependent in a way that inherently defers to the authority of the choreographer. Individual moments may invite a critique of Bel's judgement and authority, but his power always reasserts itself with the announcement of each task. Furthermore, other accounts of the process suggest that Bel exercised more directorial authority than is implied by the show's structure, exceeding the conceptual boundaries of his role in order to impose choreographic decisions.

Actor Remo Beuggert recalls that '[t]here was one actor who expressly did things on stage like waving to the audience and Jérôme told him three, four, or even five times and at some point he said, "If you do it again, you're out"' (Theater HORA, 2015: 89). Similarly, during performances of *Disabled Theater* actor Peter Keller remains on stage in the first task for much longer than the allotted minute. Yvonne Schmidt has described how 'at the beginning of the rehearsals, Keller actually remained on the stage far too long, only to walk off after almost exactly one minute at the next rehearsal. But Bel chose to keep the first version' (2015: 233). If such details of the performance were selected by Bel then the extent of the actors' genuine agency clearly diminishes. Furthermore, Bel's own account of why he relented and restored the excised dances has little to do with Gianni Blumer's opinion. Instead, he recounts that, after seeing the show in its original version with just seven dances, the French choreographer Xavier le Roy told him "[t]he piece is not accomplished if you don't see them all dance. It doesn't matter whether they are good or bad, the piece is about their singularity" (Bel, 2015: 168). Despite the performance's implicit suggestion, then, that Bel's input is structurally limited to establishing the tasks, it seems as though a large degree of non-disabled control and influence is exerted over the aesthetic choices of *Disabled Theater*.

For Benjamin Wihstutz, alternatively, it does matter whether the individual dances are good or bad, as the question of what constitutes aesthetic quality forms the core conceptual drive of *Disabled Theater*, with Bel staging his change of heart in order to put his own judgement under scrutiny and provoke this very question. The show, Wihstutz argues, 'bids farewell to the fundamental principles of achievement and proficiency just as much as it challenges the conventional criteria of judgement. What is good and what is poor theater?' (2015: 45). This forms the basis of the show's political potency, since the actors' lack of virtuosity dismantles the concept of

performance-as-achievement and so challenges ‘a fundamental principle of neoliberal societies’ (Wihstutz, 2015: 45). Within Bel’s discourse, conventional aesthetics of dance are critiqued for imposing strict standards of virtuosity on the performers in ways that subjugate and subjectify them (Siegmond, 2017). The shows *Veronique Doisneau* and *Cedric Andrieux*, for example, explore how the titular performers have been shaped, as dancers and individuals, by their challenging experiences with the Paris Opera Ballet and Merce Cunningham respectively. Jasbir K. Puar notes a comparable ideological principle that operates in ‘neoliberalism’s heightened demands for bodily capacity’ (2017: 1), such that exceptional physical challenges of the kind presented to balletic and contemporary dancers have now become a principle of everyday socio-economic productivity. Bel’s interrogation of dance, therefore, contains an implicit political critique of neoliberalism.

For Wihstutz, this political project legitimises Bel’s exercising of undue authority over the actors:

It is fully justified to accuse Mr. Bel of exploiting the HORA actors. They *are* instrumentalized for an aesthetic concept that lies at the very heart of Bel’s *œuvre*. The actors need to be presented on stage as disabled, for it is their very disability that serves as a tool to deconstruct the norms and rules of theater itself. However ethically problematic this may seem, the exploitation of the disabled cast thus enhances the political potential of the piece. (2015: 45, original emphasis)

