

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Body Behind the Curtain: Performing Disability in Zemlinsky's *Der Zwerg*

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Abstract

Like many modernist engagements with the theme of outsider identity, Alexander Zemlinsky's 1921 opera *Der Zwerg* (The Dwarf) finds its dramatic nexus in the disabled body. In opera, such bodies are not only (historically) texted but also (presently) performed, with modern stagings offering a form of mediation between the historical and contemporary. With reference to two productions of *Der Zwerg*, this article unpicks aspects of the representation and performance of disability on the operatic stage. I first explore disability's simultaneous exaggeration and disappearance as a result of the problematic practice of 'disability mimicry'. The effects of this practice and its proximity to issues of authenticity and embodiment are only made more tangible in the context of live performance, where attempts to embody disability's physicality are often sensationalised and unconvincing at best. However, disability can be, and is, represented in myriad ways. While disability mimicry can engender modes of perceiving disability from a voyeuristic perspective, these productions in fact make use of processes of 'enfreakment' to present disability through modes of theatrical production and aesthetic choice. This raises pertinent questions about why and by what means the disabled body is mobilised (or not) on the operatic stage, highlighting, moreover, disability's tendency to indicate meaning in registers beyond the body.

Keywords: Opera Studies; Disability Studies; Performance Theory

The story is now well-versed. Alexander Zemlinsky approached fellow Austrian composer Franz Schreker in 1911 with an invitation to collaborate: 'Write about the tragedy of the ugly man.'¹ The libretto produced by Schreker would become that of his own opera, *Die Gezeichneten* (The Marked Ones), which premiered in Frankfurt in 1918. This was also the year in which Zemlinsky's 'tragedy of the ugly man' would begin to take shape, when the librettist Georg Klaren used Oscar Wilde's fairy tale 'The Birthday of the Infanta' (1891) as the basis for a libretto. By the time the resultant opera, *Der Zwerg* (The Dwarf), premiered at Cologne's Stadttheater in 1922, Wilde's fairy tale had already served as creative stimulus for several musical works, including the ballets of Schreker (1908), Bernhard Sekles (1913), Miklós Radnai (1918) and John Alden Carpenter (1919). Klaren's adaptation for Zemlinsky tells the story of a nameless dwarf who is given to the Spanish princess (the Infanta Donna Clara) at her birthday celebrations. The Dwarf is unaware of his abnormal appearance and envisages himself as a brave knight. He falls for the Infanta and sings her a love song, only to be mocked by the Spanish court

¹ Franz Schreker, 'Über die Entstehung meiner Opernbücher', *Das Feuer* 1/3 (1919), 109–10; quoted and trans. in Christopher Hailey, *Franz Schreker, 1878–1934: A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, UK, 1993), 65.

and toyed with by the princess, who gives him a white rose in an act of feigned reciprocation. The Dwarf's illusion is shattered when he sees himself in a mirror for the first time and, upon discovering his ugliness, he dies of a broken heart.

Disability was a striking and prominent theme at the time in which *Der Zwerg* was composed and, like many modernist engagements with the theme of outsider identity, the opera finds its dramatic nexus in the disabled body. Depictions of such bodies can offer valuable insights into the role of disability (and the works of art, music and literature in which it is depicted) within broader cultural history. However, in an art form such as opera, these bodies are not only historically texted but also presently performed, and contemporary productions can shed light on often overlooked issues surrounding the politics and practice of (re)interpreting physical disability and historical ideology on opera stages today. This paper considers how two modern stagings of Zemlinsky's opera offer a form of mediation between the opera's historical context and its contemporary significance. These productions use various representational modes (including physical embodiment, costume and set design, staging, gesture and so on) to visually signify the protagonist's dwarfism and explore the potential meanings of the disabled corporeal form on stage. Having first explored the context in which Zemlinsky's disabled protagonist was conceived of and created, I will then turn to a close reading of these performances, as I illuminate heretofore overlooked issues surrounding the politics and practice of (re)interpreting physical disability and historical ideology on opera stages today.

Disability, degeneracy and prosthesis

David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have coined the term 'narrative prosthesis' in their formative text of the same title to describe the persistent use of disability as 'a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potency, and analytical insight'.² The recurrent aestheticisation of disability in literature, as in other narrative artforms, has generally been a point of critical contention. Metaphorical representations of disability can shore up hegemonic ideals of normality, gloss over the realities of disability as a lived experience or enable the formation and perpetuation of harmful stereotypes. In opera, disability is used as an omen (Claude Debussy's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, 1902), a token of spiritual insight (Richard Strauss's *Die Frau ohne Schatten*, 1919) and a source of comedic confusion (Francesco Cavalli's *Giasone*, 1649). Disabled stock characters such as vengeful villains (Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*, 1851), evil dwarfs (Richard Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, 1869–76), afflicted children (Thea Musgrave's *A Christmas Carol*, 1979), victims of fate (George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, 1935) and redemptive heroes (Schumann's *Genoveva*, 1849) permeate the genre. Of course, there are more and less prevalent types of disability in any given era, and modernist opera saw a shift in representational focus whereby the penchant for depictions of 'madness' up until around 1890 was displaced in favour of more physical (and indeed visible) manifestations of the 'abnormal'. This representational change is symptomatic of the broader fascination with atypical corporeal forms in modernist music, art and literature, which can be attributed, in part, to the insidious late-nineteenth-century discourse of degeneracy.³

² Michael Bérubé, 'Disability and Narrative', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 120/2 (2005), 568–76, at 570; David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor, 2001), 49.

