MAKING WAY – DRAMAWAY’S HISTORY, ARTISTIC PRAXIS AND CONTRIBUTION TO CANADIAN DISABILITY THEATRE

by

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Abstract

This is a study of DramaWay – a Toronto-based company that facilitates creative arts programming for individuals with special needs. Founded in 1999, this company has grown and developed to provide a sought after service for the disability community in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). While there are other companies in Canada providing similar opportunities, I interrogate DramaWay’s distinctive approach within the broader context. More particularly, I investigate how DramaWay’s praxis contributes to the continuing development of disability theatre in Canada. Their work, I argue, merits more scholarly and critical attention than they have thus far garnered in the broader literature concerning disability performance in Canada and abroad. In this thesis I build from the insights of this broader scholarly field to provide an in-depth analysis of DramaWay’s history, artistic praxis and current educational infrastructure. Through my examination of archival materials, as well as information gathered through formal interviews with DramaWay’s artistic director, staff, volunteers and performers, I conclude that DramaWay’s praxis in presenting the talent of performers with special needs provides a unique and valuable contribution to disability theatre in Canada.
Lay Summary

Dramaway is a Toronto-based creative arts company that, since 1999, has offered educational arts programming designed specifically for individuals with special needs. As such, it has emerged alongside a growing field of disability arts and culture work in Canada, a field in which disability theatre has played a critical role. Strikingly, however, DramaWay’s work has not yet received any critical scholarly attention, a gap that my thesis intends to address. My research for this thesis focuses primarily on DramaWay’s most popular program, DramaWorks. The DramaWorks program offers nine months of theatrical training and rehearsing which then results in a final production in a professional venue. While there are other theatre companies in Canada and abroad that develop and produce similar work, I intend for this thesis to highlight what sets DramaWay apart. Through actively engaging with a range of archival materials and conducting formal interviews, I investigate how DramaWay’s history as well as their current artistic and educational practices contribute to the growth and development of disability theatre in Canada.
Preface

This thesis is the original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Rebecca (Becky) Gold.

The UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board – Human Ethics has approved this research.

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Note on Terminology

As I will explain in greater detail in Chapter 3, while it is far from a perfect term I have chosen to use the designation “performers with special needs” as it mirrors the main arguments and language choices of DramaWay’s membership. Additionally, in exploring the scholarship surrounding performers with similar backgrounds and identity politics, it is apparent that the language varies significantly. With terminology including ‘developmental disability’, ‘intellectual disability’ (Australia), and ‘learning disability’ (UK) referencing comparable groups of people internationally, Matt Hargrave and others who have written in the field have emphasized the lack of language cohesion on an international level. While I will refer to DramaWay’s membership as “performers with special needs”, in citing a range of national and international scholars, I will shift terminology where appropriate to reflect the specific terms mobilized by the respective authors.
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And finally, I extend special thanks to my mother, Anne Crozier whose love and support never waivers.
We live in intimate connection with other people’s bodies, minds and hearts. Our ways are not inferior to others’ ways.

Living in this way challenges and extends our courage, our love, our empathy for others and our creativity. We see and hear what others miss entirely.

I am not suggesting that everyone should be like us. Our gifts are rare, and that is good. But, as difficult as our bodies and minds can be, their very uniqueness brings strength and positive challenge both to we who live in those bodies and minds, and to society – when we are appreciated, respected and celebrated.

We are unique and unusual people. – Judith Snow (an excerpt from The Quiet Voice)
Introduction

Based in Toronto, Ontario and offering creative arts programming that is “created, geared and modified to suit individuals with special needs”, DramaWay is a successful, yet under-documented company whose artistic praxis and training methodologies serve the growth and development of Canada’s disability theatre movement. DramaWay performers learn from and work with a number of talented artists and creative arts facilitators, while developing their own artistic practices within a community of performers who collectively share many aspects of their lived experience as individuals with special needs. DramaWay’s performers have gone on to find success as both film and stage actors, developed and produced their own artistic projects, and even become overnight YouTube sensations. The work that DramaWay produces and the caliber of training offered emphasizes the importance of accessible training practice and artistic support for aspiring artists disabilities.

I first encountered DramaWay as I was searching for volunteer opportunities in the GTA facilitating drama therapy-type programming. I had developed an interest in working with people with special needs in high school, and was drawn to find something through which I would be able to use the skills that I had gained from my newly acquired Drama degree from Queen’s University. I stumbled upon DramaWay and while it is emphatically not a drama therapy program, it turned out to be the ideal place for me to develop my own skills artistically, professionally and intellectually. After further exploration of the company’s history and mandate, I applied for a volunteer position.

After emailing back and forth with Danielle Strnad, the company’s founder and artistic director, I was invited to attend a DramaWorks class. My first day happened to coincide with a video shoot with students from Sheridan College who were doing a piece on Strnad (an alumna
of Sheridan’s Social Service Worker program) and DramaWay. As Strnad was busy getting everything organized for the interview, I was forced to make myself comfortable right away. I met with the facilitators and introduced myself to the students. This unexpectedly immersive experience thwarted any attempt I might have made to remain a passive observer. Rather, I was forced to jump in feet first – which in retrospect, was the best and most insightful introduction into the DramaWay experience. I found that in having very little background information about the participants before meeting them, I was unable to establish any preconceived notions of how they might behave around me. Rather, we were simply strangers without labels, introducing ourselves and getting to know one another. It is this very sense of community and relationship building that I believe is one of DramaWay’s strongest assets in its programming – the divide between program staff and student artists is minimal. The person-centered philosophy of the programming invites all involved to participate and engage on an equal level.

Having had minimal experience working with special needs adults in the past, I settled myself into the group, asked questions, learned names, and quickly acknowledged the dynamic range of personalities and abilities in the room. We did warm ups, danced, and played drama games. Within minutes of my first class experience, it became clear to me, that in this room, there was no ‘us’ and ‘them’. All of us were playing and working towards a common goal: exploring and creating theatre together. My expectations for this program, and my place within its infrastructure were set at this point. This idea of a collective ‘we’ not only helped to shape my understanding of the teaching methodologies in place, but also highlighted for me what would become my own personal practice in interacting, engaging, and working with individuals with special needs.
As a vital component of my research for this thesis, I secured ethical approval from the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board in order to conduct interviews with staff, volunteers, and DramaWay performers. In my interview with Morgan Joy, a long time DramaWay facilitator, she commented on this idea of ‘we’ as being an inherent part of DramaWay’s “culture of inclusivity”. By embedding a sense of community and support into the program’s structure, DramaWay not only becomes a safe space for its participants to explore their own creativity, but also fosters feelings of being ‘at home’ for the participants. At DramaWay, student artists and staff alike are accepted exactly as they are. They are working, playing and performing with peers who come to share many of the same experiences, and as a result develop long-term bonds.

Through pursuing a Masters degree and continuing my study of disability theatre in Canada and abroad, it quickly became clear to me when discussing my own experiences with others in the field, that DramaWay was not a name that was recognized, let alone acknowledged as a contributing member of the disability theatre community in Canada. I felt, and still feel that the work that DramaWay does is significant and is worthy of academic scholarship. In acknowledging and accepting the gap present, I intend to fill this space and document the work that DramaWay has been doing over the last eighteen years.

Recognizing the work being produced by other companies, and the work of the scholars that write about them, I have been able to immerse myself in the preexisting scholarship and position DramaWay alongside other notable Canadian companies that facilitate comparable work such as Theatre Terrific (Vancouver), Inside Out (Calgary), and Les Muses (Montréal). National and international disability performance scholars including Carrie Sandahl, Philip Auslander, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, Bree Hadley, Matt Hargrave, Kirsty Johnston, and Petra Kuppers have contributed to the growing body of international scholarship concerned with disability.
performance that has emerged over the past twenty years. Having immersed myself in this work, I hope that my own research will serve to expand upon and contribute to these broader efforts to study and understand disability theatre and performance.

In this thesis I will consider many aspects of the company’s programming and artistic choices through the lenses of materialist and semiotic analysis, noting in the case of the former, for example, how funding strategies have supported the company’s efforts (or not) and, in the latter, the kinds of signs and representational strategies the company has mobilized in its works. It is important to note here, however, that my broader study has also relied heavily on interview-based methodology. After receiving approval from UBC’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board, I travelled to Toronto on two separate occasions for the purpose of this project. My first trip was intended to inform DramaWay participants and staff of my research project, distribute consent forms, and extend the invitation to participate in interviews during which participants would be asked questions about their experiences facilitating or training and performing with DramaWay. I felt it essential for this project to present the voices of the individual performers that I would be writing about – providing a platform from which they could have an opportunity to speak for themselves.

After receiving consent from thirty performers and ten staff members/volunteers (including Strnad) to participate, I returned to Toronto to conduct the interviews. Over the course of one week, I travelled to the three primary DramaWay locations and conducted sets of interviews in the four DramaWorks classes. It was a pleasure to sit and speak with these artists – some of whom I had worked with previously, and others whom I had never met before this project. This essential component of my study was successful and beneficial in providing first-hand insight into the DramaWay experience.
In addition to the interview process in which I engaged, I was given the opportunity to explore DramaWay’s archives – acknowledging the importance of documentation and preservation of materials in the development of a company such as this. Through my exploration of materials including play programmes, a documentary, video recordings of productions, registration and feedback forms, I was able to encounter and analyze the ways in which this company has grown and developed since it was established in 1999. The development of the programming and the quality of the theatre being produced emphasizes DramaWay’s willingness to adapt and develop to meet the needs of their ever-growing membership.

Ultimately, the intent of this project is to highlight and examine critically the work that has been and continues to be done by DramaWay and its performers. In approaching the company’s arts education methodologies and performance praxis through an academic lens, I suggest that the work being produced and the artists whose talents are being fostered by the program merit more sustained and engaged scholarly and critical attention. Through my analysis of DramaWay’s archival, marketing, and performance materials, in addition to the interviews conducted and transcribed for the purposes of this research, I intend to emphasize the ways in which this company’s praxis could contribute to the existing scope of disability theatre in Canada. The company is particularly focused on dismantling misconceptions of individuals with special needs through performance production and its emphasis on creating awareness through community engagement. I hope that this work will not only help to highlight DramaWay’s connections to the wider disability theatre community but also provide a new set of valuable case studies for practitioners, artists and scholars who work with performers with special needs.
Chapter 1: DramaWay

1.1 History

DramaWay was founded by Danielle Strnad in 1999. Having grown up with various experiences related to working with individuals with a range of disabilities, Strnad felt a connection to this community and believed that the arts could be a powerful force in enhancing quality of life and developing self-expression. Strnad holds a BFA in Drama in Education from Concordia University and a diploma from the Social Service Worker program at Sheridan College. Bridging her love of theatre and performance with her passion for the disability community, Strnad began working as a freelance drama teacher in various centres and programs across the GTA. After receiving extensive positive feedback for the work she was doing, she decided it was time to establish her own company.

With the firm belief that acting and drama can be an effective way of providing individuals with an experiential education for both social and life skills, DramaWay was born. The company started from minimalist beginnings, first running a program for six to eight students in the boardroom of a Community Living building. It was from these intimate performances that DramaWay’s most prolific program, DramaWorks, was developed. With regard to her inspiration for the title of her program, Strnad explained to me in our interview that she simply believes that “drama does work”. What started as a small solo venture, over the last eighteen years has expanded and evolved into the multifaceted company that DramaWay is today; hosting fourteen programs across the GTA and servicing over three hundred students with accessible arts education.
1.2 Programming and The Importance of Experiential Learning

DramaWay as a company offers a range of programming that engages with both performing and visual arts, as well as leadership and social skills training. In approaching this company through the lens of disability performance praxis, I intend to focus my research on DramaWay’s DramaWorks program specifically. DramaWorks is a product-oriented performance program, in which a cast with special needs (both physical and cognitive) performs an original or adapted script – most often within a musical theatre framework. Over the course of nine months, these performers engage in an audition/casting process, develop their characters, and rehearse lines, lyrics, and choreography. The program culminates in a full-scale production in a professional venue, fully equipped with sound, lighting, props, set, costumes, makeup etc. As much as DramaWay prides itself on the final product of the year-end showcase, it is the process-based and experiential learning that takes place over the course of the year that is most central to the program’s aims and company’s mandate of “enriching lives through creativity”.

Experiential learning can be defined simply as “learning from experience or learning by doing. Experiential education first immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, attitudes, or new ways of thinking” (Lewis & Williams 5). It is through this process of being presented with new information or ideas, and learning to position oneself within or alongside these concepts, that DramaWay’s performers come to understand their roles within the story or the script being presented to them. While engaging and immersing themselves in their role, the performers often learn or explore new behaviours or skills. Thus through the rehearsal and performance process, extra-daily life and social skills are acquired and developed.
DramaWay’s programming embraces a person-centred philosophy, which is evident in student-facilitator interactions, as well as in the productions’ casting and rehearsal strategies. Rather than a student having to adapt to play a certain character, the script writing and casting processes place emphasis on individual student’s needs, characteristics, and personal interests. For example, archetypal or stock characters within these plays may develop new favourite foods, habits, or alternative styles of speaking that draw from the performers’ own lived experiences. Characters that traditionally have a substantial number of lines may become more movement-based in order to provide a less or non-verbal student the opportunity to perform a lead role. The students’ strengths and talents therefore, are put at the forefront of the practice.

This actor-centered approach was striking to me when I first encountered it as an assistant facilitator and stage manager for DramaWay’s production of *We Go Together* (2014), an adaptation of *Grease*. I recognized in the casting of the production how individual performer’s personalities, mannerisms and interests were incorporated into the script. DramaWay really embraces each individual in the program, highlighting their talents while also encouraging them to stretch and build new skills. Additionally, participants have some level of input with regard to how they want to develop their own characters within the parameters of the script. As an example, for DramaWay’s 2015 production of *The Hopeful Hearts*, inspired by the musical *Annie*, performers playing the roles of orphans were given the opportunity to pick their own ‘orphan name’. In presenting this opportunity for choice, participants gained a more vested interest, and established a strong personal connection to their character; they became more than just one of a group of orphans, they became their own independent character within the story. The character names selected were not arbitrary, and rather matched the personalities of the characters that the members of this group wanted to play. Names ranged from Molly to
Firecracker; the former nodding to the original production, playing up timid, shy and innocent, while the latter indicating a leader, loud, confident and protective of her friends. It is clear that there is something deeply significant for the performers when they can inject themselves personally into the work that they are producing. The process is akin to contemporary professional theatre practices in which actors are often invited to draw on their own experiences to develop a character. DramaWorks performers also do this, but it is more often that the individual is at the core of the character, rather than the story’s character being the foundation.