Siegmond and Wihstutz agree that Bel’s work is ultimately emancipatory and egalitarian, holding out, if not realising, the potential for new forms of subjectivity beyond those imposed by dance or neoliberal institutions. They disagree, however, on the role that disability plays in this project. For Wihstutz, Bel’s critique requires the actors’ disabilities to be presented and exploited as non-virtuosic in order to underline their contrast with normative theatrical bodies. Siegmond, alternatively, defends Bel in broadly the same terms that he approaches the accusations of postcolonial exploitation in *Pichet Klunchun and Myself*: the destabilising of Bel’s power and degree of agency granted to the performers suggests that they are not exploited but emancipated within a performance that ‘systematically destroys any kind of secure ground from which to differentiate between an appropriate or inappropriate representation of disabled people, [...] between what is to be considered as abled or disabled’ (2015: 30). Despite these differences, Siegmond’s and Wihstutz’s respective critiques rest on the impression of Bel creating space for a natural, non-virtuosic learning disability to appear. Bel’s hidden influence over the aesthetic content, however, suggests that *Disabled Theater* constructs, rather than emancipates, a performance of learning disability. The resulting exploitation of the learning disabled actors deploys these constructions, and so operates through maintaining and exploiting conventional perceptions of learning disability. Thus, as Sarah Gorman notes, ‘the performers’ contribution is framed within an ableist paradigm’ (2017: 97).

During the performance, the actor Matthias Brücker draws attention to the presentation of the performers as animalistic while giving his opinion of the show: 'It is super. My parents think differently. They didn't like it. After the performance, my sister cried in the car. She said that we are like animals in the zoo. Fingers in the nose, scratching, fingers in the mouth' (Umatham and Wihstutz 2015a: 225). The actors perform such 'animalistic' behaviours throughout by exhibiting behaviour that is apparently instinctive and culturally inappropriate, contradicting Siegmund's assertion that they are 'not doing anything freakish that would actively draw attention to their "otherness"' (2017: 246). While this may serve Bel's discursive drive to renegotiate the forms of physical behaviour that are permissible on stage, it also reinforces existing misperceptions of people with learning disabilities as socially undeveloped and uninhibited.

Fostering an impression of learning disability as animalistic has rather dangerous connotations in existing discourses about intellectual impairment. Eva Kittay recounts an exchange with the philosopher Jeff McMahan in 2008 in which she seeks to contest McMahan's thesis that 'the moral status of [people with profound cognitive disabilities] should be demoted below that of all other human beings [...] and that the appropriate comparison group is nonhuman animals, whose moral status should be appropriately elevated' (2010: 394). By aligning their moral status with animals, McMahan is questioning whether people with profound learning disabilities deserve the same rights as non-disabled people, including the right to justice and the right not to be killed.

Disabled Theater also constructs and exploits the performers as amateurs as well as animalistic, and this amateurism is pivotal in Bel's critique of the neoliberal insistence on performance-as-achievement. Gorman recognises Bel's intention to destabilise aesthetic conventions through a poetics of failure and reflects that the actors' perceived amateurism may be related to the art form, as they are trained actors and not dancers (2017). Nonetheless, Gorman is more critical than Wihstutz of Bel's exploitation of disabled actors in the pursuit of his aesthetic and political project and she argues that 'the suggestion that amateur bodies cannot transform themselves, or become "other" suggests that they are primarily identified by bodily "immanence" and a perceived failure to transcend the constraints or limitations of the body' (2017: 97).

If the piece explores the poetics of failure, then, it does so by employing a medical perception of disability in which failure is symptomatic of the actors' learning disabilities rather than an act of aesthetic choice or liberation. These particular actors, it appears, cannot reject virtuosity because they are already rejected by it.

I have demonstrated elsewhere that the function of learning disability within the symbolic order of liberal societies is to act as 'the static model of inferiority against which a non-disabled humanity measures itself' (Calvert, 2014: 187). Bel's decision to exploit the learning disabled actors by framing disability as amateurism constitutes a deployment, rather than

a destabilisation, of the cultural and discursive norms established by (neo) liberal societies: learning disabled failure is the marker against which normative performance-as-achievement is assessed and valued. Furthermore, by only claiming credit for the concept, Bel personally sidesteps the poetics of failure, exempting himself from his own critique of performance-as-achievement. Within Bel's discourse on dance, then, this exemption and the failure to recognise the complexity of learning disabled discourse neutralises the critical potency of his project.

