

Subproject 1: Disability in Contemporary European Theatre (Dr. Soledad Pereyra)

As part of the DFG-funded project “Erzählung, Erwartung, Erfahrung: Behinderung im zeitgenössischen europäischen Theater und Film” (No. 429281822), the present subproject was responsible for the compilation, classification, and analysis of a corpus of European plays staged from 1990 onwards by theatre groups with artists with cognitive disability, nowadays identified as *mixed-abled* theatres. The theatre groups in the corpus seek to counteract the exclusion of people with disabilities by placing socially marginalised individuals at the centre (of the stage and the theatrical text), to raise ethical questions, and to intertwine experience, artistic creation, and participation. The subproject aims to research the representation of cognitive disabilities and the symbolic use of bodies with cognitive disabilities on stage to reveal social implications and new aesthetic possibilities. For the systematic analysis of the works, in addition to the approach through the theoretical framework of cultural studies, narratology, and theatre studies, the main project’s three concepts were implemented as a method: narrative, expectation, and experience.

Regarding narrative, the corpus reveals many plays that create a story through adaptation, versions, and traditional narratives from canonical Western cultural texts. For example, the productions *Metamorphosis* (2020, director: Ben Pettitt-Wade) by the Welsh group HiJinx, *Medea - Der tödliche Wettbewerb* (1997, director: Gisela Höhne), and *Die Räuber* (2017, director: Jacob Höhne) by the Berlin-based theatre group RambaZamba. In some cases, these versions only reclaim a traditional or literary character, sometimes even just a feature of it, to explore it scenically in a novel way, as in *Orlando. Engel und Wartesäle* (2001, director: Martina Couturier) by Berlin’s Theater Thikwa where the focus is on discussing the possibilities of gender transition and deconstructing gender binarism. Other examples are *Pinocchia* (2020, director: Richard Conlon) by the English group Blue Apple Theatre, which only takes the automaton or non-person feature of the traditional “Pinocchio,” and *Un peep show per Cenerentola* (2020, director: Antonio Viganò) by the Italian group La Ribalta, essentially recovering the theme of the search for the prince/princess and the narrative element of the slipper from the traditional fairy tale *Cinderella*. The use of narrative frameworks previously known to the audience serves as the common ground from which to create expectations and, simultaneously, to generate the unexpected through a new positioning, unusual in theatrical history, where people with cognitive disabilities interpret and are protagonists of plays that were usually denied to them, such as those of Shakespeare. In this sense, European mixed-abled theatre stages versions of Shakespearean dramas, where the hypotexts or primary texts are evoked in the narrative in a very free, transversal, and almost unrecognisable way beyond the

title and some brief moments of the play. Like, for example, the productions *El amor no dura para siempre (Romeos y Julietas)* (2017) and *Hamlet. Una versión recontra libre* (2022) both at the Centro Dramático Nacional of Madrid or *Lost Love Lost. Oder: Lasst mich den Löwen auch noch spielen!* (2011) by RambaZamba, which partially revisits the classic piece *The Tempest*. These examples show that the productions of Shakespeare by European mixed-abled theatres do not appear as homage and do not work as an adaptation but as a mere reference, confirming a disruptive positioning towards the canon. Finally, when analysing the narrative, the subproject shows that most plays in the corpus do not have disability as their central theme. In general, the theme of disability does not appear in the first person and is only mentioned, hinted at, or partially interwoven, even in adaptations such as Blue Apple Theatre's *Frankenstein* (2021, director: Richard Conlon), where passages from Mary Shelley's novel alternate with dialogues from a group of non-disabled people about gender, disability and the relationship between nature, culture, and civilisation. Concerning this, Spanish mixed-abled theatre is very different, as the topic of disability is frequently more direct than in the rest of the European corpus and is sometimes based on the representation of personal experiences of the ensemble artists, as in *Madre de azúcar* (2022, directed by Clàudia Cedó), *Y me busco* (2020, directed by Javier Martínez Lorcca/Susana Olmo), *Supernormales* (2022, directed by Iñaki Rikarte), or others found in historical archives, as in *Cáscaras Vacías* (2016, directed by Magda Labarga/Laila Ripoll).

As for the analysis of expectations, the subproject shows that most of the performances explore, centrally or peripherally, social expectations about the gender and sexuality of people with cognitive disabilities to allow a distancing from such preconceptions. The analysis of the corpus shows that this theatre attempts to break with expectations derived from a culturally ingrained image of people with disabilities as angels, asexual and infantile beings, without desire or gender concerns. The performances analysed oppose this through, for example, the sexualisation of the bodies of people with disabilities (*Gott*, 2017, directed by HORA; *Sieben*, 2017, director: Antje Siebers; *Supernormales* and *Un peep show per Cenerentola*), motherhood (*Madre de azúcar*; *Hamlet. Una versión recontra libre*), sexual desire without a romantic relationship (*Lectura fácil*, 2022, director: Alberto San Juan) and “dissident sexualities” and non-hegemonic gender identities (*Y me busco*; *Lectura fácil*).

Different theatrical techniques such as monologues, comedy sketches, plot interruption, breaking the fourth wall, and playful interaction between spectators and performers create a situational empathy that enables a new implicated experience with disability. The theatrical space brings performers and audiences, some of whom have no direct experience of disability

in everyday life, closer together. The inclusion of the audience in *Hamlet. Una version recontra libre* breaks down the separation between stage and audience and creates a shared experience between people with and without disabilities. The same is true of *Cabaret des frissons garantis* (2015, directed by Olivier Couder), in which the artists of Théâtre du Cristal prepare a meal backstage during the performance, which they then serve to the audience to create a shared banquet experience.

In terms of genres, most of the performances are dramas (even with humorous moments), such as the parodies in *La perspectiva del suricato* (2020). Even when a play is presented in a comic tone, the dramatic perspective is often maintained, as in *Supernormales*, which, although characterised by satire, grotesque and “esperpento,” at the same time constructs the story of a female character with a disability who becomes a victim of intra-familial sexual abuse. The tendency towards drama leads the audience to a theatrical experience of “narrative transportation” and, therefore, to forms of empathy that drive ethical or moral interpretations about disability that sometimes forget the aesthetic aspects of the plays, as we noted in the reviews of the play *Superabile* (2015; directed by Michele Eynard) by Teatro La Ribalta.