1.3 Participants and Staff: Demographics and Relationships

Participants in the DramaWorks program have thus far ranged in age from thirteen to forty-five, and include individuals of all-abilities, races, genders, and sexual orientations. These participants engage in programming in three primary locations across the GTA. By having rehearsal spaces that span from the west end of Toronto (Swansea) to just past the furthest east boundary (Scarborough), Strnad has been able to reach out to a wider demographic within Toronto’s disability community. She and the facilitators travel to these various venues in order to provide consistent programming at each location. In our interview, Strnad commented on the number of relationships that DramaWay has fostered with various community organizations in the GTA. Some of these organizations include: Community Living Toronto, the Down Syndrome Association of Toronto, Harmony Place, and The Coffee Shed. In building relationships with these organizations (many of which DramaWay’s membership engages with independently as well), the company situates itself as a complementary program for the Toronto disability community.

Strnad’s approach to staffing her program further highlights the person-centred philosophy upon which DramaWay is founded. Throughout my interview process, I learned that
the majority of the DramaWorks artistic facilitators had little to no experience working with the special needs population prior to being hired by DramaWay. Strnad makes a point of hiring artists as facilitators, rather than clinical or behavioural-field professionals. This choice sets the tone for the programming in that it emphasizes the participants’ engagement in the program as autonomous artists rather than clinical participants. In recognizing some of the staff’s lack of exposure or pre-existing training in working with individuals with disabilities, both Strnad and the support staff (often special education teachers or ABA therapists) are great resources who regularly check in and provide mentorship and support to new staff and volunteers.

Overtime, Strnad’s approach to hiring has moved away from the traditional sit-down interview strategy to be much more participatory. After reviewing applications and references, she invites prospective facilitators or interested volunteers to come to a class. She looks for their willingness to immerse themselves in the programming and engage with the students. Additionally, Strnad aims to identify unique talents or skills that these prospective facilitators/volunteers might be able to contribute to her team. While previous experience is not required, Strnad looks for inclusive behaviours and enthusiasm for the program in her facilitators. She aims to utilize each facilitator to their fullest extent – someone who has worked as a playwright will be given responsibilities regarding that year’s script, while those with experience in clown or dance will facilitate programming that corresponds to those elements of performance. In the same way that Strnad highlights the talents of her performers, she also features the strengths of her staff, which in turn helps the diverse needs of the group to be met and everyone to feel validated in the work they are doing. Overwhelmingly, the interview responses I received from facilitators suggest that there is a cherished exchange of creative input
and output in which the strong majority feel the benefits of a diversely able and talented classroom.

1.4 Accessibility Aesthetics

As an organization, the inclusivity of and accessibility to programming is of the utmost importance for DramaWay. Various strategies that foster accessibility are implemented to try and maintain equal access to programming for each participant regardless of needs or abilities. The first way in which this is accomplished is by ensuring that all participants can simply access the program by being focused and present in the room – something not necessarily given among DramaWay’s membership. Strategies in place include utilizing the knowledge and skills of support staff, various relaxation techniques to reduce anxiety (ie. Emotional Freedom Technique\(^8\)), and what has become known as DramaWay’s ‘sensory buffet’. This ‘buffet’ is a collection of various materials and toys (Play-Doh, glitter wands, stress balls, etc.) utilized by participants who benefit from tactile engagement or sensory stimulation in order to minimize anxiety or stimming\(^9\) and in turn maintain independent focus. In this case, accessibility is about creating an environment in which participants are able to be present safely and successfully engage in the program.

With the understanding that in a group of fifteen to eighteen students, there are inevitably going to be a range learning abilities and styles, facilitators aim to acknowledge this diversity in the ways in which they execute lesson plans. Character types that are going to be used in the final production are often explained and explored through the use of visual aids – pictures, graphics, PowerPoint presentations, etc. Participants will engage with these materials and explore their understanding through performance practice. How does the character speak? How do they move? How do they relate to those around them? Participants experience this new
information visually, discuss orally/auditorily, and then put what they have learned into practice, kinesthetically. By engaging with these different learning styles, the program aims to reach each participant on an equal level, further promoting the accessibility of the programming.

Another teaching tool that has proven incredibly beneficial for this group is the use of online video tutorials, primarily for choreography. Once the choreography for a dance has been developed by a facilitator and workshopped with the class, the choreographer(s) will then record themselves dancing and post the video on YouTube so that participants can watch and rehearse at home. This interactive teaching method aims to engage students in at-home experiential learning. By watching and dancing along to the video and following the verbal cues of their instructor(s), students can continue to explore and develop their skills outside of their once-a-week group rehearsal. Looking at the DramaWay YouTube page\textsuperscript{10}, and surveying the tutorial videos from 2013-present, the views on these videos range from 100 to nearly 1600. As these videos are intended to be used as teaching tools, rather than offered up for public consumption or entertainment, it is evident that performers are utilizing this teaching method. Learning through repetition, these performers are able to practice at their own pace – start and stop, watching the videos over and over again.

1.5 Significance of Staging and Product-Based Programming

While DramaWay’s experiential learning processes are an integral part of the company’s pedagogy, it is the product-oriented element of the programming that ultimately drives the DramaWorks program throughout the year. Each year, DramaWay’s Annual Showcase highlights the talents of over one hundred students from across the GTA who come together to perform for an audience comprised of family, friends and the general public. There is a divide in arts education between those who favour process-based training vs. product-based training.
While both approaches are valid, Strand’s choice to provide the DramaWorks students with a final production opportunity is significant. Alysha Hunsberger, one of DramaWay’s multi-arts facilitators, views the final production as “the chance for a group of people who don’t usually get those big achievement moments in their life, to have that moment”. These performers are driven by the end goal of their final production – they work hard all year because they know that in June they will be on stage, and the spotlight will be on them. Working towards a common goal is not only beneficial for maintaining focus and drive, but it also helps to develop certain social and life skills. The aspect of teamwork that is inherent in creating theatre forces these performers to learn about compromise, patience, and acceptance of others. Strnad and the facilitation team make clear from the beginning of rehearsals that the production is a team effort. Bringing a positive attitude and supporting those around you, they therefore insist, is paramount. This is what DramaWay’s mandate is referencing by “enriching lives through creativity”; in providing artistic opportunities, and embracing the experiential learning that comes with developing a piece of theatre, other skills are developed in the process.

These performers anticipate the final production all year. When casting is announced, bated breath and crossed fingers are felt and seen across the room. The importance of being professional is emphasized throughout this process. If a participant is unhappy with the role that they have been cast in, they may get emotional or anxious, but supports are in place. They are reminded of the professional nature of the program, and facilitators emphasize that this is how professional theatre works – that we cannot always be guaranteed the part that we were hoping for. Pushing through moments of stress or anxiety, performers are praised for their professionalism and willingness to engage in the process. This theme of professionalism remains a constant throughout the rehearsal process and into the final production.
It is only within the last few years that DramaWay’s final showcase has been produced in a professional theatre space. Strnad spoke to me about wanting to provide her performers with a “star treatment”, reminding them that their work is valid and deserving of being on a professional stage. The Papermill Theatre, which is located on the heritage site of Toronto’s Todmorden Mills, has hosted DramaWay’s showcase for the past five years. This facility offers performers a professional dressing room space, a raised proscenium stage, and quality technical capabilities. It is essential to note that the stage currently utilized by DramaWay at the Papermill Theatre is not wheelchair accessible. However, I will address this inaccessibility in more detail in Chapter 4. Despite this issue that has been avidly contested by past and present facilitators over the last five years, it is clear that Strnad and her staff aim to provide a quality performance experience for their participants, as well as their audiences.

Professional or in-training makeup artists are given honoraria to provide professional quality makeup for the performers on the day of the showcase. Doing makeup for one hundred or more performers with special needs also provides these artists with a valuably challenging experience. Strnad comments,

I think it’s a great experience for some of them, because although many of them have done makeup, it’s different. They need to understand that this is how it’s going to be. Some [of the performers] might want this and that, and you have to be adaptable. It also helps them because it is high pressure. You want to get ready for modeling? Well I’m giving you fifteen actors and you have five minutes to do their entire face! Go!

There is a giving and receiving that happens in this: performers are given the opportunity to have their makeup done, and emerging artists are given time to engage with clients that they would not normally work with on a regular basis. It is this level of professionalism that is to be maintained throughout the process and development of the final production. By utilizing various resources, the company validates and appreciates the work of these performers.
1.6 Marketing, Social Media, and the Search for Financial Support

Until fairly recently, DramaWay’s marketing strategies have been fairly simplistic – reaching out to community organizations, promoting and advertising the programs being offered. While targeting various support organizations can be a successful strategy in reaching DramaWay’s target clientele, by far the most effective and most common way that incoming participants hear about DramaWay is by word of mouth. This is significant in that word of mouth and personal testimonials hold substantial weight in promoting the work that DramaWay does. Parents talk, students tell their friends that they are going to drama class after their day program/school, etc. DramaWay is a choice in which individuals choose to participate – this time spent at drama is additional to attending full day schooling or day programs. In my interview with Anne McCallum, an assistant facilitator for the company, she comments on this idea of choice:

I think it’s different in that it is not a replacement for school. It’s not just somewhere for them to go and spend their days. They’re here because they want to be here. They’re here because they want to have fun and not because they have to. I think a lot of day programs end up being a chore for people to go to because they need somewhere to spend their days and make their guardians or parents comfortable, whereas this is something that they elect to do on their own time in their evenings […] These people are over programmed a lot of the time, they need free time but they still choose to come because the community is so great.

The participants are committed and eager to invite their friends from outside the program to join them and Strnad offers trial classes to anyone interested in her programming. While government funding for extra-curricular activities may be limited for some individuals, it could be comforting for a parent to have their child try out a new program before committing a portion of their funding and their family’s time to it.

In the age of social media, independent marketing strategies have become even easier. DramaWay has a very active Facebook and Instagram presence. While these marketing methods are aimed at inviting new business and promoting the work being done, they have also become
platforms for current participants to engage with the company on an enhanced level. This is another means by which DramaWay fosters a sense of community in its membership. Many of the DramaWay students use Facebook and Instagram regularly. They are eager to respond to and comment on whatever information DramaWay presents, whether it be promotional material for the final showcase, videos related to disability rights and inclusion, or just pictures from classes, the participants are there supporting the media being produced. These social media platforms allow for students to engage with and promote the company on a personal level – they are proud of the work that they do, and they want as many people as possible to see and know about it.

As a for-profit creative arts company, DramaWay is limited in their ability to apply for and acquire additional grant funding, as most granting opportunities are targeted towards not-for-profit organizations. With the costs of producing a large-scale showcase, and adhering to the level of quality that has been delivered in preceding years, the company struggles to balance this financial equation. Strnad emphasizes the joy she has in being able to provide her performers with the opportunity to perform in a professional theatre – but with rising production costs, maintaining this rental space has proven challenging. Without wanting to drastically increase program fees or cut staff members, Strnad and her team have turned to online crowd-funding to help subsidize some of these costs.

In the fall of 2014, DramaWay launched their first Indiegogo campaign. With a fundraising goal of $5000, the objective of the campaign was to help subsidize the costs associated with the final showcase, including renting the Papermill Theatre. The perks offered for this campaign ranged from acknowledgments on the DramaWay website, to exclusive access to DramaWay’s documentary, VIP tickets to the showcase, and for a $1000 donation, one could receive all previous perks, as well as a coffee date with Strnad and one of the performers. This first
campaign proved quite successful, and with forty-seven backers, DramaWay’s goal was exceeded by $65.

The following year, DramaWay set up for another campaign. A promotional video was put together and shared on various social media platforms. However, the 2016 showcase campaign proved less successful. By setting a goal of twice as much as the previous year, DramaWay was only able to reach 34% of their substantial goal of $10,000. However, due to an additional and unexpected donation from a private donor of $5000, DramaWay was able to approach the 2016 showcase with reduced financial concern.

The reality of this yearly campaign strategy is that renting a professional theatre space is expensive, and in addition to providing the performers with quality costumes, props and set pieces, these production costs continue to rise. Now in their third year of Indiegogo campaigning, DramaWay has pushed harder than ever before to get the word out. With the tagline “When You Donate, We Create”, DramaWay’s 2017 promotional video features the personal testimonials of participants, video footage of past showcase performances, and emphasizes the sense of camaraderie and community felt by members of the program. This year’s video differs from previous promotional videos, in that it only includes the voices of the performers. Strnad is never heard, and is only seen briefly alongside one of the performers. This choice not only ensures that the performers are at the forefront of the message, but it also highlights that although DramaWay is a for-profit company, this money really does go directly to support the work that these artists are doing, and in turn, helps to foster their growth and development as performers. This year, DramaWay aimed for a goal of $8000, again to support financially all of the anticipated costs that come with producing their showcase. While they did
not reach their goal this year through their Indiegogo campaign, they managed to raise $5070 – the most money raised through DramaWay’s crowdfunding ventures thus far.

In addition to the Indiegogo campaign, this year Morgan Joy independently produced a cabaret fundraiser with the intention of donating all proceeds back to DramaWay. Morgan Joy is a prominent figure in Toronto’s clown, comedy, and karaoke communities. This evening featured the talents of a number of DramaWay performers, who with the help of Morgan Joy and other local artists, developed and performed pieces inspired by their own passions and interests. Performances included music, dance, storytelling, and sketch comedy. In her pitch to Shelley Marshall, the owner of The Full Bawdy Loft (the cabaret’s venue, which unfortunately has since closed), Morgan Joy remarked on the lack of accessible and affordable performance venues for artists with disabilities in Toronto. Not only was this space wheelchair accessible, but it was also being utilized as a place of healing and performance exploration for individuals living with and wanting to speak out about mental health12. This combination of factors in creating an accessible and inclusive performance space is what drew Morgan Joy to pursue this venue for her cabaret. As a result of her own personal connection to Marshall, Morgan Joy was offered the space to produce the cabaret, free of charge.

The event’s mission was simple: “the Dramaway cabaret is dedicated to ensuring that everyone has access to the same spotlight” (Morgan Joy). While these performers have the opportunity once a year to act, dance, or sing on stage, the opportunities to develop their own projects have been scarce. Morgan Joy has had dreams of developing this open-mic/cabaret-style event for DramaWay participants for some time. With the strong belief that their stories should be told, and their talents fostered and highlighted, this event proved a significant and
empowering experience for all involved. This inaugural event successfully raised $670 from online and at-the-door ticket sales, with all proceeds going to DramaWay’s 2017 showcase.