Under Bel's authority, the exploitation of the actors and the superficial engagement with learning disabled agency and representation are symptomatic of a lack of care. For Kittay, a key ethical feature of care is the necessity that 'the dependency relationship does not authorize the exercise of power except for the benefit of the charge [...] Should the dependency worker neglect her duties, the fate of the charge hangs in the balance, and some intervention is critical' (1999: 33). I will suggest below that similar obligations of care and dependency are necessarily operative, if usually hidden, in theatre. Bel, in framing the actors as animalistic and amateurish, neglects their interests as professional performers and as learning disabled people.

Kittay also proposes two urgent principles that philosophical discourse about learning disability should observe, and these seem appropriate to extend to Bel's function as the author of the conceptual and choreographic framework: 'first, *epistemic responsibility*: know the subject that you are using to make a philosophical point; and, second, *epistemic modesty*: know what you don't know' (2010: 401, original emphasis). In neglecting the complexities of discourses around learning disability, Bel's naivety both exposes the actors to undue risk and weakens his own discursive project.

What might happen, however, if we broaden our reading of the performance to consider *Disabled Theater* as a collaborative project, in which the performers' contribution exceeds Bel's ableist framework? Given the long-standing association between care and learning disability, could the combination of Theater HORA and Bel produce a meeting of two modes of interaction, one discursive and one caring? Under such a reading, the dynamics of care may become more complex and reciprocal, opening new insights into the making process that extend beyond the conceptual and subjective to the material and intersubjective. Before turning to this reading, it will be valuable to consider how such an approach is already articulated in another recent performance by learning disabled actors, *Mind the Gap's Contained*.

Contained

Contained is a touring production by Mind the Gap, a British theatre company based in West Yorkshire. Like Theater HORA, the company (which formed in 1988) works primarily with professional learning disabled actors

and has an established history of touring original work nationally and internationally. For this production, it also worked with a guest director, Alan Lyddiard, noted for his ensemble practice as the former artistic director of Northern Stage in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. *Contained* shares some similarities with *Disabled Theater*: both shows begin with a bare stage apart from a row of chairs for the actors; and both stage elements of their own making processes within the performance with the actors appearing as themselves, rather than in the guise of characters.

At the same time, the productions are markedly different in tone, structure and content, with *Contained* invoking an open atmosphere of reciprocal care and collaboration in contrast to the more compartmentalised relationships presented by *Disabled Theater*. Built primarily on autobiographical stories told by the ensemble, *Contained* offers accounts of personal experiences and relationships that encompass struggle, achievement, pain, joy, victory, defeat and resilience, even within single narratives. The performers' disabilities carry particular significance in some stories, but not in others, although they usually inflect the perspective of the storyteller. Overall, however, rather than taking disability as its theme, the show opens up complex layers of human experience as it has been, and is, lived by these particular performers. Structurally, the stories are interwoven with each other and interspersed with original songs, written by cast member Jez Colborne and performed live by the ensemble. There are also dance sequences and video segments, which variously involve pre-recorded footage, live feed and green-screen technology. Accordingly, the bare stage soon gives way to a complex array of technical equipment that is assembled and disassembled by the performers throughout the show. My analysis is based on seeing the performance three times during its two-year tour: twice at Mind the Gap Studios in Bradford (October 2015 and April 2016) and once at La Condition Republique, Roubaix as part of the Crossing the Line Festival (January 2017).

The interweaving of the autobiographical stories with each other, and with different media, invites constant cross-cutting between the stories and performers as they glide in and out of view or individual narratives give way to concerted musical numbers that draw out shared threads and offer a thematic commentary on the material. The ongoing technical set-up and stage management compound the complexity and restlessness of the focus so that the performance never settles into seemingly finished routines in the way that *Disabled Theater* does. *Contained* is a work in flux that is perpetually making itself: indeed, as the performers' lives develop offstage, their personal narratives are continually updated.

Contained also involves the onstage presence of a non-disabled figure alongside the learning disabled performers who, like the translator figure in *Disabled Theater*, stands in for the director and the directorial process. This role is undertaken by Charli Ward, the academy director at Mind the Gap, who works permanently with the actors and whose engagement with them extends far beyond this particular project. Her role in the

performance reflects some aspects of directorial authority in which she represents Lyddiard and his assistant, Mind the Gap's resident director Joyce Lee, by giving the actors onstage instructions and leading onstage warm-ups. Where the translator of *Disabled Theater* is restricted to managing the performance and its technical operations, however, Ward positions herself as a member of the ensemble, joining with the actors in the complicated technical operation of the show and, at times, performing alongside them in the dance routines.