³ For more on the prevalence and function of the disabled body in modernist art and culture, see Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Michigan, 2010) and Michael Davidson, *Invalid Modernism: Disability and the Missing Body of the Aesthetic* (Oxford, 2019). On the intersection of disability and degeneration theory in modernist music, see Joseph N. Straus, *Broken Beauty: Musical Modernism and the Representation of Disability* (New York, 2018).

In the wake of an unprecedented period of scientific progression, the closing years of the nineteenth century were increasingly characterised by an air of cultural pessimism. The notion of degeneration had emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and saturated the cultural zeitgeist with images of physical and social pathology, regression and decay. Ideas about the effects of cultural decay or *Untergang* on the national collective would form the backbone of fascist policy under the Nazi regime. However, while theories of degeneration did act as something of a prelude to the pathologisation of groups including Jews, people of colour and disabled people within Nazi ideology, the concept of degeneracy was an international phenomenon that had gained pan-European and transatlantic popularity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to its wide-reaching and often contradictory contexts and implications. At its core, degeneration theory centred an able-bodied, white male prototype of normality that enabled its exponents to adopt broad constructions of the antithetically degenerate other. As the nineteenth century drew to a close, the language of degeneracy was increasingly used to project otherness onto certain groups amid a growing social preoccupation with dangerous deviations from the norm. Widespread engagement with these attitudes was manifested in the emergence of cultural figures such as the abhuman, the New Woman, the *femme fatale* and the male aesthete in the popular fiction of the time.⁴ Opera, too, with its glut of marginalised identities, was saturated with themes and ideas that had developed alongside the discourse of degeneration.⁵ From orientalism and perverse sexuality to disability and disease, ideas about difference and abnormality are often reflected in close relation to the bodies of operas' others.⁶

With pseudo-scientific theories of socio-cultural sickness gaining traction in the public sphere over the coming decades, disability and disease were increasingly framed as significant threats to domestic 'health' and 'normality'. Disability historian Carol Poore has explored the effects of degeneration theory on social attitudes towards disability in Germany at the time in which *Der Zwerg* was composed, suggesting that 'right-wing discourse of degeneracy combined attacks on disabled people ... Marxists, and Jews as threats to the racial makeup and political stability of the German nation'.⁷ Poore attributes the attempts to remove or conceal disabled people from the public sphere during the Weimar era amid fears for public health and safety to the influence of degeneration theory.⁸ Indeed, many exponents of the theory predicted a gloomy sequence of acquired deviant characteristics as a result of heredity and contagion, thereby altering the general attitude toward bodily difference at this time from one of shame to one of fear. On the other hand, this amalgamation of social and artistic criticisms, fuelled by anxieties about aesthetic difference, led to the emergence of what Tobin Siebers refers to as

⁴ Several scholars have recognised Gothic literature as a particularly pertinent example of popular cultural engagement with theories of degeneration. Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, UK, 1996); Stephan Karschay, *Degeneration, Normativity and the Gothic at the Fin de Siècle* (New York, 2015).

⁵ Jeremy Tambling, 'Daughters of Kundry: *Salome* and *Elektra*', in *Opera and the Culture of Fascism* (Oxford, 1996), 161–85; Nicholas Till, "'An Exotic and Irrational Entertainment": Opera and Our Others; Opera as Other', in *The Cambridge Companion to Opera Studies*, ed. Nicholas Till (Cambridge, UK, 2012), 298–324.

⁶ In opera studies, discussions about atypical bodily forms have generally focused on the (sometimes intersectional) representation of gender, madness and race. Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis, 1991); Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (Lincoln, NB, 1996); Catherine Clément, *Opera, Or The Undoing of Women*, trans. Betsy Wing (London, UK, 1997); Mary Ann Smart, *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera* (Princeton, 2000); Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor, eds., *Blackness in Opera* (Chicago, 2012); Mary Ingraham, Joseph So and Roy Moodley, eds., *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance* (New York, 2015).

⁷ Carol Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture* (Ann Arbor, 2007), 51.

⁸ Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, 51–2.

‘Modern art’s love affair with misshapen and twisted bodies’.⁹ In the midst of this so-called ‘disability aesthetic’, creators drew upon the visual rhetoric of the disabled body to celebrate difference and challenge reactionary discourses that moralised health and beauty.¹⁰ The circulation of such conflicting ideas about disability meant that, whether framed as an exemplar of degenerate society or celebrated as a radical counter to dominant notions of normality, people with disabilities occupied a space in the era’s cultural mindset as a kind of universal other. Moreover, in relation to the wider shifts in cultural thinking at the time in which *Der Zwerg* was composed, disability was rich with interpretative potential, often serving in the narrative arts as a catch-all symbol of social and political otherness.