This event provided a unique performance opportunity to DramaWay’s membership contrasting the more formal structure of the weekly programming. I believe that for many performers who devised and developed their own work for the cabaret, new understandings of performance possibilities will have become apparent. Through the process of producing self-generated works, these performers were given the opportunity to engage creatively with a range of topics and performance media; some of the acts explored comedy through the use of puppetry, there was a lip synced rendition of Céline Dion’s “It’s All Coming Back to Me Now” performed in drag, as well as a personal and reflective re-telling of when one of the performers received her first motorized wheelchair. The opportunity to safely explore less mainstream or personal content was embraced. Following the work of national and international disabled artists who produce theatrical work to represent and share their experiences and voices, I hope that DramaWay will continue to promote the development and creation of personal work by its performers. Through encouraging company artists to continue sharing their voices creatively using the tools that many of them have gained through their engagement in DramaWay’s programming, their skills and confidence as performers will only continue to grow.
Chapter 2: Us, Them, and We: Contextualizing Scholarship and Major Themes

DramaWay has been in existence, and successfully providing creative arts education to individuals with disabilities for over eighteen years. While their work has been recognized in various promotional materials, a documentary, and a handful of local magazine articles\textsuperscript{13}, the company has not yet received any scholarly attention or recognition. As mentioned previously, when I first began this research I was surprised to find that DramaWay was not yet a well-known name in the field of disability theatre. Further, I have also become aware that while the scholarship surrounding disability theatre and performance has grown significantly over the last two decades both nationally and internationally, there remains a relative paucity in the amount of attention given to performers with special needs and the companies with whom they develop and produce theatrical work in Canada.

Through my engagement with current disability theatre scholarship, I will provide an overview of the seminal research in order to present relevant themes and issues in the field, specifically regarding performers with special needs. In this overview, I will highlight disability theatre as an expression of a rich and complex counterculture, address the questions of value for this work, identify challenges for disabled individuals to attain professional status or the capacity to perform professionally, and finally, highlight the importance of exposure and raising the public profile of these artists. In providing this survey of relevant scholarship, and recognizing that further theoretical work is needed to account for performers with special needs, I will frame my own research of DramaWay’s praxis and how it aligns with and may contribute to the future development of disability theatre in Canada.
2.1 Disability Theatre and Performance: Embracing the Counterculture

My introduction to the field of disability theatre and performance scholarship began with Kirsty Johnston’s *Stage Turns: Canadian Disability Theatre*. This book questions “why theatre?” within the larger context of disability arts and culture, and identifies theatre as an exemplary medium for artists with disabilities to “talk back” against social stigma, prompt critical conversations, and reimagine the possibilities of theatre and performance practice. Viewing disability theatre in Canada as an intercultural project, Johnston takes an analytical approach in her exploration of a number of Canadian disability theatre companies, productions and festivals. She argues that “disability theatre presents profound challenges to mainstream aesthetics that have not yet been fully recognized, and that disability theatre must be understood in its diversity to appreciate its creative tensions and opportunities” (14). In coming to understand disability theatre, not in how it may or may not fit within a mainstream theatrical context, but rather in its ability to redress and adapt theatrical traditions for its own purposes, its artistic value, social and political power comes to light. Through my own research of DramaWay’s unique theatrical praxis, it is evident that this work spans beyond accessibility and adaptability, and rather engages in a distinct practice best suited to the performers with whom they produce their work. It is not about producing theatre differently, but rather producing theatre within the innovative parameters of practice that are most accessible and inclusive to this community. In reimagining the traditional theatre aesthetic both in terms of education and production, and implementing these alternative practices, this unique theatrical culture can expand the possibilities of what is accepted and embraced on Canadian stages.

Recognizing disability theatre as a form of cultural expression through performance, I then turned to Petra Kuppers’s *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. This
text highlights disability performance as an expression of “cultural uncertainties” or “Otherness” that can be explored through various methods of creative expression. Kuppers identifies disability as a social category that while “not the same as race or gender, […] shares important aspects with these ways of knowing difference” (5). These communities have shared experience of minority status, oppression and pushing against stereotypes or barriers imposed by society. Citing the preconceived knowledges of disabled individuals specifically, Kuppers recognizes the strength of performance practice in its ability to examine creatively and question these ideas through a range of contexts and media. In reimagining ways of approaching stereotypes surrounding disability, and where these bodies may and may not be granted permission or access to perform, Kuppers’s work emphasizes a call for “social change and respect […] rather than the] normalization or smoothing out of differences into a uniform work” (11). In contrast to the desire to normalize disability performance and integrate its methodology into mainstream practice, Kuppers promotes disability performance as an autonomous form for the very reasons of difference that it is excluded from mainstream participation in the first place. By highlighting disability culture’s progressive politics and the way these may inform unique performance practices, Kuppers’s work helped to situate my own understanding of DramaWay’s methodology and practice as a politically powerful challenging of systemic barriers and reclaiming of public space that is not often made available or accessible to members of the disability community. The very act of engaging in theatre training and performing for an audience resists the stereotypes faced by individuals with special needs with regard to their own capabilities as performers and as valuable members of the arts community.

Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander’s collection of essays, Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance helped me to understand the variety of performance genres and
praxis included in disability theatre. This collection embraces disability and performance practice in a wide range of its various iterations – “disability as performance of everyday life, as a metaphor in dramatic literature, and as the work of disabled performing artists” (1). The essays included in this text are drawn from an interdisciplinary complement of authors, allowing the work to present diverse perspectives on and relationships to disability and performance. The essay that most resonates with my own research is Giles Perring’s “The Facilitation of Learning-Disabled Arts: A Cultural Perspective”. Perring’s work critically approaches the role of nondisabled artists and facilitators in the development of performance pieces that include individuals with learning disabilities. He questions the motivations of the facilitator, and their ability to provide these performers with a sense of autonomy that may perhaps be absent in other aspects of their lives that are so closely managed “through social (at both institutional and family levels) and medical care structures” (178). It is through the intention, approach and practice of the facilitator that performers with learning disabilities can be streamed into various modes of performance engagement. Perring highlights three approaches that facilitators may utilize in their practice – normalizing, post-therapeutic, and counterculture. Each approach values differing aspects of the performance practice when working with individuals with learning disabilities. The post-therapeutic mode may use performance techniques to highlight or confront personal or emotional challenges faced by the participant. This practice is often used as a therapeutic exercise conducted by the facilitator rather than creating work intended for public performance. With regard to my own experiences as a DramaWay facilitator, and my research on performance practice with/for individuals with special needs, the normalizing and counterculture modes are most applicable. The goal of normalizing is the integration of these learning disabled performers into mainstream performance culture, while the contrasting goal of the counterculture approach
intends to disrupt mainstream performance traditions and aesthetics to make room for alternative praxis and methodology. Perring notes, “The normalizing and counterculture approaches […] mirror the dialectic between integration and inclusion. One says: Bring people inside the existing margins! Another says: Move the margins out so that everyone is inside them!” (186). While I view both modes as valuable, my work at DramaWay has demonstrated the power inherent in re-claiming the traditional and often-exclusionary performance practices that exist in mainstream theatre culture. In challenging existing methods of performance and performer engagement, as DramaWay does, perhaps the power in this approach lies in the ownership of difference, and an unwillingness to conform to the ableist margins in which Western theatre practice is often so contained. In embracing this alternative approach as independent of the parameters of mainstream theatre production, disability theatre can be valued in its own right.

2.2 Understanding the Value

Recognizing that the theatrical work of learning disabled performers has been under-theorized, in his book *Theatres of Learning Disability: Good, Bad or Plain Ugly?*, Matt Hargrave identifies and breaks down all elements that must be considered to build a stronger understanding of this specific sub-genre of disability theatre. Hargrave emphasizes the aesthetic diversity in this work, noting that there is no definitively prescribed praxis in executing such theatrical productions. He tackles the complexity of language and identity in the field, noting how ‘theatres of learning disability’ align and fit within the greater discourse of disability theatre. Moreover, through engaging with the work of a number of key companies (including Australia’s Back to Back, UK’s Dark Horse, and Mind the Gap) who support the artistic development of performers with learning disabilities, Hargrave explores the value of engaging with and producing this work.
What constitutes the value of a theatrical production? Hargrave wonders about the relationships between mainstream professional production values and traditional training. For mainstream audiences, does artistic value decrease with a production’s divergence from the traditional frameworks of theatrical practice? Does the level of professional training of the performers inform the value of the production? Hargrave recognizes the instability of ‘value’ as it pertains to performers with learning disabilities. He notes that “the distance travelled by a learning disabled actor over the course of a single show (in terms of mechanical reach and delivery) may be far greater for them than for an actor who has benefitted from a regime of formal training” (88). Traditionally, the value or perceived quality of a theatrical production is strongly based on the actor’s ability to perform while utilizing various acting techniques that they have acquired through training – the ability to project their voice, physicalize character, memorize lines, etc. However, in recognizing the performance development of an actor with a learning disability (many of whom may have had minimal to no formal training), one must understand their development as performers in relation to where they began in the process. As an example, perhaps an actor who struggles with vocal projection, over months of practice, is finally able to project their voice enough to be heard – while this feat is deemed obligatory within the mainstream aesthetic, I would suggest that this progress is valuable within this context. While the execution of performances by actors with learning disabilities may not check the same boxes as those in mainstream performance, their ability to develop and grow as performers is a quality that should be recognized as valuable.

With that said, I question to what extent this definition of value can be stretched? If the work being produced by performers with special needs is primarily valued in terms of the performers’ independent and personal growth, can it still strive to stand alongside mainstream
productions as equally valuable to audiences? And with that, is this level of ‘value’ something these performers seek? Is there a desire for performers of diverse needs and abilities to present their work and have it resonate and hold value among mainstream theatre audiences? I ask these questions especially in view of the overwhelming lack of professional or institutional theatre training opportunities for individuals with special needs.

I would suggest that to value theatrical productions with special needs performers within a mainstream theatrical context, there would need to be a significant amount of work done on a social level. Through engaging audiences and providing opportunities for audience education, perhaps there will be a greater appreciation for the development of this work as valuable beyond the category of disability theatre, and rather just as quality theatre in its own right. Johnston quotes performer Victoria Maxwell about this very concern. Maxwell states “as a disability artist, I only do a service if the pieces I offer are good theatre. If what I present is mediocre in quality, I only reinforce tokenism, the image that disabled and disability artists can get an ‘A’ for effort but not for talent – the very stigma I am trying to eliminate” (Stage Turns 125). Maxwell emphasizes the need for performance quality in order for the work to be deemed valuable. While quantifying value and quality is slippery, there is an emphasis on the need to exceed expectations, and challenge audience perceptions. While performers with learning disabilities, as Hargrave mentions, can go through an intense journey of growth over the course of a production, Maxwell notes the competing demand to also be better than ‘good enough’ for a disabled performer or company. One of the key challenges in disability theatre is forging new aesthetics and standards while also contending with the spaces and ableist values that dominate mainstream professional practice.
2.3 Professionalism

Questions of what constitutes professional theatre practice, and the ability to achieve ‘professional’ performer status are additional hurdles for disabled performers to overcome or justify. When there are minimal formal training opportunities that are made accessible to individuals with special needs interested in pursuing a career in theatre, how does one break into acting as a profession and what resources are made available to make this process accessible?

The problems of inaccessibility at many professional theatre venues and training programs in [Canada] and the challenges many disability artists face when trying to forge a professional career while also living with a disability, make existing standards for professional designation inappropriate for many (Johnston, *Stage Turns* 125).

Johnston highlights three primary issues or challenges that disabled performers face when trying to make their way into the professional performance sector: the lack of accessibility offered by training institutions, the frequent inaccessibility of performance venues, and the challenge for individuals with disabilities to work safely and successfully within the current structures of mainstream professional theatre practice.

With regard to post-secondary training, the lack of access may pertain not only to the physical/environmental barriers of the institution’s campus and facilities, but the potential for an inaccessible curriculum, or lack of willingness for instructors to accept and accommodate for disabled individuals in their performing arts programs. There is a stigmatic and ableist divide that is present in most Canadian post-secondary institutions that are intended to provide opportunity for growth and development, while preparing individuals (ideally) for a professional career path. It is evident however that these opportunities are only for some, and that there is more work to be done. In the multi-authored article “May I have this dance? Teaching, Performing, and Transforming in a University-Community Mixed Ability Dance Theatre
Project” included in *Theatre Research in Canada*’s fall 2016 Special Issue on Disability and Performance, Doolittle et al. reflect on their experiences of developing a community-based art for social change project, which then grew into a post-secondary drama course and culminated in a large scale, university-produced dance-theatre production (239). What began as a series of dance-drama workshops developed in partnership with a number of social support organizations for self-advocates with developmental disabilities in Alberta in 2013, evolved into a “for-credit course in Fall 2014 in the Faculty of Fine Arts at the University of Lethbridge (UL) entitled ‘All-abilities Dance Drama: Production Development’” (240). The authors recognize that this was the first course offered in the University of Lethbridge undergraduate theatre program to include students with developmental disabilities. They also comment on the logistical and administrative struggles they faced in order to properly enroll and ensure adequate course credit would be given to the six part-time open studies students with disabilities who were going to be in the class.

Acknowledging that this fight for inclusion and accommodation was cumbersome, they nonetheless argue that it was necessary and unfortunately not out of the ordinary for these students and the community partners that support them.

In the class, the drive for inclusive practice was paramount. Devising of creative work would be undertaken individually, with a partner or in small groups. Creating connections and feelings of trust between classmates (both with and without developmental disabilities) was built through trust-building exercises and games. In working with a mixed-abilities group, the authors recognized the need to adapt how they were used to teaching theatre. They slowed down their process, and incorporated more physical demonstrations in order to accommodate the various learning speeds and styles in the room. The authors note that “[f]inding activities that allow for many different learning styles is not just better mixed ability pedagogy, it is better pedagogy
period” (246). Reflecting on the feasibility of inclusivity or mixed-abilities courses like their own, the authors prompt further investigations of how this practice could become a reality for other institutions. While this course and the corresponding production were deemed successful by instructors and students, this work was not sustained at the University of Lethbridge. However, in acknowledging this work as a positive “mixed-abilities art and activism initiative within a university” (254), there is hope that other academic institutions will be drawn to explore how they could be more inclusive and provide better access to the arts education that they provide.

Despite the successful endeavour reflected upon above, this work ultimately demonstrates that most disabled individuals are still not being granted the same opportunities to engage in post-secondary theatre or performance training in Canada. In line with the social model of disability, it is imperative that institutions embrace change for the sake of accessibility and inclusion. It is not that individuals with disabilities are unable to participate in the programming and curricula, but rather that compromise and adaptation methods need to be embraced by the institution in order to prepare prospective students for success in their program regardless of physical or cognitive ability.