At other points, she occupies a more supporting role. While many of the performers take charge of telling their own stories monologically, cast member Paul Bates is accompanied by Ward, who poses questions to him. Bates' impairment prevents him from fixing the story sequentially, so Ward's questions – which may vary from performance to performance – function to guide his narrative and negotiate a route through to the completed story. Similarly, Ward is visibly alert when Howard Davies, who may sometimes struggle with memory difficulties, tells his story. Unlike the neutral and detached tone of the *Disabled Theater* translators, Ward maintains a kindly and encouraging manner throughout. She is as immersed as the actors in the fluidity of the performance, managing the various staging processes and adapting to circumstances within her own role.

The exploration of the power dynamics between non-disabled facilitator and learning disabled performers is similarly fluid, as Ward moves between an authoritative position, a broadly equal contribution to stage and technical management and a supporting role that facilitates the performers' own authority. It is this latter role that most explicitly opens up the dynamics of care in the performance, as Ward's provision of support builds the performers' dependencies into the show.

Such support reflects Kittay's description of care as both a labour and an attitude:

As labor, it is the work of maintaining ourselves and others when we are in a condition of need [...] As an attitude, caring denotes a positive, affective bond and investment in another's well-being. The labor can be done without the appropriate attitude. Yet without the attitude of care, the open responsiveness to another that is so essential to understanding what another requires is not possible. (2002: 259–60)

In the collaborative context of the performance, the labour of care combines personal care for the other with professional care: Ward's efforts are directed towards sustaining the performers *as* performers. This also demands an attitude of care, as Ward must be open and responsive to the needs of the performers in the live event, especially during her improvised support for Bates and Davies. In turn, this evidences Ward's epistemic responsibility at an intimate level, understanding the individual nuances and dependencies of these particular performers.

This combination of epistemic responsibility and attitude of care resonates with Nel Noddings' concept of engrossment, an essential element for

qualitative acts of caring, through which the carer 'is *present* in her acts of caring. Even in physical absence, acts at a distance bear the signs of presence: engrossment in the other; regard, desire for the other's well-being. Caring is largely reactive and responsive' (2013: 39, original emphasis). Presence, of course, is a prized attribute of the live performer, and Noddings' concept opens up a potential mode of presence predicated on care that I will call theatrical engrossment. In this mode, the performer's engrossment during the live event does not signal immersion in the fictional world being created, but is externally directed, as a responsive and reactive attitude of care, towards sustaining the well-being or security of elements surrounding the performance itself, such as the other performers, the audience or the physical environment. Such care is intrinsic, on some level, to all theatre making, but is usually masked during performance.

Within the structure of *Contained*, such theatrical engrossment is openly presented: Ward's responsiveness to the performers, as a labour of care, is simultaneously an act of care for the performance itself, as its progress is also dependent on the quality of care paid to the performers within the fluid circumstances of the live event. As such, *Contained* is not concerned with a conceptual exploration of success and failure, but rather foregrounds the dynamics of care out of recognition that the well-being of the actors and the maintenance of the performance are equally dependent on the labour and attitude of care: indeed, the two are imbricated within each other.

The more rigid structure of *Disabled Theater*, divided along functional lines, struggles to meld care and performance in this way, as the compartmentalisation of director, translator and actors constrains theatrical engrossment. An accidental example, in which the established frame collapses, is illustrative. At the performance on 7 October 2017 at La Commune, the Theater HORA actor Julia Häusermann banged her head on the stage while dancing energetically to Michael Jackson's song *They Don't Care About Us*, forcing her to cut the routine short. The translator Simone Truong swiftly moved from the sound desk to check on and comfort Häusermann and then arrange for an ice pack to be delivered to the performer. For this moment, Truong's necessary and intimate engrossment in Häusermann conflicts with her role in the compartmentalised structure and so halts the performance. Her labour of care cannot accommodate either the aesthetic frame or the watching audience and so is not theatrical engrossment in which care for the live event coincides with care for the performer. Accordingly, the relationship between Truong and Häusermann, reconfigured as caregiver and dependent, overwhelms their given roles as translator and performer. If such dynamics of care operated during the making process of *Disabled Theater*, they have been erased by the meta-theatrical frame of the performance.