Zemlinsky’s opera emerged at the beginning of a period in which he would face increasing critical hostility, partly because of the socio-political and economic vicissitudes which led to the translation of degeneration theory from its original biological context into the social sciences and the arts. Poore identifies Weimar Germany, in particular, as a place in which images of disability in popular culture, the labelling of modern art as ‘degenerate’ and the real-world presence of disabled people resulted in ‘clashes’ between social and aesthetic norms.¹¹ This would lead to the development of a reactionary critical climate in which certain artists and artworks were condemned as degenerate. Zemlinsky was one of many cultural figures at this time whose performances were unexpectedly cancelled ‘for reasons of public safety’ and, in the years that followed, his career would be marked by a series of displacements, many of which were imposed in light of his Jewish heritage.¹² Situating the question of disability’s meaning in *Der Zwerg* within this broader narrative of social, political and cultural upheaval, the representation of the opera’s disabled protagonist reflects a wider tendency towards the ‘enfreakment’ of disability by artists and writers as a means through which to represent their own outsider identity. In fact, one early reviewer of *Der Zwerg* noted the extent to which the opera’s narrative appeared to be grounded in reality, suggesting that the idea of ‘a grotesque looking, crippled and deeply emotional person as a deranged toy in the hands of a selfish child’ was ‘designed to be real’.¹³ Of course, the reviewer refers here to Zemlinsky’s failed relationship with Alma Schindler, whom the composer had met and fallen for in 1900. In a journal entry, Schindler refers to Zemlinsky as ‘dreadfully ugly, almost chinless’, and accounts of his ‘ugliness’ appear with some frequency in her diaries.¹⁴ Even after Zemlinsky and Schindler’s relationship had developed into a romantic affair, she imagined their marriage and noted ‘how ridiculous it would look ... he so ugly, so small – me so beautiful, so tall’.¹⁵ She ultimately rejected Zemlinsky in favour of Gustav Mahler, and *Der Zwerg* has long been understood as reflecting the composer’s own insecurities about his physical appearance, which are summarised in his denigrating self-portrait: ‘Short and skinny (low marks: unsatisfactory, B-). Face and nose: impossible; every facial feature: ditto ... Everything else as outlined above. Hence summa summarum: hideous!’¹⁶

⁹ Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 4.

¹⁰ Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 2–3.

¹¹ Poore, *Disability in Twentieth-Century German Culture*, 52.

¹² Marc Moskovitz, *Alexander Zemlinsky: A Lyric Symphony* (Woodbridge, UK, 2010), 281.

¹³ Dr R. St Hoffmann, ‘“Der Zwerg” von Alexander v. Zemlinsky’. Review of *Der Zwerg* held at the Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne. No date or publication name is provided (my translation).

¹⁴ Alma Mahler-Werfel, *Alma Mahler-Werfel: Diaries 1898–1902*, trans. Antony Beaumont (London, 1998), 253.

¹⁵ Alma Mahler-Werfel, quoted and trans. in K.M. Knittel, *Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna* (London, 2010), 40.

¹⁶ Alexander Zemlinsky, unpublished letter to Alma Mahler-Werfel, quoted and trans. in Antony Beaumont, *Zemlinsky* (Ithaca, NY, 2000), 27.

The opera's librettist, too, stressed that the Dwarf's physical appearance 'should be interpreted in a wider context' and, for Zemlinsky, the protagonist's outsider status perhaps served the additional purpose of echoing the stigmatisation he faced in light of his physical appearance, his place on the periphery of Viennese musical society and his marginalisation because of his Jewish heritage.¹⁷ Like many depictions of disability in the arts, then, the representation of disability in *Der Zwerg* reveals and underwrites the cultural moment in which it was created. As the result of a process of narrative prosthesis, the Dwarf's disability serves as a projection of the composer's outsider identity and as a metaphor for the anxieties about otherness that pervaded the cultural landscape in which the opera was conceived. However, representations of disability do not exist in a historical vacuum: they are constantly transformed and updated for the contemporary stage. Here, disability takes on new meanings in light of dramaturgical interpretation, and often, problematic modes of disability representation predominate.