Even with the potential lack of formal training, the opportunity simply to perform on professional stages is not a feasible reality for many performers with disabilities. While accommodations have been and continue to be made to support audience members with disabilities, that same level of access has not been made (or deemed necessary) for performers. Wheelchair seating in theatres has been a common consideration for some time, and although these may not be the best seats in the house, they provide some level of access to the community. This same level of access however, is not mandatory for the stages in these venues. While some
venues may have measures in place to install a ramp, others would have to remove their raised stage all together in order to make it accessible. While it provides opportunity for performers with mobility issues, the fee to un-install a stage in a union house is costly. A black box/studio spaces may be more accessible, however, it is not always the case that the dressing room spaces to be used can sufficiently accommodate those who use mobility devices. There is still a lack of consideration for disabled artists in Canada to be able to perform on what are considered to be professional stages. Again, this is not due to a lack of talent, but a lack of access and opportunity provided by those who mediate and control these spaces.

The current structures in place for professional actors with regard to rehearsal and performance periods are strenuous, and are not often conducive or accommodating to an actor with a disability. According to the Canadian Actors’ Equity Association’s “Canadian Theatre Agreement” (CTA), the standard rehearsal day is eight and a half hours in length with an hour and a half long meal break after a maximum of four hours of rehearsal. This schedule would be adhered to in the standard five to six day rehearsal week that is deemed the norm for professional theatre actors in Canada. From the standpoint of working with performers with special needs, it may not suitable to be working eight-hour days and the rehearsal process may need to be lengthier to accommodate this. While the option for alternative rehearsal schedules\(^{14}\) pending approval by Professional Association of Canadian Theatres (PACT) and Canadian Actors’ Equity Association (CAEA) may allow for more flexibility in this process, what is deemed the ‘standard’ infrastructure for professional level productions hinders if not entirely prevents the inclusion of disabled actors within normalized practice. With this, issues of casting arise – non-disabled actors are playing disabled characters because they are able to work successfully within the parameters of the standard professional performance structures that are in place. I suggest
that these exclusive structures may be a contributing factor to the number of independent theatre projects being produced by disabled artists in Canada.

In the development of independent work or creating work under the umbrella of ‘disability theatre’, these artists are able to work in their own time and within the frameworks of what they value as theatre practitioners; they do not have to fit within the structures that the mainstream theatre organizations deem standard for professional performers. While acknowledging that changes need to be made to ensure that training and performance opportunities are made more inclusive, the drive for individuals to perform still remains; theatre is still being created in spite of the challenges and barriers that are in place. Established Canadian performers such as Alex Bulmer, Jan Derbyshire, Adam Warren, Alan Shain, and Niall McNeil and companies such as Stage Left, Theatre Terrific, Ahuri Theatre, Les Muses, and DramaWay will continue to develop and produce work that is significant to their community to ensure that their voices are being heard and that their stories receive the exposure they deserve.

2.4 Exposure: Reclaiming Stares, Re-appropriating Identity and Embracing Stigmaphilia

In order to understand that which we do not inherently know, we must expose ourselves and actively engage. Leading disability studies scholar, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes extensively about the concept of staring as a “vehicle for curiosity”. She emphasizes, “the stare is distinct from the gaze, which has been extensively defined as an oppressive act of disciplinary looking that subordinates its victim” (9). The gaze, specifically the concept of the “clinical gaze” aims to pathologize and diminish the subject. The stare, rather, is the physical manifestation of curiosity and inquiry. Garland-Thomson writes about the social issue of staring restriction or prevention. Children are told from a young age not to stare. She notes that while viewing the
disabled body may intrude on our “routine visual landscape” (20), the act of suppressing a child’s stares may actually be more detrimental than polite. In inviting a dialogue and embracing curiosity, the sight of disability may become understood and accepted by children at an earlier age – normalizing the seemingly non-normate. The stare, if not acted upon in a productive manner, but rather through punishment, will no longer appear as an innocent expression of curiosity.

The stare, however, does not have to be a mono-directional interaction. What happens when the subject or staree reclaims their stares? Garland-Thomson uses the term “visual activism” in reference to the staree saying “look at me”, rather than “don’t stare” (193). This idea of harnessing and reclaiming the gaze, and welcoming the stare in order to educate is significant to my research as a means of exposing audiences to bodies and performers that are not often given the opportunity to appear on public stages. This shift of power that comes from reclaiming the stares of others is significant in its ability to harness the imbalance of power that often exists between disabled and non-disabled individuals.

Complementing Garland-Thomson’s work, Bree Hadley’s Disability, Public Space, Performance and Spectatorship: Unconscious Performers explores the everyday performance of people with disabilities and how spectators may be invited to participate in these ‘performances’ to redress preconceived understandings of disability. Hadley explains that for “people with disabilities, daily interactions in social situations, spaces and places can feel like a series of performances in which their idiosyncrasies are, whether they like it or not, on show” (1). Comparably to Garland-Thomson’s call for the re-claiming and re-appropriating of the stare, Hadley considers (through her analysis of a variety of live art case studies) the ways in which performance practices allow artists with disabilities, and their spectators, to negotiate new ways
of relating with self, others, and society (27). In agreement with Hadley’s understanding of the unconscious performance of individuals with disabilities, I suggest that a cycle of understanding might be established. If society is actively engaging and participating in the everyday ‘performance’ of individuals with disabilities, how would that then inform their perception of intentional or staged performances by individuals with disabilities, and in turn, how could one’s experience of being invited to stare and engage with disability theatre, then inform one’s perception of the everyday disabled experience? In the ways that life informs art and art informs life, both approaches can inform and nurture more progressive social understandings and foster greater inclusivity and accessibility. In turn, this could prompt a greater uptake of disability performance within the broader discourse of theatre and performance practice.

Through the act of harnessing the imposing gaze, the subject of the stare, the disabled performer is able to reclaim their identity through performance. Michael M. Chemers in *Staging Stigma: A Freak Manifesto* writes that one may view their non-normate identity not solely as an imposed restrictedness by society, but rather as “a role tactically played (or played against) in an ever changing system of representation” (n.p). This concept of the role that one chooses to play emphasizes the fluidity of the disabled identity in its ability to work with or against what society perceives to be its restrictions or barriers. The very act of disability performance in itself is a form of activism for accessibility and inclusion. By claiming space on Canadian stages, the disabled performer draws attention to the non-normative practice of disability performance. The disabled identity, though not necessarily emphasized, is inherently present in the performance. The presence of non-normate performing bodies pushes against the stigma of ableism within Canadian theatre and performance culture.
Queer theorist Michael Warner coined the term “stigmaphilia” to discuss the power that comes from reclaiming and owning the stigmas that have been posed against one’s identity. Warner recognizes that “stigma is messy and often incoherent” (37) and while he writes about stigma specifically as it relates to queer identities, disability and ‘crip’ theorists have found the term useful when speaking about disabled identities as well; recognizing the theoretical parallels between heterosexuality and able-bodiedness as perceived “natural” or “non-identities”, while homosexual and disabled identities are stigmatized as divergent from the “norm” (McRuer & Bérubé 1). Warner explains, “the stigmaphile space is where we find a commonality with those who suffer from stigma, and in this alternative realm learn to value the very things the rest of the world despises – not just because the world despises them, but because the world’s pseudo morality is a phobic and inauthentic way of life” (43). It is through taking ownership over one’s own stigma that the power is taken away from those who intend to stigmatize and discriminate.

Through the act of performance and claiming space on stage on their own terms, disabled individuals are able to reclaim and in turn oppose the social stigmas that they face. Disabled artists, through their performance practice can create awareness, engage and educate audiences not only on the disabled experience, but also the range of alternative (and perhaps more accessible) performance styles and media that they engage with. It is through this engagement that disability theatre can begin to disrupt society’s ableist perceptions surrounding mainstream theatre and performance practice.

The themes and issues that are being addressed within disability performance scholarship resonate with the work that DramaWay produces. The intent of DramaWay’s programming is to provide a valuable and generative arts education to its participants. It is that same concept of value that Hargrave focuses on with regard to the growth and development of performers with
learning disabilities. Through my study of the company, I have come to understand its aims as consonant with what Hargrave identifies as “the twin goals of [disability theatre], advocacy and aesthetic innovation” (46). DramaWay likewise intends for the personal value that the program has for its participants to resonate with and extend to those who come to see their productions, and translate into a valuable theatre experience for all. DramaWay’s attention to professional standards in training, teamwork, and production value is founded in the programming itself, and in the expectations that are set for the participants to understand the importance of the final production, and how their efforts and behaviours will contribute to its success. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Strnad now hosts the final showcase in a professional theatre venue, not only because it can accommodate more bodies, and is a significantly nicer space than the non air-conditioned church basement in which they used to perform, but because she believes in the quality of the work that her students produce and feels that it merits being performed on a professional stage.

The broader literature concerning disability performance also prompts me to interrogate in more detail the DramaWay performers’ recognition or acknowledgement of their role as active participants in resisting ableist ideologies within the mainstream theatre community. There is an air of pride and strength that is redolent in DramaWay’s programming. The company’s overarching goal is for participants to gain confidence not only in their abilities as performers but also as valuable members of society. In what follows, I hope to explore the performers’ own sense of these activities and aims.

Through its person-centred programming and the development of accessible and inclusive productions, DramaWay invites critical engagement and understanding alongside other disability theatre groups in Canada. The work being produced, while on a smaller scale than
some of the other companies cited in this chapter, nonetheless impacts each performer on a significant level. The DramaWorks program on its own facilitates programming for over one hundred performers each year. By attending to the ways in which DramaWay strives for and values the growth and development of each of its performers, we can begin to appreciate its place as a significant contributor to the field of disability theatre and performance in Canada.
Chapter 3: Disability Culture and the Complexities of Identity Language

Language is informed and evolves through historical and cultural shifts. Throughout centuries of oppression, stigmatization, protests, and policy changes, how have shifts in disability culture informed the identifying language being used by and for people with various disabilities? Who decides what language is to be used, and how, in turn, does that reflect the sociopolitical positioning of disabled individuals? In order to develop a basic understanding of the ways in which contemporary disability culture and identity language intertwine, it is useful to explore the following three models of disability – the medical model, the social model and the minority model. By understanding the contrasting values of these models, one can gain insight into the range of approaches to disability identification, which informs the language used by and for individuals with disabilities.

The medical model of disability pathologizes the individual or community based on diagnosis, impairment, or difference of ability. This model views disability as something biological to be fixed or cured in the individual. The medical model is not generally accepted or appreciated by members of contemporary disability communities. Rather, it is a discourse that many resist because they argue that it alleviates society of any and all responsibility with regard to the stigmatization and unjust treatment of disabled individuals.

In contrast, the social model of disability “which has been the dominant discourse in disability politics since the 1970s” (Hargrave 29) emphasizes the ways in which society itself disables an individual. Based on both environmental and social infrastructures, this model highlights the ways in which our contemporary society as a whole does not invite or support the inclusion of the disabled individual, but rather accepts and continues to contribute to the environmental and social barriers that preclude the full social enfranchisement of people with
disabilities. In *Theatres of Learning Disability*, Hargrave presents an example of how the social/medical model binary operates:

[I]magine candidate ‘X’ who is applying for a place at drama school. She is diagnosed as autistic, which, from a medical perspective, is an innate cognitive condition that cannot be ‘cured’ or altered. As a consequence of the condition, she finds it difficult to engage in big group activities and to memorise large sections of text. From a medical standpoint, she would have to adapt to meet the expectations of the curriculum, and overcome her challenges. Medical or therapeutic processes might help her but only on the understanding that she has ‘a problem’. Conversely, the social model would argue that the barriers ‘X’ faces are environmental and social: it is not ‘X’ who has the problem but the drama school. ‘X’ is disabled not by her autism but by the disabling attitudes and restrictions placed on her by society (29)

It is imperative to recognize the ways that existing infrastructures may deter if not entirely exclude individuals with disabilities from participating in mainstream theatre training and performance opportunities, in addition to the barriers that they may be forced to resist on a daily basis. The social model emphasizes the idea that if society were to provide equal opportunity to individuals with diverse abilities and needs, that disability, as a social construct would become less apparent – students and professionals of all abilities would be able to train and perform with equal access; neither group privileged over the other. However, because student ‘X’ is forced to approach her training under the label of ‘autistic’, she incites and challenges the assumptions of the institution. Because of the language of her diagnosis and society’s perception of what that necessitates, she is faced with additional and potentially oppressive challenges in seeking and participating in such training opportunities.

The minority model both embraces and moves beyond the social model of disability as it recognizes the disabled experience as one that connects to other civil rights movements in its ability to channel a shared experience of oppression, which can then be used to prompt political
action and social change. To elaborate on this concept of disability as an embodied minority identity, in his book *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers explains,

Disability is not a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity. To call disability an identity is to recognize that it is not a biological or natural property but an elastic social category both subject to social control and capable of effecting social change (4)

The minority model emphasizes the power in coalition and shared experience, while still acknowledging the diversity and range of individualized experiences of disability. This model highlights the stigmaphilic notion that McRuer and Bérubé offer to the disability experience, and highlights how embracing disability as a minority counterculture can then be used to drive social change. Simi Linton (qtd. in Johnston) elaborates, “[w]e are all bound together, not by this list of our collective symptoms but by the social and political circumstances that have forged us together as a group” (*Disability Theatre and Modern Drama* 20). Ultimately, the power in this model lies in a collective social experience and communal need for political and cultural change.

These contrasting models of disability can shape how disability identity language is informed or resisted. What language do members of the disability community choose to adopt? How might the reclaiming of historically derogatory language produce feelings of empowerment for some, but apprehension for others? There has been a long history of oppressive, offensive, and medicalized language used to define disabled individuals. In the foreword to *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*, Michael Bérubé quotes his co-author, and founder of crip theory, Robert McRuer, as he writes that there is “no way of saying ‘disabled’ without hearing ‘cripple’ (or freak, or retard) as its echo” (ix). It is the oppressive past (and unfortunately, still present) of disabled individuals that gives such substantial weight to the complexities of identifying language, and ownership over one’s linguistic definition of self.
Disability as an aspect of one’s identity is fluid in that no two disabled experiences will be exactly the same. The challenge lies in defining oneself with autonomy and agency but also maintaining a sense of community as a part of the greater whole.