A sequence towards the close of *Contained*, however, holds potential for acknowledging alternative care dynamics within *Disabled Theater* through its recognition of the learning disabled actors as caregivers rather than dependents. After the Mind the Gap actors Howard Davies and Zara

Mallinson have told the story of their personal relationship, Ward herself has the opportunity to tell an autobiographical story: 'Family is very important [to] me and I feel like now in my life that is what is missing. I desire a family. I want children, I want to be married, and I want a house. This is something I thought I was on track with until recently. My last relationship broke down because he didn't want this' (Mind the Gap, 2016: 34). The trauma of this relationship break-up was very recent at the time of early performances, and Ward could not contain the rawness of her own emotion, often breaking down as she tried to complete the story. Invariably, the performers around her responded with care.

The genuine emotion of both Ward and the performers was palpable to the audience, and Ward recalls how its intensity would vary according to her own level of difficulty:

During the tour you can see the [performers' level of] support at its highest if I am really struggling with the story with hugs and constant 'you can do it' support. On those nights where it felt easier, there would just be a gentle touch of the shoulder for reassurance that they were there. I believe that in that moment, all the guys are with me and forget the audience, they are not performing. (Personal correspondence, 2016)

Ward here describes a highly responsive mode of theatrical engrossment, one that adjusts its intensity according to Ward's level of need and also reverses the established relations of dependency as the learning disabled performers now offer care to their usual caregiver. Unlike Truong's engrossment in Häusermann, however, this unplanned breakdown does not bring the performance to a halt, but is more readily accommodated within the dynamics of care already operating in the meta-theatrical frame.

The complex fluidity of roles, actions and narratives that underpin *Contained* thus extends to the dynamics of care itself, exposing the reciprocity within caring relations that Kittay acknowledges (2002). Her analysis does not, however, focus primarily on mutual care, which she calls 'exchange-based reciprocity' (Kittay, 1999: 68), exploring instead the more pronounced dependency involved in caring for a person with profound disabilities as a means of contesting liberalism's 'conception of the person as independent, rational, and capable of self-sufficiency. And [...] of society as an association of such independent equals' (Kittay, 2002: 258).

Potentially more fruitful here is Jasbir K. Puar's 'broader politics of debility' that questions 'the presumed, taken-for-granted capacities-enabled status of abled-bodies' under neoliberalism (2009: 166). Kittay's critique of liberal societies sustains a distinction between disabled and non-disabled people according to the intensity, or longevity, of the former's dependency on the latter. For Puar, alternatively, disability no longer identifies an enclosed constituency grounded in its particular politics of identity and representation, but is connected to a wider critique of neoliberal regimes that privilege and demand capacity of their subjects, while simultaneously debilitating them. Such a context produces 'more fluid relations between

capacity and debility' (Puar, 2009: 168) that problematise easy divisions into disabled and non-disabled. She examines the fluid dynamics of capacity and debility in terms of 'conviviality', approaching identity categories 'as events – as encounters – rather than as entities or attributes of the subject': 'In its conventional usage, conviviality means [...] to be merry, festive, together at a table, with companions and guests, and hence, to live with [...] [C]onviviality does not lead to a politics of the universal or inclusive common, nor an ethics of individuatedness, rather the futurity enabled through the open materiality of bodies as a Place to Meet' (Puar, 2009: 168). The open engagement within this concept of conviviality clearly resonates with Noddings' concept of engrossment and Kittay's attitude of care but, by replacing disability with the mutual navigation of each other's debilities and capacities, also allows for more nuanced and reciprocal meeting points between care and dependency.