Disability mimicry: exhibition and erasure

March 2017 saw the opening of a unique double bill at the Teatro Nacional de São Carlos (TNSC) in Lisbon, where Zemlinsky's opera was staged alongside Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci* (1892). The same month also saw the premiere of a new production of *Der Zwerg* the opera at Oper Graz, where it formed the first half of a double bill with Luigi Dallapiccola's 1949 opera *Il prigioniero* (*The Prisoner*). In both productions, the title character was played by a non-disabled performer, with both companies making use of a practice that I refer to as 'disability mimicry' (whereby a performer mimics the physical attributes or qualities of a disability).¹⁸ In a special edition of the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* on disability and theatre, Carrie Sandahl and Ann M. Fox pose an important question: 'Who gets to play disabled and to what end?'¹⁹ Disability scholars and activists alike have long deliberated upon this issue, often highlighting the inherent problems associated with attempts to 'perform' disability such as those seen on stage in Lisbon and Graz. In 2020, Sia's film *Music* came under public scrutiny for using both disability mimicry and blackface in its portrayal of the eponymous protagonist, leading the broadcaster, performer and disability rights activist Mik Scarlett to write that 'Any portrayal is as much about casting as it is story'.²⁰ The backlash against Sia's film is representative of the way in which disability mimicry has been brought to light in mainstream publications in the last decade, particularly in reference to non-disabled actors playing disabled roles in Hollywood films.

In a 2001 interview, the American playwright and disability activist Cheryl Marie Wade reflected on the practice, suggesting that 'To some extent, that's like a white guy putting on blackface. It's just as offensive.'²¹ Frances Ryan's article for *The Guardian* – 'We wouldn't accept actors blacking up, so why applaud "cripping up"?' – is one of many that emerged in newspapers, magazines, and blogs to challenge the practice of disability mimicry

¹⁷ Georg Klaren, 'Der Zwerg und was er bedeutet', quoted in Beaumont, *Zemlinsky*, 301.

¹⁸ The casting of non-disabled performers to play disabled roles and the associated simulation of the disabled body is defined variously as 'Disability Drag', 'cripping up', 'cripface', and 'Disappropriation', but I use the term 'disability mimicry'.

¹⁹ Ann M. Fox and Carrie Sandahl, 'Beyond "Crippling Up": An Introduction', *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 12/2 (2018), 121–7, at 123.

²⁰ Mik Scarlett, quoted in 'New film by Sia sparks "cripping up" backlash', *Disability Rights UK* (27 November 2020), disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/november/new-film-sia-sparks-cripping-up-backlash (accessed 16 July 2021).

²¹ Cheryl Marie Wade, quoted in Katherine Tolan, 'We Are Not a Metaphor', in *American Theatre* (1 April 2001), www.americantheatre.org/2001/04/01/we-are-not-a-metaphor/ (accessed 16 July 2021).

following Eddie Redmayne's appearance as Stephen Hawking in *The Theory of Everything* (2014).²² These pieces are characteristic of the increasingly drawn comparison between disability mimicry and blackface within the mainstream media.²³ Both disability mimicry and blackface have been long-standing issues in opera production, with the latter perhaps receiving more critical focus than the former, both in scholarship and the mainstream media.²⁴ However, comparing cultural representations of minority identities, as well as the use of the terms 'cripping up' and 'crip face', run the risk of oversimplifying the lived experiences of both black and disabled people.²⁵ For Tobin Siebers, one of the key disadvantages of this disability mimicry (which he terms 'disability drag') is that 'disability appears as a facade overlaying able-bodiedness'.²⁶ In essence, he refers here to the fact that the presence of non-disabled performers in disabled roles highlights their able-bodiedness and therefore contributes to the erasure of authentic disability. Siebers draws a comparison between disability mimicry and both blackface minstrelsy and cisgender and straight actors playing LGBTQ characters, suggesting that casting performers without subjective experience of these groups not only expunges that group's identity from the public view, but also 'transforms its reality and its fundamental characteristics'.²⁷ His approach runs the risk of amalgamating frequently marginalised communities into one category of otherness, but he does make an interesting point regarding disability. He argues that this kind of 'inauthentic' casting represents performers' 'able-bodiedness as much as their pretence of disability', thus 'insinuating ability into [disability's] reality and representation'.²⁸ The use of disability mimicry in both productions of *Der Zwerg* serves as an effective illustration of this erasure of disability.

Many texts discussing the notion of disability mimicry refer to film and television, yet issues surrounding this kind of embodied representation are somewhat complicated by

²² Frances Ryan, 'We wouldn't accept actors blacking up, so why applaud "cripping up"?', *The Guardian* (13 January 2015), [theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/13/eddie-redmayne-golden-globe-stephen-hawking-disabled-actors-characters](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jan/13/eddie-redmayne-golden-globe-stephen-hawking-disabled-actors-characters) (accessed 16 July 2021). Also, Rob Crossan, 'Eddie Redmayne's awards are not good news for disabled people', *The Telegraph* (11 February 2015), [telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/11400980/Eddie-Redmaynes-awards-are-not-good-news-for-disabled-people.html](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/11400980/Eddie-Redmaynes-awards-are-not-good-news-for-disabled-people.html) (accessed 16 July 2021); S.E. Smith, 'Here We Go Again: Oscar Season and Disability Porn', in *Disability Intersections* (16 February 2015).