Although an in depth analysis of disability identity politics and language is beyond the scope of this project, it is important to discuss some of the current ideas surrounding disability terminology and identifying language. When speaking about disability identity politics, it would be impossible exclude crip theory. The term was coined by Robert McRuer and identifies the parallels between the stigmatization of queer and disability communities and recognizes how the rhetoric of queer theory might resonate with the disability experience as well. “McRuer envisions the crip discourse as the child of the queer narrative: a community reclaiming a negative word and announcing their non-normative status in order to challenge dominant power structures” (Bone 6-7). Crip, sourced from the word ‘cripple’ holds a significant amount of heaviness with regard to the oppression of people with disabilities and the derogatory language that continues to be used today. In her article “Queering the Crip or Cripping the Queer” disability theatre theorist, Carrie Sandahl suggests, “the term cripple, like queer is fluid and ever-changing, claimed by those whom it did not originally define […] The term crip has expanded to include not only those with physical impairments but those with sensory or mental impairments as well” (Sandahl 27). McRuer and Bérubé quote Sandahl, emphasizing that both ‘queer’ and ‘cripple’ have a shared “history of pejorative use” and in turn, suggest that ‘crip’ as a demonstration of reclaiming language for the disability community, presents equal fluidity in its breadth of identification (34). At this time, I find it challenging to recognize ‘crip’ as being a suitable term to resonate with all disability experiences. With a term so deeply rooted in the history and oppression of individuals with physical disabilities, I argue that this language cannot truly be
inclusive of individuals with developmental or cognitive disabilities. While I do agree with aspects of McRuer’s theory regarding the parallel stigmaphilic experience of queer and disabled individuals (mentioned in the previous chapter), like a number of other theorists, I find the argument for ‘crip’ as an all-inclusive term of activist identity, problematic.

In her article “Trapped behind the glass: crip theory and disability identity”, Kirstin Marie Bone examines the history of disability identity language and argues that crip theory does not successfully accomplish what it intends to, and rather may only be furthering the “cycle of exploitation” (1). Bone provides a historical and sociological analysis of the terms ‘monster’, ‘handicapped’, ‘freak’, and ‘cripple’ – all words that have historically been used to describe individuals with disabilities. Upon her analysis of the word cripple as a preface to her critique of crip theory, Bone explains that the word ‘cripple’ stems from “the Germanic krupilo, [and] has at its heart the stem krup, which is ‘to creep’ and is often believed to reference ‘one who can only creep’. This history reveals the very specific bodies represented within the crippled narrative: those with restricted use of their limbs” (5). Her assertions highlight one aspect of failure of ‘crip’ to encompass all disabled identities in that it seems to privilege one particular kind of disability experience over another. Indeed, in Lotta Löfgren-Mårtenson’s article “‘Hip to Be Crip’ About Crip Theory, Sexuality and People with Intellectual Disabilities” she notes how McRuer in his writing on crip theory “does not make any reference to intellectual disabilities” (420). Crip theory thus risks reinforcing a division within disability culture “both through the rhetoric of the word ‘crip’ and foundational theorists’ privileging of certain bodies over others” (Bone 10). Ultimately, Bone’s article problematizes the current linguistic discourse surrounding crip theory, disability identity and activism, while putting out a call for more inclusive theories
and pedagogy. There is hope in that re-evaluating the way that language functions within the greater discourse that room can be made for all disabled voices to be included.

In conducting my own research within the disability community for this thesis, I have still encountered a diverse range of identifying language used for and by individuals with disabilities. With regard to the group most pertinent to my research, specifically those involved in DramaWay’s programming, the language most often used cites ‘intellectual disability’, ‘developmental disability’, ‘learning disability’, ‘special needs’, and ‘cognitively diverse’. For the purposes of this project, I have been faced with the challenge of trying to identify the most appropriate term to use in my writing, while being inclusive of the range of terms mobilized by DramaWay’s core membership. While the company’s website states that “DramaWay programs are created, geared and modified to suit individuals with special needs” (“DramaWay Philosophy”), their current social media and promotional content advertises and highlights DramaWay as a program for individuals of “all-abilities”. I would argue that this inconsistency is language can be confusing. The term all-abilities, though potentially understood as more inclusive, risks seeming more vague and ambiguous in its definition. I would suggest rather, that it is significant that DramaWay develops its programming specifically to serve individuals with disabilities; these programs have been designed very specifically to welcome and support the unique needs of this community. Throughout my interview process, I was actively attentive to the identifying language utilized by performers, staff and volunteers.

As I reviewed my interview transcriptions and considered the company’s more recent use of ‘all-abilities’ in their marketing and promotional material, I found it interesting that this was not the language most often used by staff, and moreover, never used by the performers. Out of the ten staff and volunteers interviewed, the majority used the term ‘special needs’ when
referring to those who participate in DramaWay’s programming. While a number of staff used the term ‘disability’, very few referred to DramaWay’s membership as consisting of individuals of ‘all-abilities’. While the company may be moving towards ‘all-abilities’ as the preferred designation for the DramaWay demographic, this has not yet manifested in the language of the staff and volunteers.

Out of the thirty performers that I interviewed, none of them referred to DramaWay as being for individuals of ‘all-abilities’. Rather, of those participants who used self-identifying language in their interview, the most common wording used to describe their group was simply ‘people with disabilities’, ‘actors with disabilities’, or ‘disability actors’. To quote DramaWay performer, Lindsey Chalmers, “DramaWay is a perfect program for other disability actors to perform on stage for the audience to watch”. In reference to what made her want to join DramaWay, another performer (who wished to remain anonymous) commented on the sense of “camaraderie [in] being with other people who have disabilities”. It is evident in this use of language, that this ownership of “disability” is a defining factor in how the participants perceive the infrastructure of DramaWay’s programming and their experience as active members within its community.

Other performers identified DramaWay specifically as a program for people with ‘special needs’. Victor Pereira comments that DramaWay is “filled with special needs actors, [and that] it’s not the production that makes DramaWay special, it’s […] the people that are inside it”. Again, there is a sense of ownership and pride that comes with this identifying language. It is evident that many of the company actors cite their shared identity as people with disabilities or special needs as essential to the sense of community that they experience at DramaWay.

DramaWay is an organization that is for them. It is viewed as a unique environment where a
sense of belonging regardless of diagnosis or ability, is paramount. With the diversity of DramaWay’s membership, it is challenging to find the best language to be equally inclusive of all members. Formal medical diagnoses within the group include: Down syndrome, autism, generalized anxiety disorder, acquired brain injury, cerebral palsy, and learning disability. While there is a wide range of diagnoses accounted for in DramaWay’s membership, there is consistency in the cognitive diversity of its participants. DramaWay is ultimately built to support the creative arts education of a cognitively diverse group of performers with and without physical disabilities.

While I recognize both the complexity and enduring challenges of identity language, I intend to complicate the term ‘all-abilities’ as it relates to this particular company. The use of all-abilities language seems to be most prevalent with regard to classroom integration or inclusion of individuals with disabilities into mainstream programming. In our interview, Strnad explained her preference for the term ‘all-abilities’, a term she understands as more positive than “differently abled” or “special needs”. However, she also recognized that the best practice for language remains unclear – “families would have to call, well what do you mean all-abilities? But I think that’s great. Call us, and we’ll explain it”. DramaWay’s service in providing creative arts programming specifically for individuals with special needs is vital to the philosophy of the company. DramaWay’s praxis offers a unique opportunity to members of the disability community that merits more discernable recognition apart from what more broadly defined arts programming may be able to offer these performers.

In conversations with a number of staff members about the term ‘all-abilities’, there is a positivity surrounding the term’s inclusivity in that it accounts for the involvement and support of mainstream/neurotypical staff and volunteers, and the idea that everyone involved is working
together as a team. However, there is also a recurring acknowledgment of the confusing nature of ‘all-abilities’. When explaining to me how they introduce the work that DramaWay does to friends and family, “performers with special needs” is still the language that staff and volunteers use most. Susan Anderson, a long-time DramaWay volunteer, explains that she finds the company’s shift between special needs and all-abilities interesting:

On the one hand, [all-abilities is] clearly in line with DramaWay’s philosophy about empowering participants and recognizing and appreciating [that] everyone has creative talents worthy of being appreciated on stage. On the other hand, sometimes when I describe DramaWay with this language to new friends, it seems like people don’t know what I mean (i.e. people who just aren’t very good at acting?) Having grown up using the language of special needs, I still say that sometimes because it’s well understood and recognized.

The challenge for the company is to promote an inclusive program, but also be clear about the unique opportunity that it provides for disabled individuals in the GTA to be supported in creative arts training and practice. The debate and uncertainty surrounding inclusive language for individuals with intellectual, developmental, and cognitive disabilities remains a challenge, both at DramaWay and elsewhere. Hargrave highlights the multiplicity of approaches with regard to the most appropriate identifying language for this community. He argues that, “learning disability [or in this case, special needs] is a heterogeneous and unstable category. It has never been a unified classification and has never been resident in any one field of knowledge” (26).

Outside of a medical or social sciences approach in which the language is based more concretely on a pathologizing diagnosis, there remains an uncertainty of how to speak from a more positive, human-centred perspective grounded in the social or minority model. The unsteadiness of this language as it tries to accommodate such a wide range of diagnoses and experiences is evidenced by the diversity of designations being used both nationally and internationally.
As I mention in the foreword, I have decided to use the term ‘special needs’ because it is a term that has been embraced by most of this particular group’s own self-identifying language. However, as I began thinking about this chapter and the complexities of identifying language, COORDOWN, the National Coordination of People with Down Syndrome (based in Italy), partnered with Down Syndrome International to produce a PSA-style video for World Down Syndrome Day 2017. The video entitled “NOT SPECIAL NEEDS” actively resists and demonstrates through humour why people with Down syndrome (a group that makes up the majority of DramaWay’s membership) should not be considered “special needs”. Lauren Potter, who many would recognize as the Down syndrome actress who plays Becky Jackson in the hit TV show Glee, is the face of the video. She introduces absurd concepts that she believes could justifiably be perceived as ‘special’. She explains, “It would be special if people with Down syndrome had to eat dinosaur eggs – that would be special” and “it would be special if we needed to be massaged by a cat” (CoorDown, emphasis in original). Ultimately the message of the video is that there is nothing inherently “special” about individuals with Down syndrome. Rather, what Potter proposes is that people with Down syndrome need “education, jobs and opportunities, friends and some love”. Potter concludes by looking directly into the camera, and asking “are these needs special?” (CoorDown). The video intends to emphasize that these needs are not ‘special needs’ but simply ‘human needs’. While I understand and endorse the argument that Potter and those who created the video are making regarding equal access and opportunity, in the prevailing disabling social conditions that shape DramaWay’s activities, it remains a reality that individuals with Down syndrome do often require additional services and supports as they navigate things like education, the job market, independent living, and theatre training and production. Unfortunately, Canadian society is not yet equipped to fully provide equal access to
individuals of all abilities. Therefore, in eliminating the need for any kind of adaptability or “special” accommodation, equal access will not become a reality for this community.

Accessibility and inclusion are rooted in adaptability; understanding that not everyone learns, works, processes information, or behaves in the same way is inherent in that. In embracing the special or alternative needs of an individual or group, our society can work to adapt existing systems and infrastructures to be more accommodating and inclusive of all people.

I fully recognize, therefore, that ‘special needs’ is a flawed choice of term, and understand the problematic aspects of its etymology. However, for the purposes of this project, it is the term with the most currency at the company as it seeks to identify the range of experiences that the DramaWay performers share. If I were to simply state that they were performers with disabilities, I would be faced again with the challenge of having to explain what that means for this specific group. A company like Vancouver’s RealWheels Theatre for example, also works with performers with disabilities. However, there is a much stronger presence of artists with physical mobility impairments who participate in their productions. These two companies do not equally serve the same performers. There remains an inadequacy in disability rhetoric to express coherently the shared aspects of identities and experiences of people with Down syndrome, autism, and learning disabilities. In highlighting the challenge of this identifying language, and recognizing that previous attempts at finding empowering and inclusive terminology (i.e crip, all-abilities) have also proven problematic, the search for an alternative term continues.

While presently, the language of ‘special needs’ may provide sufficient understanding of the range of diagnoses mentioned within DramaWay’s membership; the term needs to be continually tested and reimagined. As it stands, the term ‘special needs’ emphasizes difference in that the individual has ‘specialized’ needs that must be met. It is using the word ‘special’, that
emphasizes distance and other-ness – special as divergent from standard or ‘normal’. However, in highlighting the ‘needs’ of the individual, the term becomes a call for action and accommodation, emphasizing that something else must be provided in order for this community to fully achieve equality. Rather than the needs of the individual being the issue, it is the label of ‘special’ that I believe casts the term in a negative light.

There is a call for our society to become more inclusive so that the ways in which this specific community’s needs are addressed are no longer considered ‘special’ – but rather, a foundational feature of society. While this is the ideal circumstance, this is not yet the state in which our society functions. In acknowledging the complexity of language as it pertains to disability as a whole, as well as to the specific communities that exist under the umbrella of disability, I suggest that further development in disability rhetoric is needed to best serve this community. In recognizing the way that language and culture intersect, and by exploring more positive (self)identifying language for members of the disability community, perhaps an advancement in terminology could contribute to informing and reforming society’s perceptions of individuals of diverse cognitive abilities, and in turn eliminate the barriers and disabling attitudes that the current language reinforces.
Chapter 4: Interview Engagements, Performer Highlights, Reflections and Opportunities for Growth

When writing about marginalized communities, it is imperative that one’s research not only speaks about, but also speaks to and engages with the community directly. This is particularly the case in the disability cultural field, which has long been animated by the anti-oppression slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us”, first attributed to the disability community by disability rights activist, James I. Charlton and explored in depth in his book *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. I recognized from the inception of this project, that speaking with DramaWay performers directly would be crucial in gaining first-hand, personal insight into the program. With the intention to write about the programs in which these performers participate, the community in which they grow, and the theatre work that they produce, it would be essential to hear from them directly and respect their agency in speaking about their own experiences. It is fundamental to my research approach that the voices of these performers be heard and presented respectfully.

Upon receiving approval for this study from the University of British Columbia’s Behavioural Research Ethics Board, I flew to Toronto in October 2016 to meet with prospective interviewees, explain the purpose and intent of the project, and distribute invitations to participate and consent forms. During this activity, I was overwhelmingly met with great enthusiasm from the performers, staff and volunteers. While I was thrilled to have received this positive feedback, I did encounter some key notes of resistance and feel that it is important to detail these, address and justify my decision to privilege disabled voices in my research.
Shortly after I had returned to Vancouver following my initial trip to Toronto, a DramaWay parent contacted me by email and expressed concern regarding the approach I was taking with my project. In their email this parent explained to me that while they believe their child has the ability to successfully perform on stage, that they do not believe that they have the “mental capacity” necessary to participate in an interview. This parent further commented that this sentiment would apply to the majority of DramaWay’s membership. They recommended to me that if I wanted to conduct interviews, that I should widen my interview pool to include the parents of the participants. While I understand the concern and followed up with the parent directly, I had nonetheless made a conscious choice to focus solely on performers and company administrators in this study. This is not because I do not value and appreciate the profound role of supportive parents and caregivers. Rather, recognizing that I could not accomplish everything in this single study, my primary aim was to privilege the voices that have been least heard and most central to the work. I believe that every such participant at DramaWay has the capacity to express him or herself, and demonstrates this when engaging with their castmates and facilitators in class or when they perform on stage.