Conviviality therefore suggests the attitude of care as fluid and mutual, constantly adjusting to the fluctuating vulnerabilities of interdependent people by 'rendering bare the instability of the divisions between capacity-endowed and debility-laden bodies' (Puar, 2009: 169). Ward's breakdown exposes this fluidity by revealing the emotional debility, and resulting dependency, of the presumed caregiver. In doing so, *Contained* resists distinctions between non-disabled and learning disabled debilities through which, as disability theorist Dan Goodley observes, diagnoses of cognitive impairment 'pathologise individually located behaviours and thoughts that stand in opposition to the rational, self-controlling and self-governing citizen so cherished by neoliberal societies' (2014: 88).

The fluid interplay of stories, status and care dynamics in *Contained* therefore produces a sense of restless engagement that marks this performance as convivial in Puar's terms. It is an event in which the performers meet and navigate each other's dependencies, collapsing the distinction between individuals as either wholly capable or wholly debilitated. While care is always a prominent component of learning disabled theatre making, arising from the historical understanding of learning disability outlined above, the explicit care in response to Ward's breakdown reveals an otherwise hidden, reciprocal care that constantly circulates among the ensemble in order to sustain both performers and performance. The conviviality and care that are necessary in collaborative theatre making become openly and aesthetically available to the audience, producing a distinct type of event that I would like to classify as 'convivial theatre'. Theatrical engrossment is an identifying characteristic of convivial theatre, in that the performers openly nurture the conditions surrounding the performance, through an externally directed labour, and attitude, of care. As such, each performance must recognise afresh the immediate debilities and needs of the performers, and meaning emerges from the audience encounter with, or experience of, the performers' highly responsive attitude of care within the live event.

Theatrical engrossment and Disabled Theater

Such insights into learning disabled theatre making have potential to extend the reading of *Disabled Theater* beyond the framework of Bel's discourse on dance, theatre and performance. Reflecting on the care dynamics in the show acknowledges the conviviality of the Theater HORA actors, collapsing *Disabled Theater's* ableist framework and pursuing a subtler critique of neoliberalism in which the actors offer care to an absent, yet nonetheless dependent, Jérôme Bel.

Disabled Theater, while not explicitly pronouncing such care dynamics, contains traces of conviviality that open up a dialectical engagement with Bel's discourse. The performers briefly submit to necessary acts of theatrical engrossment that, in their contrast with Bel's meta-theatrical frame, are fleeting but noticeable. Focusing on these moments, instigated by the actors of Theater HORA, recognises *Disabled Theater* as a collaborative and interdependent project in which the Swiss company both pursues and subtly contests Bel's overarching agenda. Such acts of theatrical engrossment complicate the choreographer's abstract discourse, countering conventional liberal concerns with emancipation, equality and exploitation through an emphasis on openness, interdependency and responsiveness.

Critical appreciation of Theater HORA tends to emphasise the performers' energy and investment. Umathum and Wihstutz note a favourable response to 'the stage presence of the actors' (2015b: 7), while Siegmund proposes that '[w]hat makes the solos so compelling to watch is the actors' ability to lose themselves in the dance, to abandon themselves to the point of recklessness while at the same time trying to retain control over the form' (2015: 26). Häusermann's accident may be less accidental from this perspective: it is an inevitable risk, and consequence, of the personal recklessness that lends 'presence' to her performance.

Häusermann won the Alfred Kerr Prize in 2013 at the Berlin Theatertreffen, with judge Thomas Theime giving the award on the grounds of her authenticity in performance, which Sandra Umathum defines as 'forgetting the self' (2015: 111). Such observations on presence and abandonment of the self are reminiscent of characteristics of engrossment in Noddings' formulation. For the most part, the actors' engrossment here signals immersion in the act of performance itself, and so does not appear primarily motivated by care. There are, however, specific moments in which the actors display theatrical engrossment, the explicit and responsive attitude of care towards the conditions surrounding the performance that honours the interdependence of all involved.