²³ Max Stephens, "'Crippling up" is just as unacceptable as blackface, says Sally Phillips', *The Telegraph* (30 August 2020), [telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/30/cripping-just-unacceptable-blackface-says-sally-phillips/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/08/30/cripping-just-unacceptable-blackface-says-sally-phillips/) (accessed 16 July 2021); Michelle Cuneo, 'Crippling up is the new black face', *ArtsHub* (08 May 2015), [artshub.co.uk/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/performing-arts/michelle-cuneo/cripping-up-is-the-new-black-face-247975](https://www.artshub.co.uk/news-article/opinions-and-analysis/performing-arts/michelle-cuneo/cripping-up-is-the-new-black-face-247975) (accessed 16 July 2021); and Kaite O'Reilly, "'Crippling up is the twenty first century answer to blacking up": Peeling and The "d" Monologues' (8 November 2011), kaiteoreilly.wordpress.com/2011/11/08/cripping-up-is-the-twenty-first-century-answer-to-blackening-up-peeling-and-the-d-monologues/ (accessed 16 July 2021).

²⁴ Robin Elliot, 'Blacks and Blackface at the Opera', in *Opera in a Multicultural World: Coloniality, Culture, Performance*, eds. Mary Ingraham, Joseph So, and Roy Moodley (New York, 2016), 34–49; Jonathan O. Wipplinger, 'Performing Race in Ernst Krenek's *Jonny Spielt Auf*', in *Blackness in Opera*, eds. Naomi Andre, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor (Chicago, 2012), 236–59.

²⁵ Dominick Evans, 'Please Stop Comparing Crippling Up to Blackface', *Dominickevans.com* (18 July 2017), [dominickevans.com/2017/07/please-stop-comparing-cripping-up-to-blackface/](https://www.dominickevans.com/2017/07/please-stop-comparing-cripping-up-to-blackface/) (accessed 16 July 2021). Sean Murray and Daniella Santoro unpick the historical intersection of blackness and disability in the United States, with the former stating that 'Historically, cultural representations of African Americans were deeply intertwined with disability, routinely conflating race and disability as stigmatizing bodily conditions.' Daniella Santoro, 'The Dancing Ground: Embodied Knowledge, Health and Visibility in New Orleans Second Lines', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, eds. Blake Howe, Stephanie Jensen-Moulton, Neil Lerner and Joseph Straus (Oxford, 2016), 313–4; Sean Murray, "'That Weird and Wonderful Posture": Jump "Jim Crow" and the Performance of Disability', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Disability Studies*, 357–70.

²⁶ Tobin Siebers, 'Disability as Masquerade', *Literature and Medicine* 23/1 (2004), 1–22, at 18.

²⁷ Siebers, 'Disability as Masquerade', 18.

²⁸ Siebers, 'Disability as Masquerade', 18.

live performance. Linda and Michael Hutcheon suggest that literature on opera and the body has typically focused specifically on the voice, but they stress that ‘Opera is not only texted; it is staged, and therefore the body is not only verbally represented, it is literally and physically embodied’.²⁹ Theatre and performance studies scholars have explored the myriad of metaphorical meanings which the body in performance is able to represent, and often, these meanings are compounded when the object of representation is the disabled body. At the TNSC in Lisbon, Peter Bronder (the Dwarf) shuffles onto the stage wearing his shoes on his knees in an attempt to imitate short stature. This almost pantomimic technique does not seem to raise concerns for either company: in Graz, Aleš Briscein enters by walking on his knees and, though he returns to his feet in several later scenes, other characters then enter the stage on stilts in a questionable effort to maintain the illusion of dwarfism. Towards the end of the performance, following the protagonist’s discovery of his appearance in the final scene, Briscein also seems to adopt a limp. Although the Dwarf is described as limping in the opera’s libretto, this alteration of his gait only in the final moments of the production comes across as careless, even cartoonish. Both productions in the Graz double bill – *Der Zwerg* and *Il prigioniero* – also feature non-singing figures whose presence underscores the works’ shared themes. In *Der Zwerg*, a shackled man (representing Dallapiccola’s prisoner) frequently appears alongside the Dwarf, and apart from a few moments in which he is struck, pushed or otherwise treated with contempt by Don Estoban, he appears invisible to the remainder of the cast. In *Il prigioniero*, the protagonist is shadowed by a silent figure representing Zemlinsky’s Dwarf, whose only action on stage is the ringing of a golden bell. This role is played by an actor with dwarfism, and so, while his presence in *Il prigioniero* is presumably intended to create dramatic unity between the two halves of the double bill, is his absence in *Der Zwerg* (and the preference, instead, for Briscein’s disability mimicry) a quite literal example of the erasure of disability from the production?