The “Ethics Guidelines for International, Multicenter Research Involving People with Intellectual Disabilities” was developed to ensure that individuals with intellectual disabilities participating in academic research studies would have their health, safety, and human rights protected and chance of exploitation prevented (Dalton & McVilly 59). This document states “an adult person with intellectual disability should be assumed capable of providing informed consent, unless it has been established otherwise; for example by formal assessment and/or legal determination” (62). This sentiment is further echoed in The Montréal Declaration on Intellectual Disability that states:
Under no circumstance should an individual with an intellectual disability be considered completely incompetent to make decisions because of his or her disability. It is only under the most extraordinary of circumstances that the legal right of persons with intellectual disabilities to make their own decisions can be lawfully interrupted (3).

With the weight of the documents mentioned above and having undergone an extensive ethics approval process, I hope to justify this choice to interview and privilege the voices of DramaWay’s membership. Within the parameters of this project, the personal experience and expressions of these performers is of the most interest to me. It is significant that the words of these participants inform my understanding of the effect that this company has on them. This particular community does not often have the opportunity to speak for themselves, and by inviting these performers to do so, I hoped that I would receive the most direct and authentic articulation of their own experiences with the program, and in turn, gain insight into DramaWay’s successes and challenges in providing creative arts education to youth and adults with special needs.

I intend for this chapter to provide insight into specific and significant moments that emerged throughout my interview process. I will identify both positive and critical moments, highlight two performers whose work both inside and outside of DramaWay is particularly revealing of the quality of training and the social impact of the company, and finally conclude with reflections for the company about potential future directions based on my findings from the interviews conducted.

Once I had received completed consent forms and confirmation of interest from participants, I returned to Toronto in November 2016 to conduct my interviews. Over the course of the week, I conducted a total of forty interviews with DramaWay performers, staff and volunteers. All performers and the majority of staff and volunteers were interviewed during
DramaWay’s DramaWorks classes at the three primary class locations – Downtown (Summerhill), East (Scarborough), and West (Swansea). All interviews were audio recorded using an iPhone and a password protected voice recording application. While some DramaWay performers who wished to participate in the interviews did not want to be identified by name, I have chosen to still include a number of their voices but have cited them anonymously. All people I cite directly, I do so with their express permission or that of their primary caregiver. The length of time per interview with each DramaWay performer (on average) lasted seven minutes. While some responded strictly to the questions being asked, a number of participants elaborated on their experiences at great length. I was thus generously granted far more content than could be included in a thesis of this length.

I have selected material on the basis of the following criteria: the need to highlight positive expressions as well as constructive criticisms, provide a range of experiences sourced from both long term and newer voices, and demonstrate the social benefits of DramaWay’s programming. To analyze the data collected, I first transcribed the interview material verbatim. Then, for each question I discerned whether or not there were common responses and also took note of any outliers. This process helped me to identify and flag moments of constructive critique that stood out from the otherwise overwhelmingly positive feedback that I received from interviewees. My analytical approach to all of this data draws primarily from disability performance studies. This field is primarily interested in the artistry and aesthetics of disabled individuals. Likewise, I read the interview material for the interviewees’ conscious expressions about their involvement with the company, their artistic impulses, processes and ambitions. I did not therefore, brush interviewees’ responses against the grain to tease out unconscious biases or other impulses. Rather, I took interviewees expressions at face value. This process of data
selection has allowed me to present a breadth of experience that I believe reflects the diversity of individuals included in the DramaWay community.

4.1 Interview Engagements

In general, interview participants had overwhelmingly positive things to say about their experience with DramaWay. When I asked students what their favourite aspect of DramaWay was, many responded with great enthusiasm for the creative opportunities that it offers. Jessica Rotolo commented, “basically everything. Everything. I love, love, love, acting. My favourite thing to do is act”. Despite Rotolo’s emphatic response, when asked to describe herself before coming to DramaWay she commented that she was “shy, timid, and […] not outgoing”. Many of the other performers had similar responses, emphasizing increased levels of confidence or ability to project their voice as a result of their training with DramaWay.

Others commented on the inclusive nature of the program: “[j]ust the way that everybody gets along and you know, the thing with DramaWay that I love is it’s a program where we can come, and you know, people with disabilities, we actually get to put on plays and shows and stuff. And it’s fun, we really enjoy it” (Parker). Again this bond and sense of community that DramaWay fosters is noteworthy. The space that DramaWay holds for its participants is both exclusive in its preservation and development of its specific community, but inclusive of the range of disabilities present within that community. In creating a safe space for performers to be their authentic selves, opportunities arise to explore new ideas and interests beyond the curriculum or rehearsal schedule. One participant, when asked about his favourite character that he has performed in a DramaWay production remarks, “I like playing female characters, they’re some of my favourites” (Anonymous). I appreciate and believe that it is important to acknowledge that DramaWay does not cast based on gender. Sometimes a woman may happen
to been cast in a male role, and other times, it is a specific request by the performer. This particular participant who presents as male prefers to be cast as a female, and the facilitators embrace that. When individuals with special needs are so often placed in boxes that identify them as asexual or unable to understand non-conforming/binary gender identifications, I believe that DramaWay’s choice to embrace the preferences of its participants is socially valuable.

With regard to artistic exploration, Andrew Chapman, who is one of the original members of the company, has been exploring a newfound love of puppetry. A number of years ago, he crafted a hand puppet with the assistance of Morgan Joy, and has become quite attached to it. The puppet, named Johnny Bean, has now been featured in a DramaWay production and was included in the line up of this year’s DramaWay Cabaret. This new passion of Chapman’s has been fostered and encouraged by Morgan Joy and the other facilitators at DramaWay. In embracing alternative and creative methods of self-expression, DramaWay performers are able to develop their own artistic interests both within and aside from the prescribed programming provided.

In speaking with DramaWay performers, there is an obvious air of pride that resonates from many of the individuals that I interviewed. Francie Munoz commented, “I have all the DVDs of all my shows. I’ve got all of them!” It is evident that DramaWay performers believe in the work they produce, and being able to preserve documentation of their hard work has helped to build a sense of community and accomplishment over time. Another participant articulated his dreams for the company, “if I could put our plays into one word, it would be Broadway! I think our plays could be put into good use if they were on Broadway” (Anonymous). The assertion is striking in its focus on connections with mainstream commercial practice. What would it mean to have a DramaWay production on a Broadway stage? How could this promote awareness for
performers with special needs, while also breaking down the traditional barriers of professional theatre practice? These performers believe in the work that DramaWay produces, and are passionate about their contributions as active members.

While overwhelmingly the responses centred on the positive impact that DramaWay’s programming has had on its community of performers, is it equally important to identify the interviewees suggestions for new directions or improvement, especially as these help to contextualize DramaWay’s praxis within the greater field of disability theatre and identify opportunities for further development. It is important to note that all interviewees were keen to see the company continue its work into the future, their suggestions were thus aimed at determining the strategies and best practices to do that for everyone involved.

DramaWay’s programming philosophy stems from an emphasis on adaptability and honouring the interests and abilities of all participants equally. The comments that follow, however, point to the current limits of this approach. When a performer is drawn to an alternative practice or role within theatre, how can the company best accommodate the interests of the individual, while maintaining equal opportunity in the classroom? I spoke with a participant who finds himself sufficiently engaged by his on-stage experiences with DramaWay, but also feels drawn to pursue alternative theatre roles and goals. He spoke to me about his dreams of directing, and his goals in developing applicable experience in this role through DramaWay. The structure of the DramaWorks program however, is fairly focused on developing performers; paying participants attend with the understanding that they are to be cast, rehearse their parts, and then perform for an audience. While much of DramaWay’s praxis presents a process-oriented approach, ultimately their work is product-oriented in that they need to have something to show to the family and friends who expect to see the performers on stage. There is an
opportunity for the company to expand its engagement with theatre training to individuals who are not drawn to being onstage, but are still interested in being involved in the programming. Could there be room made for more process-oriented learning or mentoring opportunities aside from the main performance program? What might DramaWay look like if its productions were not only performed by individuals with special needs, but directed, written, designed, and/or stage managed by them as well? This particular participant expressed a strong desire for the company to take his dream of directing seriously and expand the program. A common challenge for companies serving the disability community is contending with the surfeit of demands from disabled artists who are underserved by a host of theatre institutions and structures. The company might consider, however, expanding their programming to include mentorship opportunities for long-term participants.

Many of DramaWay’s members have been with the company for five or more years and may, likewise, be interested in expanding their skill set. To have the opportunity not only to perform, but also to contribute to the production in other theatre roles could be highly rewarding for those long term performers as well as other individuals with special needs who might be more drawn to non-performing theatre roles. A unique vision could emerge through the production process when there is shared life experience between director/playwright and cast. The striking theatre production history of Niall McNeil, a Vancouver-based actor and playwright with Down syndrome, offers a rich example of what can come from fostering alternative arts opportunities within this community. His most recent work, *King Arthur’s Night* (which he co-wrote with Marcus Youssef) was co-produced by Neworld Theatre and the National Arts Centre, and premiered at the Luminato Festival in Toronto in June 2017. In addition to McNeil starring in his own play, this production worked in partnership with the Down Syndrome Research
Foundation of British Columbia, and cast three additional performers with Down syndrome (Tiffany King, Andrew Gordon, and Matthew Tom-Wing) in the production. This collaborative process between McNeil as playwright and as castmate emphasizes a kind of fluidity in the production process and highlights a fresh perspective in reimagining the traditional theatre aesthetic. McNeil’s success as a playwright and Down syndrome artist exemplifies the realm of possibility for DramaWay’s performers in expanding their artistic interests beyond the parameters of performance currently shaping the DramaWorks program.

Throughout my interview process, I found that those performers who had been with DramaWay for a number of years were able to provide highly valuable reflections on their long-term training and social experiences with the company, as well as offer constructive insights for future growth and development. Elias Georgopoulos is one of the more senior members of the DramaWorks program and has been involved for ten years. He first started attending the program after telling his support worker of his interest in pursuing actor training. He noted jokingly that at first “she couldn’t hear me and she said ‘hacker?!’ I tried to correct it”. Georgopoulos explains that one of the things he is working on through his participation in the program is learning to speak more clearly, as he feels that others often have difficulty understanding him. He has a quick and witty sense of humour, which is partly what motivates his desire to perform. He expresses interest in pursuing sketch comedy, voice acting, and has dreams of eventually producing his own TV show or fantasy film. Georgopoulos remarks on Strnad’s love of producing fairytale adaptations for their final productions, which as a fantasy fan he enjoys. However, he would also like to make these productions more unique, and less “PC”. I asked him if he could give me an example or elaborate further on this. Without a moment’s hesitation, he tells me about his own adaptation of Little Red Riding Hood, a version whose explicit content
definitely aims to reach an adult audience rather than the more general audiences the company has courted in the past. Western fairytales have been embraced as source material for DramaWorks productions as the story lines are already familiar to many of the participants even before they have read their script. However, this question of age appropriate content is something to be considered. Where is the line between presenting simple stories that everyone knows and engaging with the participants’ desire to present more mature or rather, age-appropriate content? When the range in age for DramaWay’s membership spans from young teens to middle-aged adults, how can the company ensure that the work being produced resonates with the artistic interests of all participants? Perhaps part of this resistance to fairytales derives from the performers’ desire to be acknowledged for the age that they are, and not the age that society perceives them to be based on their disability or diagnosis. There is something to be acknowledged in this resistance, and as demonstrated by DramaWay’s 2017 production Galaxy Trek of the Star Guardians (a collaborative mash-up of the blockbuster film franchises: Star Trek, Star Wars, and Guardians of the Galaxy) the company is already exploring opportunities to diversify their production content.

DramaWay’s dynamic is fascinating in that it is so much more than just a program for these individuals to attend one evening a week. Performers form friendships, romantic relationships, and develop lasting connections with those in their community. There are life skills and lessons learned that far exceed the boundaries of the drama curriculum. When given the opportunity for final comments before concluding the interview, Georgopoulos reflects,

I know DramaWay’s not a dating site, but it’s hard to find somebody. I’m looking for somebody who will see me as a person, not a label. I know people with no disability will never date a guy with special needs. Danielle says that’s wrong, that people could date somebody.
The complex balance between education and social dynamics within the program is a significant part of the DramaWay experience. What it provides to its participants spans far beyond the boundaries of a classroom – it engages all aspects of the participants’ lives. Rather than encouraging them to leave their personal experiences at the door, they are invited to share and work through them in a safe space, supported by their friends and allies. In embracing the complexities of the performers’ lives with regard to family, relationships, school, doctor’s appointments etc., the community that DramaWay provides offers support far beyond arts education. These challenges are acknowledged and support is provided as needed so that everyone involved has the opportunity to be present in the room and participate in the programming to the fullest extent.

4.2 Performers Highlights

My notes above draw from the rich sampling of individual perspectives from DramaWay’s membership that I was afforded during the interview process. I will now highlight two performers who shared with me in particularly great detail the impact that DramaWay has had on them personally. Sam Forbes and Victor Pereira are active and committed members of the DramaWay community who spoke candidly and at length to the influence of the company as a whole, as well as the ways in which the company has helped to shape them as artists and self-advocates.

4.2.1 Sam Forbes

With upwards of seventy-three million views on Facebook, Sam Forbes is also known as ‘The Dancing Barista’. He took the Internet by storm when he demonstrated his dance moves behind the counter of a Toronto Starbucks in 2016. The video was shared on YouTube by Carly Fleischmann, a well-known autism and disability advocate, and quickly went viral. It was not
long before the video caught the attention of comedian and talk show host, Ellen DeGeneres. After a very successful segment on *Ellen*\(^{19}\), which to date has garnered over five million views on YouTube, ‘Sam the Dancing Barista’ has very quickly become famous beyond Toronto.