One example is particularly illustrative. During the fifth task, in which the actors offer their opinion of the show, Häusermann states that she would like to dance to Justin Bieber instead of Michael Jackson. Bieber's song 'Baby' is then played by the translator, with Häusermann dancing and singing along. Following her accident during the Parisian performance, Häusermann concluded by saying '*Merci, Simone*' to Truong, who smiled

and nodded her appreciation. This moment of gentle intimacy cut through the established framework of the show, shattering the demarcation of individual roles set up by the task structure to acknowledge the relationship between the performers. If Häusermann here acknowledges the care that Truong showed following the accident, in its tenderness and spontaneity the moment also feels like a reciprocal act of care, as though Häusermann senses that Truong has been unsettled by having to tend to her injury. Häusermann's gesture reassures Truong that she has recovered and, through this reassurance, eases Truong's concern for the actor and restores the translator fully to her role. It is through Häusermann's attitude of care, as an act of theatrical engrossment, that the equilibrium of both Truong and the show are restored.

At the same time, the sudden visibility of an attitude of care introduces a new register to the performance, which complicates Bel's framework. Truong herself is personalised by Häusermann's intimate gesture, which appreciates her as more than the physical representative of the absent Bel's structural and depersonalised power. The head injury, its treatment and its conclusion in Häusermann's gesture, reveals the interdependent humanity of both the actor and translator rather than their functional roles in Bel's conceptual discourse and political critique. The primary characteristic of this humanity is the necessity of care, as both Truong and Häusermann display the need for care and responsivity to the need of the other. In other instances of theatrical engrossment, such recognition of, and responsivity to, such human need is extended to Bel himself in ways that dialectically extend his conceptual exploration.

Also within the fifth task, the performers Gianni Blumer and Matthias Brücker both present negative criticisms of the show, but choose to soften their critiques. In calling the show 'super' before reporting his family's criticism, Brücker indicates that he does not wish to upset Bel. Similarly, while objecting to being omitted from the seven selected dances, Blumer tells the audience: 'I didn't dare complain to Jérôme Bel. Because actually he is very nice' (Umathum and Wihstutz, 2015a: 139). Their caveats form an act of care, designed to ensure that Bel is not personally wounded by the criticism. In order to enact this care, of course, Blumer and Brücker refer to the real Bel that they encountered in the devising and rehearsal process rather than Bel as the depersonalised authority shaping the performance and discourse. Just as Häusermann had to personalise Truong in order to restore the translator's equilibrium within the performance frame, so Blumer and Brücker must personalise Bel in order to fulfil the tasks he has set them.

These moments feel caring in that they respond to some perceived need within Bel himself. Given Bel's absence, it is difficult for the audience to know what needs Blumer and Brücker are catering for, and the intimacy between them and Bel is less intense than between Häusermann and Truong. Nonetheless, their care of Bel still evokes an intimate, interpersonal relationship, built on need and response, which is essential to the realisation of the performance. The fleeting glimpses of such relationships, which,

again, contradict the individualistic and compartmentalised framework, offer important qualifications for Bel's discourse.

By opening up alternative registers, based on care and interdependency, Häusermann, Blumer and Brücker destabilise the proposition that Bel has simply established a structure that emancipates the individual agency, aesthetic control and self-expression of the actors. It is not simply that this structure obscures the extent to which Bel has exercised control over the actors' choices, but that these choices are not independent and may well themselves be inflected by the labour and attitude of care towards Bel, Truong or, indeed, each other. That is, the aesthetics of *Disabled Theater* may be driven by engrossment, shaped as much by the collaborators responding carefully to the perceived needs of the other as by the pursuit of a conceptual discourse, the choreographic authority of Jérôme Bel or the free expression of the actors. The apparent amateurism or freakishness of the actors may therefore be less indicative of the natural state of learning disability and more reflective of the actors' perception of, and performative response to, Bel's own aesthetic needs and desires.