Often, the erasure of disability in performance is complicated by its simultaneous exhibition or amplification, by which it becomes a spectacle to be consumed by the audience. This can also be understood as a form of ‘enfreakment’ in that it offers a stylised presentation of physical difference for the benefit of a ‘normal’ audience.³⁰ The process of enfreakment is problematised in light of disability mimicry because the disability presented to the audience is performed as opposed to real. Siebers refers to disability mimicry as ‘a variety of the masquerade ... providing an exaggerated exhibition of people with disabilities but questioning both the existence and permanence of disability’.³¹ The sense of exhibition described by the author is perhaps more palpable where disability is represented on stage, particularly when it is depicted by non-disabled performers. This is an example of what Sandahl refers to as a ‘representational conundrum’ – a term she uses to describe ‘challenging, puzzling, or paradoxical issues that are unique to or complicated by disability’s presence’ on stage.³² In Graz, both Briscein’s attempt to signify short stature by walking on his knees and his adoption of a limp at the end of the production paints a sensationalised picture of physical difference, while the appearance of Don Estoban on stilts only exacerbates the sense of caricature and offers disability as a spectacle to be consumed by the audience. This performance of disability is therefore very much in keeping with typical modes of enfreakment, yet the conundrum presents itself in the fact that,

²⁹ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, ‘Embodied Representation in Staged Opera’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and the Body*, eds. Youn Kim and Sander Gilman (Oxford, 2018), no page, oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190636234.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780190636234-e-11 (accessed 16 July 2021).

³⁰ David Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (New York, 1992), 53–74

³¹ Siebers, ‘Disability as Masquerade,’ 18.

³² Carrie Sandahl, ‘Using Our Words: Exploring Representational Conundrums in Disability Drama and Performance’, *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 12/2 (2018), 129–44, at 130.

while this hyperbolic performance draws the gaze of the audience, it does so while concealing disability from the public view, because the disability presented is not real.

When disability is represented on stage, the immediacy of the live body also enables the erasure of disability *after* the performance. Following the enactment of disability on stage, the curtain call provides the opportunity for non-disabled performers to return to and even assert their able-bodied identity to the audience. This is the case in Lisbon and Graz, where disability is suggested by the alteration of the performers' bodily demeanour and gait, but the curtain calls consequently enable the transformation of Briscein and Bronder back into their real-world able-bodiedness at the end of the performance. The conditions for this process are also met when disability mimicry relies on the use of props, as in David McVicar's 2001 production of *Rigoletto* at the Royal Opera House.³³ Here, the protagonist's deformity is depicted by the alteration of the performer's gait and bodily demeanour to suggest a hunched back and by the sustained use of crutches. Petra Kupperts writes about crutches, wheelchairs, white sticks and other disability aids as 'signholders of disability that can be and are referenced by nondisabled people when they "act" disabled'.³⁴ When considering the performance of disability and the associated capacity of non-disabled performers to cast aside the corporeal or material properties of impairment following performance, the lack of such 'signholders' during the curtain call (as in the aforementioned production of *Rigoletto*) can emphasise the absence of authentic disability. This erasure, Siebers suggests, can reassure the audience 'that the threat of disability is not real, that everything was only pretend'.³⁵

The sense of transience surrounding disability's representation on stage echoes its depiction as feigned or fleeting in many opera narratives, where often, disability's presence indicates disorder and chaos, while its subsequent elimination (typically by way of death or cure) coincides with the restoration of order and normality.³⁶ Disability mimicry can undermine perceptions of disability as real and/or permanent, with a performers' use of disability aids, altered bodily demeanour and transformation into able-bodiedness (facilitated by the curtain) emphasising the transitory nature of disability in performance. In her prominent work on the ontology of live performance, Peggy Phelan writes that 'performance's only life is in the present'.³⁷ Her emphasis on the relationship between theatre and time is significant. Arguing that performance 'cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations', she suggests that the value of performance lies precisely in its visibility and subsequent disappearance.³⁸ This understanding of performance in terms of ephemerality and disappearance is problematic in the context of disability mimicry because it points to the boundaries of the stage as a means through which to contain disability within the present of the performance. In this sense, disability can only ever be temporary when presented on stage, particularly when the disabled body is in some way simulated.

³³ This production was most recently revived in the 2017/18 season, with Dmitri Platanias in the title role.

³⁴ Petra Kupperts, 'The Wheelchair's Rhetoric: The Performance of Disability', *Drama Review* 51/4 (2007), 80–88, at 80.

³⁵ Siebers, 'Disability as Masquerade,' 18.

³⁶ This is often the case with sensory impairments and vocal disfluency. For example, in Fromental Halévy's *L'éclair* (1835), Lyonel is struck by lightning and becomes blind before regaining his sight at the end of the opera, and in Carl Maria von Weber's *Silvana* (1810), the mute protagonist regains her voice over the course of the opera's narrative. The loss and restoration of sanity comprise another common narrative device and can be found in comic settings (as in Meyerbeer's *Dinorah* [1859]) and in *opera seria* (Vivaldi's *Orlando* [1727]). Blake Howe and Charlotte Armstrong, eds., *Musical Representations of Disability*, lsu.edu/faculty/bhowe/disability-representation.html (accessed 16 July 2021).

³⁷ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York, 1993), 146.

³⁸ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 146–8.

The curtain call provides a literal barrier between what is performed and what is real, reinforcing the erasure of disability from the sphere of performance. But what of productions in which the disability mimicry continues into the curtain call?