After returning from his dream trip to Japan (courtesy of *Ellen*) I had the opportunity to interview Forbes about his experiences with DramaWay. Over the last five years, he has been a participant in DramaWay’s DramaWorks, SingingWorks and RhythmWorks programs. Speaking with Forbes, it is evident that he is not only passionate about his own role in the performing arts, but he is keen to speak out about issues pertaining to accessibility and inclusivity that are often lacking or absent in the entertainment industry.

Forbes proudly identifies as an advocate for individuals with special needs. He elaborates, “all types of special needs – I just think that we, as a community, we deserve to be treated better”. He goes on to express his disdain for the ‘R-word’\(^{20}\), and for his desire to dismantle the ways in which he feels society negatively labels individuals with disabilities. It is evident that he values the programming in which he engages and DramaWay’s approach in breaking down the barriers that surround him and his community.

Forbes loves to express himself through dance, and has dreams of performing on Broadway. He explains, “I want to promote my advocacy in the performing arts world, as well as say ‘I don’t like that you’re saying people with special needs cannot act, or can’t do this or can’t do that’. Why don’t we say what we can [do]?!” His passion for advocacy and inclusivity radiates from him. At eighteen years old, he is already aware of the limitations that society places on him, and is driven to break down these social barriers. Forbes reflects on the ways in which he has grown since he began participating in DramaWay’s programming, emphasizing a drastic improvement in social skills and willingness to engage with others. “I really do think that
DramaWay gave me social confidence and gave me just confidence in general. They gave me strength to see the world in such a beautiful light, rather than just always seeing it in such a negative, horrible light. It made me see that there are great, amazing people in the world”. He references Strnad, and his wish for more people like her in the world who “motivate” and provide a “safe haven” for the community. It is clear that DramaWay means much more to Forbes than just a program to attend once a week. He feels at home and with his community in these programs. For someone who identifies as being a part of the special needs community, entering an inclusive, accessible and welcoming space is an all too rare luxury that cannot be taken for granted.

Forbes described his experience with DramaWay’s programming vividly and with a focus on the effects that the program has had on him as a whole. He noted that he has found inspiration in Strnad to expand his advocacy work in promoting accessibility and inclusivity in the entertainment industry. He tells me about a video he created with arc + crown media called “Difability Round Table with Sam.”21 In this short three-minute video, Forbes introduces himself, as well as three other characters sitting around the table: Veruka, Derek, and Gus (all played by Forbes). After thanking his guests for joining him, he states without hesitation, “the entertainment industry loves disabled characters, but not disabled actors” (arc + crown). Forbes questions his “guests” about their feelings regarding non-disabled actors playing disabled roles. As the conversation develops, Gus, the character costumed as a detective presents a statistic stating that 16% of Best Actor and Best Actress awards won have been for portrayals of disability or mental illness. Forbes responds in question “if there are so many amazing stories of individuals with disabilities, why aren’t we casting them to play these roles?” The questions and debate continue, highlighting (rather comically) this very serious issue that exists within
mainstream entertainment. Forbes’s approach to this understandably difficult topic is calm and mature. He ends the video by saying “the more we talk about talented actors with different types of abilities, the more common it would be to see them given the opportunities others have”. He wants to see more exposure and awareness for performers with special needs and for them to be given the opportunity to play roles that depict their own experiences.

It is evident that Forbes’s experience with DramaWay has shaped his understanding about his own talents as well as the talents of those in his community. His passion and drive for advocacy derives from personal experience and the hunger for exposure for himself and his peers. In the yearly showcase that DramaWay produces, these talents that he speaks about are not only demonstrated, but showcased. Selling out shows in a professional theatre space, these performers are granted the opportunity to shine. While it might not yet be Broadway, it’s a pretty good start.

4.2.2 Victor Pereira

Victor Pereira is a long time DramaWay participant who has been involved with the company for the last nine years. Pereira is the personality behind the statement “if you want a good life, make it a DramaWay life” – a quote that has been previously used for advertising and marketing by the company. He has engaged in a variety of programs including DramaWorks, RhythmWorks, ExpressionWorks, as well as ActingWorks. Similarly to Forbes, Pereira has seen immense growth in himself since he began with DramaWay. He reflects,

They’ve seen me grow up as a person. They’ve seen me mature because before DramaWay, I used to be hyperactive. I used to be off the wall; but then DramaWay gave me this focus and [by] following a script […] said ‘here, you can do a script and then you can be whatever you want to be’. That really surprised me. I can be who I want to be anywhere, and they can accept me for who I am.
It is clear that this understanding of growth and maturity stems from the program’s infrastructure of inclusivity wherein individuals do not have to justify or suppress their needs or behaviours to be accepted.

I ask Pereira to speak to the work that he has done outside of DramaWay as an actor and performer. He tells me about the short films he has acted in, including *Play. Stop. Rewind* (2010) and *Penpals* (2012)\(^22\). The former is a film about two brothers coming to terms with the loss of their mother, and was screened at both national and international film festivals, nominated for a Cilect Prize and won Best Film and Best Screenplay at York University’s Cinesiege Film Festival. Pereira was also cast in Kire Paputt’s feature length film, *The Rainbow Kid* (2015)\(^23\), a coming of age story about a young man with Down syndrome, which was also screened at national and international festivals, and won a number of awards including Best Feature Film Under 250k at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2016.

Pereira mentions a personal project that he has been working on called “Able to Be Disabled” – a piece that he began developing during the summer of 2016 with DramaWay facilitator, Morgan Joy. “That’s the big one. That’s the big one I want to get off the ground”, he tells me “it’s about people with disabilities and how they can do more. How they can provide for society”. Pereira had the opportunity to first stage this piece with fellow performers Amelia McAfee Bruner, James Porter and Michael Louie at Connect heARTs Coffee House event, in support of Toronto’s Panfish Productions’ *Toronto, Mississippi*\(^24\) in fall 2016, and then remounted a further developed version at this year’s DramaWay Cabaret. He explained the primary impulse behind the piece as “the school system and how it fails people with special needs. It just surprised me how people can do more and that teachers put us down, and I want to be the voice of the voiceless, I want to be the guy who helps people achieve more – that’s my
goal”. It is evident that there is a discrepancy in how Pereira feels at school and how he feels at DramaWay:

DramaWay has really tested my boundaries of what I can do. It’s really pushed me forward. School has taught me to respect people, but DramaWay has taught me to respect myself. It’s really opened my eyes to what people with special needs can do. You just take any of the special needs people [referring to his classmates], you just have a ten-minute conversation with them – they can be your friend in five.

Again, he highlights the community and companionship of the group. DramaWay performers often see each other outside the program in school, day programs, social events, etc. However, DramaWay is an established and consistent aspect of their weekly routine that fosters artistic development, creative exchange and interdependence in pursuit of production. These programs provide both an educational and social experience that the participants can rely on weekly.

A striking aspect of my conversation with Pereira was his acknowledgment not only of how this program has impacted him, but how he believes it could benefit others. He tells me that he would like to see more awareness of DramaWay, and for more people to get involved. “There’s people that I know can do DramaWay, but they don’t have the finances to pay for this”.

He recognizes an issue in the infrastructure of the company – the lack of subsidy opportunities for individuals who may not be able to afford the current programming or for those that are not able to justify spending their government funding on arts programming.

People need to know about this more. I cannot say that enough, it just really has changed people’s lives. Without a place like this, you wouldn’t see me here, you wouldn’t see actors here […] this place saves people. It gives people a voice. It gives people a chance to be themselves.

It is apparent that DramaWay has had a significant impact on Pereira with regard to social behaviours, as well as his involvement externally on stage and screen.
Both Forbes and Pereira highlight most prominently the opportunities that have been afforded to them as a result of the personal growth that they have experienced at DramaWay. It may not be the physical experience of rehearsing and putting on a show, but the experiential learning that comes from DramaWay’s theatre praxis. The company’s attention to meeting individuals as they are and nurturing their talents and personalities from there is foundational to their enterprise. For Forbes and Pereira most clearly but also for the other performers I interviewed, it is evident that the program’s effects span far beyond the stage.

4.3 Reflections and Opportunities for Growth

In analyzing the dynamic range of feedback presented in the interviews, three primary areas emerged as opportunities for potential growth and development of DramaWay’s current educational praxis and creative infrastructure: the need for an accessible performance space, the opportunity to develop existing programming to include mentorship opportunities, and the complexities of funding a for-profit company while recognizing the need for subsidization of program costs.

Across the board, all of the interviewees’ feedback centered on opportunities for growth and expansion for DramaWay, rather than a devaluation of the years of work that have gone into developing this programming as it currently exists.

4.3.1 Accessibility

DramaWay is expressly committed to providing accessible and inclusive creative arts programming for individuals of all abilities. While a range of procedures and strategies are in place to ensure that all members of the company can participate to the fullest extent, a recurring contention of facilitator interviewees was that the stage at the Papermill Theatre (the venue which hosts DramaWay’s Annual Showcase) is raised and inaccessible for performers who use
mobility devices. The Papermill Theatre is housed in a historic building and because of its heritage site status, the option to renovate or make significant changes to the architecture would be very challenging. The theatre itself is a modern addition to the space, opening its doors in fall 2006. Despite being a contemporary theatre space, however, accessibility considerations were made for patrons, but not for performers. There are two flights of stairs leading up to the stage, one stage right and one stage left. DramaWay began renting this space in spring 2012. Upon recognizing the lack of accessibility as an issue, they inquired about the feasibility of installing a ramp or removing the stage all together. The technician at the theatre informed them that due to fire code regulations, ramps could not be installed, but that they did have the capability to remove the stage. This option however, would be an eight-hour process and as a union house, would incur costly fees that DramaWay would be unable to afford. More recently however, the Papermill Theatre has ceased to offer the removal of the stage as an option for rental clients as they “have been advised by the company that installed the stage that [they] should no longer disassemble it as it will cause instability in any future re-installation and endanger the individuals on it. [Therefore,] dismantling the stage will jeopardize its longevity” (Cheong). The practices currently implemented by DramaWay to accommodate performers with mobility issues in this space have included assisting them on stage at the top of the show to wait in the wings until their scene begins, hoisting wheelchair users onto the stage, or having performers with mobility devices performing on the floor in front of the stage (often in narrator roles) rather than with the rest of the cast on stage. While these practices are far from ideal, the company has, through these strategies, tried to adapt to make up for the venue’s lack of accessibility. While there are other venues in Toronto that have accessible stages or can make their spaces accessible, they are too small to accommodate the number of audience members that attend the DramaWay Showcase,
too expensive to alter, or would prove challenging for performers who travel independently to access by public transit. While there is growing pressure on all theatre companies to provide wholly accessible spaces for artists and audiences\textsuperscript{25}, it is particularly essential for this company to fulfill its person-centred philosophy by finding alternative options that honour the specific needs of its membership. As DramaWay facilitator Alysha Hunsberger explained:

[DramaWay is] supposed to be an all abilities theatre company and we do have a number of wheelchair users and we need to make it so that they can get up on that stage easily [and] without hassle. […] Papermill has been great to us, they’ve given us a lot of support, but I think we need to start taking more time to find a space in the city where there’s a theatre that has access […] That’s always been a thing for me. I come back to it and I just wish we had a space that was better suited to our participants.

There is a clear desire to do more to provide better accessibility for their performers and Strnad has expressed interest in using future funding opportunities to support this endeavour. I would suggest that it is necessary to explore alternative venue options in order to eliminate these barriers and provide equal performance opportunities for participants in the DramaWorks program. In doing so, DramaWay would be able to provide more comprehensively accessible programming by ensuring that every participant has equal access to the spotlight.

4.3.2 Programming Growth and Mentorship Opportunities

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the DramaWorks program is fairly rigid in its prescribed roles for participants. While participants may be asked to take on leadership roles within a specific production, the current model of this program leaves little room for participants to contribute and be involved in any way that is not performing on stage. I am reminded of Giles Perring’s work on the facilitation of learning-disabled artists in which he highlights that “learning-disabled artists’ preparation and exhibition of their works has invariably been achieved through collaboration with, and facilitation by, nondisabled people” (176). He questions the roles
and motivations of the facilitators that work with learning disabled artists, and draws attention to the fact that many aspects of these artists’ lives are managed by nondisabled people in both personal and professional capacities (family, personal support workers, teachers, doctors etc.) By empowering a student or small group of students to be involved in assistant directing, playwriting, set designing, etc., DramaWay’s work would better align itself with the key impulse of the disability theatre movement in producing disability-led work. Not only would this expansion of practice provide alternative opportunities for participants who wish to engage in production roles outside of acting, but it would also position the company to be able to provide mentorship opportunities to individuals interested in working in or producing theatre outside of DramaWay. DramaWay has been successful in regularly hiring working artists as facilitators. In expanding the programming to include training opportunities alongside these artists who work in various aspects of the industry, a powerful opportunity for mentorship, collaboration and inclusion could be built.

4.3.3 Funding and Subsidizing Program Costs

DramaWay is not currently registered as a non-profit organization, which many would find surprising considering the kind of work in which they engage. As a for-profit company, they are not eligible for the same kind of government arts funding that non-profits receive. Over the last eighteen years, DramaWay has relied on participant fees, private donors, commercial businesses, and crowd funding to support financially the execution of the various programs they provide and the production of the final showcase. In my interview with Danielle Strnad, I questioned if she had considered applying for non-profit status. She explained to me that she had been given advice that suggested that it would not be a good option for her and her company, but that she realizes that it would provide her with more flexibility with regard to applying for
grants, which could be used to subsidize the cost of programming for families. A number of facilitators and volunteers with whom I spoke echoed this sentiment, stressing the feeling that seeking non-profit or charitable status would be a worthwhile endeavour for DramaWay. In achieving non-profit status, and applying for additional funding, DramaWay would be able to further enhance their inclusivity by making their programming more financially accessible to the members of the disability community. When families have to carefully allot where they spend their government funding, it restricts and creates barriers for individuals that may be considered low-income to be able to engage in this programming. As Victor Pereira commented, he knows of people who would thrive as a part of this company, but they are unable to afford it as the current price of yearlong programming ranges from $800-$1000+ per program. Investigating and perhaps applying for non-profit status could open many more doors for DramaWay and allow for further development of programming and an increase in membership.

Ultimately, the vast majority DramaWay’s membership is resoundingly supportive of the company’s programming offered and emphasizes the many gains they have derived from it. While DramaWay has provided wonderful training and social opportunities for its participants, I would suggest that there is room for growth and further development. In privileging the voices of these participants, and highlighting their unique perspectives on the programming, I hope that this project will provide greater insight into the needs and desires of DramaWay’s membership so that this company can continue to provide quality programming for this evolving community. In continuing to build upon the successful foundation that Strnad has established, I believe that DramaWay can be a leading force within the field of disability theatre in Canada.
Conclusions

This study of DramaWay has examined the company’s approaches in creative arts education and performance praxis. By identifying the ways in which DramaWay provides accessible theatre training to individuals with special needs, I intended for this thesis to highlight how this work may contribute to and inform the future practice of disability theatre training and production in Canada.