These acts of theatrical engrossment therefore point to an underlying attitude of care that, perhaps, has most reverberations for Bel's critique of virtuosity, which, as with Puar's critique of neoliberalism, contests the impossibility of such demands, based as they are on idealised, non-disabled criteria. By presenting disabled aesthetics as an alternative, however, Bel does not trouble the more fundamental liberal insistence on individual freedom and independence. The theatrical engrossment of the Theater HORA actors, by contrast, resonates with Puar's conviviality in abandoning individual agency, independence and, indeed, the very notion of criteria itself as appropriate measurements of performance. Rather, performance here is not measurable as the successful realisation of Bel's concept, but emerges instead from the convivial encounter between collaborators, an open aesthetic that is guided by care as the actors, directors and translators negotiate each other's needs and debilities. The richness of *Disabled Theater* lies in the elements that both elude and nurture the framework of Bel's discourse, as much as what appears within it. Approaching the critique of liberalism from this perspective, in which interdependency is prized above individual contributions, Bel becomes incorporated into, rather than exempted from, his reflection on performance-as-achievement.

In attending to the traces of convivial theatre and theatrical engrossment in *Disabled Theater*, the distinctions between non-disabled and learning disabled artists become less significant, and the politics less concerned with questions of representation and reception. Instead, the politics of production reflect inevitable dynamics of care that are elemental in theatre making, particularly where this involves learning disabled actors, but are usually disavowed under a neoliberal system that emphasises individual capacity and productivity over mutual dependency. Recognising the reciprocal dynamics of care in the performance, and reading its meta-theatrical frame through this lens, complicates the conceptual drive of Bel's project by adding human

complications and dependencies to his abstract discourse. At the same time, such concerns deserve consideration, not least because, as Truong's intervention following Häusermann's accident admits, these dynamics of care are already operative beneath the frame and to disavow them distorts Bel's conceptual and political critique. Moreover, they legitimately rebalance the discourse, and the outlined power relations, by acknowledging that Theater HORA, in providing the necessary care that is required to realise the concept, makes a foundational contribution to the project. This contribution of care, more pronounced in the history of this company and of learning disabled theatre in general than in Bel's own *oeuvre*, allows for the convivial collaboration to be understood as fundamentally interdependent.

Dan Goodley, like Puar, is interested in collapsing easy distinctions between disability and ability, reflected in his term 'dis/ability' (2014). He draws on Puar's theories to propose an active, rather than a critical, politics of debility:

Debility invites new ways of thinking about and politically agitating around our (labouring) bodies of debility. Many of us fail to meet the demands of neoliberal ideals. And debility is to be found at that moment when dis/ability collides [...] Recognising our debility, creates a meeting ground, a dis/ability commons if you like, in which we each have [...] the transformative and creative capacities of our labouring bodies to fashion alternative modes of production, consumption and exchange. (Goodley, 2014: 95)

Both *Disabled Theater* and *Contained* meta-theatrically explore their own modes of production. *Contained* is most explicit about how this dis/ability commons, in recognising points of debility across the entire ensemble, can only be productive through mutual engrossment, a reciprocal attitude of care towards the debility of the other that, when directed towards the conditions of performance, results in convivial theatre. *Disabled Theater*, by contrast, appears more explicitly concerned with the conventional politics of representation, power relations, agency and identity. Recognising and applying the revelations of *Contained*, however, allows for a dialectical reading of *Disabled Theater* as fleetingly convivial, opening up the ordinarily contained dynamics of care to expose a more fluid and collaborative political critique than Bel intended, in which the destabilisation of clear lines of authority, capacity, debility and dependency challenge neoliberal ideals more profoundly by collapsing its ableist paradigm.

The attention to care that informs theatre that engages learning disabled performers perhaps makes it more attentive to these questions of debility, reciprocity and engrossment. In the case of *Contained*, this is central to the performance to the extent that it operates as convivial theatre, while in *Disabled Theater*, the learning disabled actors introduce brief instances of conviviality to the performance against the grain of Bel's more dominant discursive framework and the critical responses to it. Yet it is in these glimpses of conviviality that the production's political critique is at

its most substantial, dissolving the distinction between disability and non-disability, acknowledging interdependence and opening up a shared negotiation of each other's debilities and capacities. Convivial theatre, which is, perhaps, more prominent in, although not limited to, the context of theatre and learning disability, offers resistance to the (neo)liberal prizing of individuality and independence at this more fundamental level.