In a 2017 production of Franz Schreker's *Die Gezeichneten* at the Bayerische Staatsoper, John Daszak was cast in the role of the disfigured protagonist, Alviano. Complete with facial prosthetics occasionally covered with a burlap sack, Daszak's costume is a nod to John Hurt as Joseph Merrick in David Lynch's *Elephant Man* (1980). Despite his designations as 'a cripple' and 'a monster', Alviano is presented – in Schreker's original libretto and in this production – as being largely able-bodied, in that the descriptions of his impairment more frequently refer to aesthetic qualities as opposed to physical pain and difficulties with mobility. Daszak's performance of disability draws upon these descriptions of Alviano as 'an ugly man', with his facial prosthetics giving the impression of a visually striking, but not debilitating facial disfigurement. While the decision not to mimic the bodily demeanour associated with certain disabilities is reassuring, his costuming still constitutes an example of disability mimicry and, what is more, his facial prosthetics remain intact during both his post-intermission monologue as Schreker and the curtain call. As Phelan has written:

In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of 'presence.' But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else – dance, movement, sound, character, 'art'.³⁹

Phelan's belief that performers become ensconced by that which they seek to represent would suggest that the identity of the physically disabled Alviano in this production displaces that of the performer. Yet I would argue that in instances of disability mimicry, the truth of a performer's authentic body never fully disappears. This position is supported by Siebers as he expands upon his masquerade metaphor:

When actors play disabled in one film and able-bodied in the next, the evolution of the roles presents them as cured of a previous disease or condition. The audience also knows that an actor will return to an able-bodied state as soon as the film ends.⁴⁰

The author refers specifically to film here, but once again, live theatre and opera serve as a more pertinent example of the inherent ephemerality of disability mimicry. For those with a knowledge of Daszak and his work, for example, or anyone who had looked at the singer's photograph in the programme booklet, the suggestion of his facial disfigurement (and disability more broadly) can remain only a temporary illusion.

Dramatising recognition: playing with the feedback loop

These notions of spectacle, disappearance and authenticity are not exclusive to the physical embodiment of disability by a performer: productions can use broader aspects of *mise en scène* (including costume and set design, staging, gesture and so on) to signify disability and explore its figurative potential through modes of aesthetic choice. In Lisbon, the process of exhibition and erasure described by Siebers is integrated into the sphere of the performance, as the dramatisation of the Dwarf's discovery of his disability makes a spectacle of the disabled body. José Capela's set design for the double bill – in this case, *Der Zwerg* and *Pagliacci* – draws upon the theatrical omnipresence of curtains.

³⁹ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 150.

⁴⁰ Siebers, 'Disability as Masquerade', 18.

The backdrop for *Pagliacci* is a photograph of São Carlos's pink and gold velvet curtain printed onto a large sheet of PVC. In *Der Zwerg*, the site-specific image of the theatre's curtain plays a more substantial role: the backdrop is similar, but this time it is printed on a large sheet of lightweight fabric (due to its additional role as a covering for the large mirror that was to be revealed in the final scene). An identical velvet curtain that had formerly been in use at the theatre serves as a tablecloth in the opening scene, then as a covering for the steps formed by the removable structure later in the production. Throughout *Der Zwerg*, the layers of curtains are successively removed in conjunction with the increasing disintegration of the protagonist's naivety until the falling of the final curtain reveals a large mirror, itself bringing about the protagonist's ultimate confrontation with reality. The size and shape of the mirror itself bear certain similarities to that of a model theatre that was used in the production of *Pagliacci* (producing a sense of consistency between the two performances), and its placement also facilitates the reflection of the theatre's interior. Referring to theatre's immediacy, Guillermo Gómez-Peña writes:

Performance is a disnarrative and symbolic chronicle of the 'now' and the 'here'. Performance is not about presence, not representation; it is not (as classical theories of theatre would suggest) a mirror, but the actual moment in which the mirror is shattered.⁴¹

In Lisbon, the final revelation of the mirror can be understood as a literal example of Gómez-Peña's mirror metaphor. The visual exposure of the theatre inevitably comprises a reflection of the audience therein, and the associated removal of the fourth wall constitutes the erasure of the disability on stage. In keeping with Phelan's comments on the temporary nature of performance, the punctuation of the 'here and now' in this moment serves as a reminder of disability's containment within the world of the drama. However, the symbiosis between the props, the set and the theatre itself comes to full fruition with the revelation of the mirror, thereby lending extra symbolic weight to the themes of deception and reality that sit at the heart of both *Pagliacci* and *Der Zwerg*.