As a result of my previous experience volunteering and working with DramaWay, I was able to speak to a number of the company’s theatre training and production practices from a first-hand perspective. However, through the process of interviewing Danielle Strnad and current members of her company, I was able to gain further insight into the journey that DramaWay has taken and recognize the significant amount of growth and development that this company has experienced over the last eighteen years.

By engaging with the diverse national and international scholarship surrounding disability theatre and situating DramaWay’s unique praxis alongside it, I was able to identify a number of key themes that resonate specifically with work that DramaWay produces. For example, scholars like Kuppers and Johnston who highlight disability performance as an act of cultural expression and resistance to mainstream theatrical aesthetics, further emphasize that disability theatre can exist as an autonomous form and in turn should be appreciated and valued in its own right. With regard to the work that DramaWay produces, this perspective is particularly significant. How can theatre developed and performed by artists with special needs be valued for its distinct aesthetic qualities and accessible practice? How might this work productively challenge the ableism that informs so much of mainstream theatre practice?
Hargrave suggests that for performers with learning disabilities, the work they produce should be valued in terms of their personal “distance travelled”, but with that, the formal qualities of the production should still be considered and debated. He elaborates that “to accept tokenism or [a] ‘good enough’ critique is to fail the work; the absence of debate signals indifference, or at least lack of aspiration” (88). It is significant to recognize the work that DramaWay produces as providing a unique opportunity to Toronto’s special needs community through arts education and training, but also essential to realize the amount of work that goes into developing an inclusive and personalized script, quality productions elements (costumes, set, props, lighting), and sold out houses. These productions should be valued not only for how they serve DramaWay’s membership, but also as forces in breaking down ableist barriers and stigma that are often present within mainstream theatre practice and production.

The presence of “non-normate” bodies on stage is in itself an act of resistance. In claiming space, inviting stares, and empowering performers with special needs to do what they love, the talents and unique abilities of these artists can be realized. The scholarship emphasizes disability performance as a force in challenging stigma, presenting alternative and valuable methods of theatrical production, and highlighting the need for mainstream training and professional practice to be more accessible and inclusive to the disability community.

In my discussion of disability identity language and terminology, I acknowledged the challenges in selecting appropriate language for the community of people whose work I study. Drawing attention to the range of common terminology used in various countries (developmental disability, intellectual disability, and learning disability), and the discrepancy of including individuals with cognitive disabilities under the disability activist designation of ‘crip’, I demonstrated why I agree with Bone’s assertion that there is work to be done with regard to
disability language theory and pedagogy. While acknowledging that the term ‘special needs’ is far from perfect, I believe that a re-imagining of language should be considered in order to achieve a more appropriate designation that would be inclusive and empowering within the wider disability community.

Through unpacking my interview process with DramaWay performers, staff and volunteers, a number of themes surfaced. By including both positive and critical moments, I hoped to demonstrate the successes of the company, while also highlighting room for further development. Attending to a broad sampling of generously shared voices from DramaWay’s membership, I was able to gain perspective on the impact that this company has on its membership as a whole. The amount of content transcribed from my interviews is expansive, and due to the size limits for this thesis, I was unable to cite all voices individually. However, I tried to share the overarching themes and emphasize how much I deeply valued and appreciated the interviewees’ generosity with their insights and reflections.

While this work granted me extensive insight into DramaWay’s educational and artistic practices, I must acknowledge that it only presents one approach to training and producing theatre with individuals with special needs. I recognize that there are a range of methods and a variety of companies internationally that engage in similar work, and with that, emphasize that the DramaWay approach is only one example of this style of training and performance practice. I hope that a number of the approaches outlined in this thesis will spark new ideas and incite others to embrace this work either as practitioners or audience members. I am hopeful that this work will not only help to highlight DramaWay’s connections to the wider disability theatre community but that, in its focus on education and performance praxis, a new set
of valuable case studies will be provided for practitioners, artists and scholars who work with performers with special needs.
Endnotes

1 While not her full legal name, Morgan Joy is her preferred designation.

2 DramaWay provides external drama programming at various centres and schools across the GTA. Through an ongoing relationship with ErinoakKids Treatment Centre in Mississauga, Strnad has recently rebranded the Erinoak Kids Players program as ‘DramaWorks Mississauga’. However, this program differs from the rest of the DramaWorks programming as the age for participation is cut off at eighteen, they do not produce the same play as the other four classes, and are not a part of the large-scale DramaWay Showcase. While this program still functions under the umbrella of DramaWay, it is somewhat removed from the core membership.

3 *The Nature of Creativity* (2012) directed and produced by Lizz Hodgson. This fifteen minute short film “documents the exceptional individuals who participate in DramaWay’s DramaWorks program” circa 2011.

4 The first DramaWay class was run out of a Community Living Toronto building at 20 Spadina Rd, Toronto, Ontario.

5 Product oriented programming privileges a final outcome or product, in this case a theatrical production. By contrast, process oriented training focuses more on the journey or process of training and is less concerned about the final result or executing a final production.

6 Harmony Place is a support services organization in Toronto that provides “individually driven day programs that foster personal development and social inclusion for adults with multiple disabilities”. The Coffee Shed is part of the Common Ground Cooperative, which is an organization that creates social enterprise opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities. The Coffee Shed is a fully operational coffee shop – selling baked goods, freshly brewed coffee, sandwiches and salads. Many of the DramaWay performers work or have worked at one of the three Coffee Shed locations.

7 Applied behaviour analysis (ABA) therapists use a range of techniques intended to produce improvements in communication, social relationships, play, self-care, school and employment opportunities for individuals with autism and related developmental disabilities (Autism Speaks).

8 Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) was founded by Gary Craig in the early 1990s and is viewed as a kind of “psychological acupressure” used to optimize one’s emotional health. This technique uses the same energy meridians that are used in traditional acupuncture (Mercola). It is executed by lightly tapping with one’s fingertips on various parts of the body (chest, jaw, forehead, wrists, etc.) and setting positive affirmations in order to reduce or relieve feelings of anxiety or stress. In 2014, Strnad invited Lee Peipgrass (a colleague from ErinoakKids) to run an EFT workshop for DramaWay staff and volunteers. This technique was then implemented as part of the warmups for DramaWorks classes.
‘Stimming’ or self-stimulating behaviour often appears in the form of repetitive behaviour as is common for some individuals with autism or developmental disabilities. Such behaviours may include hand-flapping, rocking, or jumping, or may include the repetitive use of an object – flicking a rubber band or twirling a piece of string to engage with the feeling of a particular texture. There are a number of reasons why an individual may ‘stim’: to gain sensory input, to reduce sensory input or to deal with stress and anxiety (The National Autistic Society).

In Ontario, adults with developmental disabilities are eligible to apply for ‘Passport’ funding. The intent of the Passport program is to help these adults participate more fully in their communities. The services and supports eligible for this funding include: community classes or recreational programming, support worker employment, person-directed planning, and caregiver respite (Ministry of Community and Social Services).

The Full Bawdy Loft served as a performance venue, a mental health drop-in, as well as Marshall’s home. Unfortunately, in late June of this year, Marshall and her husband were presented with an eviction notice giving them six months to find a new home. Marshall realized that finding a new location that would be affordable and could serve as both a home and a wellness space would be difficult if not impossible in Toronto. In early July, The Marshalls found and put an offer on a heritage home in Bear River, Nova Scotia (Lucs). Their offer was accepted, and the hope is that this house will also serve as a new Mental Wellness Loft.

DramaWay has been featured in a number of local magazines including Exceptional Family: Canada’s Resource for Parents of Exceptional Children (Fall 2008) Play to Podium: For Special Needs Families (Spring/Summer 2011), and Sheridan College’s Alumni Magazine, Ovation (2014).

The Canadian Actor’s Equity Association’s current “Canadian Theatre Agreement (2015-2018)” outlines two options for alternative rehearsal schedules:
1. Pro-rate a total of three (3) weeks’ fees over a period of four (4) weeks of six (6) days of one (1) five (5) hour call per day (5 hours/day x 6 days x 4 weeks = 120 hours) or
2. Pro-rate a total of three (3) weeks’ fees over a period of four (4) weeks of five (5) days of one five and a half hour call per day (5.5 hours/day X 5 days X 4 weeks = 110 hours) with a meal break of at least one half hour after 2 and a half hours of work (38).

I recognize that the list of qualified and talented disability artists in Canada is extensive, and while I have only named a few here, I would like to recognize the many disability artists that were present at the NAC’s Deaf, disability and Mad arts Study and the 2017 Republic of Inclusion. I deeply value the work of these artists, and acknowledge that the number of active contributors to this field is abundant and growing.
Much of the bridging of language and politics between queer and disability communities, including the reappropriation of stigmaphilia is owed to the work of scholars, Robert McRuer and Michael Bérubé.

While DramaWay outlines a range of diagnoses included in their membership, I believe it is important to acknowledge the inclusion of individuals with physical disabilities as well as those who became impaired later in life.

King Arthur’s Night was directed by James Long, with original music composed by Veda Hille. This production provides a unique insight into how McNeil perceives the story of King Arthur, and the world in which he lives. “Niall challenges the classifications and categorizations that we ‘neurotypicals’ assume must be the only legitimate means available to perceive and name the world. They’re not. There are worlds we can’t name or even imagine, within every one of us” (Luminato). This is the second play that McNeil, Youssef, and Hille have co-created. The first was Peter Panties (an adaptation of Peter Pan), which premiered in Vancouver in 2011.

Forbes’s segment on Ellen gave him the opportunity to explain why he is dancing in the video. Forbes explained that he “concentrates a lot better” when he dances. His Starbucks manager, Chris elaborated, “Sam’s jerky movements through his autism […] the music and the dance […]help him] to control himself and focus on the drinks, focus on the routines, he’s become more comfortable”. The primary message presented through this segment is that individuals with autism are capable, employable and deserving of employment opportunities.

The “R-word” is a non-explicit way of referencing the word retard(ed).

‘Difability’ is not a spelling error, but rather presents an interesting alternative, and perhaps a more positive term to replace ‘disability’. The video’s search title on YouTube is “Sam (The Dancing Barista) Talks Disability in Hollywood”.


The Rainbow Kid was selected for screenings at a number of film festivals as well as mainstream cinemas. Many DramaWay performers had small roles or acted as extras in the film. For a complete list of screenings and awards, visit www.therainbowkid.com.

It is interesting that members of DramaWay were invited to perform at this event, as the play Toronto, Mississippi by Joan MacLeod includes a character named Jhana that is described as “moderately mentally handicapped, hyperactive with symptoms of autism” (MacLeod). It is worth noting, however, that the actor that played Jhana in the Panfish production, was not disabled.
25 With regard to shifts in access and inclusion in the arts, I would also like to highlight the NAC’s Deaf, disability and Mad arts Cycle and subsequent Republic of Inclusion as a meaningful endeavour focused on engaging in critical conversations regarding disability arts, and the need for more accessible opportunities for disabled artists to create and produce.

26 These prices are based on the registration costs for DramaWay’s 2016-2017 program season. This year the cost of the DramaWorks program was $996.

27 It is noteworthy that the Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) has shifted its funding structures as a strategy for enhancing access to the disability community. Strategies include more accessible application formats as well as offering Access Support funds to help support Deaf, disabled or Mad artists in financing specific services required to complete a project through the CCA such as ASL interpreters, audio describers, support workers, transcription services, etc.
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Appendices

Appendix A: DramaWay Programs

Below is a comprehensive list of DramaWay’s yearlong and intensive programming opportunities excluding those programs offered exclusively at Erinoak Kids Treatment Centre.

**DramaWorks**
DramaWorks is the most widely attended program offered by DramaWay. This product-based program is facilitated within a musical theatre framework and allows participants to train in various aspects of performance practice while developing social and life skills. This program culminates with a final performance as part of DramaWay’s Annual Showcase.

**RhythmWorks**
RhythmWorks is DramaWay’s dance program. Performers develop movement skills by learning original choreographed routines. This program culminates with a final performance as part of DramaWay’s Annual Showcase.

**ExpressionWorks**
ExpressionWorks engages with both creative arts practice and life skills training. Creatively, the program explores a range of artistic media including dance, theatre, puppetry, and clown. Opportunities to develop or enhance independent living skills include cooking classes, experiencing transit travel, and workshops on personal hygiene.

**SingingWorks**
SingingWorks offers adaptive techniques to assist participants in developing vocal skills including tone, pitch, and rhythm while also highlighting movement in performance. This program culminates in a final open-class presentation for friends and family.

**ActingWorks**
ActingWorks is a two-week intensive day program that takes place during the summer and is also offered as a five-day March break camp. This program offers a process-based approach to acting and performance while building social and life skills. Training within this program includes: audition and résumé preparation, as well as skill development in physical theatre and text-based acting. Those enrolled in the program will have the opportunity to engage with a number of industry professionals including actors, directors, as well as a local casting agency representative. Participants will also be photographed for their own acting headshot.

**SocialWorks**
The SocialWorks program is viewed as a combination of RhythmWorks and ExpressionWorks. Currently only offered in Mississauga, this program invites participates to release excess energy by engaging in physical dance routines as well as discussions and activities pertaining to independent living skills and leadership training. Some of the topics explored in this program include: stress management, friendship and social skills, hygiene, personal safety, and healthy
eating. This program culminates in a short year-end presentation in which participants can demonstrate their newly learned or developed skills for friends and family.

**MultiArtWorks**
The MultiArtWorks program explores drama, dance, and visual arts practice while creatively incorporating topics relating to social and life skills including: conversation and active listening skills, personal safety, effective decision making and being a self advocate. The goal of this program is for participants to gain self-confidence and develop body awareness and performance skills as they explore multiple artistic media.

All program information can be found at [www.dramaway.com](http://www.dramaway.com).
Appendix B: Performer Interview Questions

The UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board approved the following interview questions. These questions were included as part of the invitation to participate so that prospective interviewees could review in advance.

1. How did you find out about DramaWay?
2. How long have you been coming to DramaWay?
3. What DramaWay programs are you involved with?
4. What are your goals as a performer?
5. What have you learned since coming to DramaWay?
6. What is your favourite thing about DramaWay?
7. What does DramaWay mean to you?
8. If you could change anything about DramaWay, what would you change and why?
9. What 3 words would you use to describe yourself before coming to DramaWay?
10. What 3 words would you use to describe yourself now? They can be the same or different.