

Book Review

Title: *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*

Editors: Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander

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Reviewer: Carrie Griffin Basas, J.D.

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander's collection, *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance*, moves forward to fill a space between disability and performance studies. Disability causes a commotion in public realms. Its presence is often considered "out of the ordinary, separate from the everyday, a cause for pause and consideration" (p. 2). As the editors note, "commotion" can mean more than disruption or disturbance; it can also mean moving together.

Highlighting five major themes within performance and disability studies—taxonomy; disability/deaf aesthetics, audiences and the public sphere; rehabilitating the medical model; performing disability in daily life; and reading disability in dramatic literature, this collection moves the reader through terrains that are varied and interesting, foreign and familiar. This book is not just for theatre, literature or performance scholars, just as it is not only for disability studies scholars. With contributing authors such as Brenda Jo Brueggeman, Owen Smith and Marcy Epstein, *Bodies in Commotion* finds ways of sparking the imagination of newcomers to either field, as well as accomplished theorists in both.

The contributors to *Bodies* explore how disability is performed, knowingly and intentionally, such as on stage or in a film. However, they go beyond carefully constructed embodiments of disability to examine ways in which people with disabilities are pushed to public center stage in even the most mundane of encounters—such as riding the bus or attending class. It is on this ubiquitous stage that disability becomes more accessibly performative—available for all to behold or deconstruct. "Performance studies and disability studies have been . . . revising what it means to have a body and what it means to be alive" (p. 325). The fields bring together lived experience, subjectivity, and an "ethics of embodiment" (*Ibid.*) to ask such questions as: How should disability be performed? What is the role of one's personal experience of disability in an acting role that calls for "neutrality," or a lack of disability? Can students learn from intentional performances, even when they are not aware that they are an audience, such as in the case of invisible theatre? To each of these questions, the answers presented are critical and nuanced.

People with disabilities occupy an interesting space— as the objects of stares, yet not at the centers of most images about daily life. David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have described this phenomenon as the "double bind of fascination/repulsion with physical difference" (p. 303). The essays in *Bodies* analyze the stereotypes and scripts that limit people with disabilities, while

at the same time, try to expand cultural images and metaphors. In many of the cases described in the book, such as in the technology-rich choreography of Cathy Weiss or the dynamic storytelling of Time Slips, “alternative subjectivities” are proposed, “ones that do not attempt to be understood as the equivalent of able-bodied norms, but instead pose a challenge—to expand our cultural understandings of the body” (p. 102). Furthermore, in discussions of people’s theatre, cyborgs, and Australian men’s wheelchair sports, the contributors discuss alternative platforms for embodying self and disability.

Bodies in Commotion creates new spaces for the performance of identity, disability and community, while at the same time, highlights how simple acts of daily living can be performances in themselves. This volume is an exciting collaboration between disciplines. Future areas of inquiry might include the performance of non-disabled roles amidst groups or communities of people with disabilities, and the performance of disability by “pretenders” and “wannabes.”

Previous literary accounts of the disabled body have often portrayed it as a stable entity possibly signifying moral deviance or divine disfavor, but contemporary writers with disabilities are defining themselves and depicting their bodies in new ways. Using the insights of disability studies and source material ranging from the Old and New Testaments to the works of authors like Lucy Grealy and Simi Linton and including contemporary films such as *Million Dollar Baby*, G. Thomas Couser sheds light on a broader cultural phenomenon, exploring topics such as the ethical issues involved in disabilit...