Arnold Aronson has established a framework for analysing set design from a Foucauldian perspective, based on the philosopher's reading of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*.⁴² The particular attention Aronson pays to the mirror depicted in the painting draws upon pertinent ideas regarding the use of reflective surfaces on the theatrical stage. He posits that when the mirror on stage is angled so as to reflect the audience, 'the spectator is in some way incorporated into the context of the performance'.⁴³ The use of the mirror at São Carlos reframes the audience's role as one in which they became part of the performance: its revelation bringing the audience into direct contact with the production's scenographic materials. By association, the objects and actions of the drama are no longer representative of a fictional world. Rather, the scenography reflects the audience's own subjectivity. Instead of creating distance between the audience and the disability in the opera's narrative, the former's reflection brings them into contact with the weighty themes of the opera. The visual symmetry generated by the reflection of the house at São Carlos serves as an allegory not only for the mirror itself, but also for the shared experience of the Dwarf and the spectator, since, like the protagonist, what is revealed to them in this moment has been there all along. Indeed, unlike the Dwarf in Oscar Wilde's original fairy tale, Zemlinsky's protagonist is no stranger to his reflection,

⁴¹ Guillermo Gómez-Peña, *Dangerous Border Crossers: The Artist Talks Back* (London, 2000), 9.

⁴² Arnold Aronson, 'Looking into the Abyss,' in *Looking Into the Abyss: Essays on Scenography* (Ann Arbor, 2005), 97–116.

⁴³ Aronson, 'Looking into the Abyss', 99.

which he describes as ‘the evil one’, who ‘follows me around, but is only a lifeless spirit, a creature of my dreams’.⁴⁴ The Dwarf has only seen the spectre of his reflection ‘in clouded glasses and smooth marble, or insidiously hiding under water’.⁴⁵ Lee writes that in such moments, the Dwarf ‘simply has not recognized [his reflection] for what it is: a “true” image of himself – ‘the recognition remains ... a partial one’.⁴⁶ The São Carlos production dramatises this reading of the work through the gradual unveiling of the stage in conjunction with the progression of the Dwarf’s recognition from unconscious partiality to ruinous actuality – the audience’s implied meta-theatrical participation allowing them to share in the Dwarf’s journey of discovery and eventual recognition.

In *The Semiotics of Theatre* (1983), Fischer-Lichte observes the co-presence between performers and spectators in her attempt to define the very nature of theatre, arguing that ‘the minimum pre-conditions for theatre to be theatre are that person A represents X while S looks on’.⁴⁷ In *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, the author further stresses ‘the bodily co-presence’ between performers and spectators to examine the concept of performance and to propose ‘an aesthetics of the performative’.⁴⁸ Fischer-Lichte explores the idea that ‘performances are generated and determined by an ever-changing feedback loop’ which is governed by the performative cycle of action and reaction that forges a connection between the stage and the auditorium and, by association, between the performer and the spectator.⁴⁹ With the emergence of Wagnerian theatre towards the end of the nineteenth century, the feedback loop between the actions of a performer and the reaction of an audience was disrupted, only to re-emerge with the advent of director’s theatre in the twentieth century.⁵⁰ As a result of the performative turn of the 1960s, which saw with increasing frequency ‘the transformation from a work of art into an event’, the feedback loop became ‘an autopoietic, self-referential’ system.⁵¹ According to Fischer-Lichte, today’s performances enable the exploration of and experimentation with the interaction between performers and spectators, and the job of directors is to develop ‘relevant staging strategies which can establish appropriate conditions for this experiment’.⁵² The author notes the inherent difficulties in ascertaining performative experiments with the feedback loop, as opposed to performances which simply ‘play with its diverse variables and parameters’.⁵³ However, she offers three factors by which a production’s experimentation with or deliberate engagement with the feedback loop can be determined: ‘the role reversal of actors and spectators’, ‘the creation of a community between them’ and ‘the creation of various modes of mutual, physical contact that helps explore the interplay between proximity and distance, public and private, or visual and tactile contact’.⁵⁴

The use of scenography in the TNSC production of *Der Zwerg* highlights the extent to which aspects of production design can create an environment in which the audience is brought into contact with the fictive world of the drama, thereby negating its role as

⁴⁴ Georg Klaren, *Der Zwerg* (libretto), trans. Roger Clement, liner notes for *Der Zwerg*, Frankfurter Kantorei, Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, conducted by James Conlon (EMI Classics, 1996), compact disk, 28.

⁴⁵ Klaren, *Der Zwerg* (libretto), 28.

⁴⁶ Sherry D. Lee, ‘The Other in the Mirror, Or, Recognizing the Self: Wilde’s and Zemlinsky’s Dwarf’, *Music and Letters* 91/2 (2010), 198–223, at 207.

⁴⁷ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theatre*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris L. Jones (Bloomington, 1992), 7.

⁴⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (Abingdon, UK, 2008), 23.

⁴⁹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 37–74 (38).

⁵⁰ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 38–40.

⁵¹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 23, 29.

⁵² Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 40.

⁵³ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 40.

⁵⁴ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 40–1, author’s emphasis.

passive observer. The Dwarf's realisation of his physique alongside the spectators' recognition of themselves in the mirror image is a role reversal of sorts, while the co-presence of the two in this moment establishes a community between performer and spectator and also constitutes a form of visual contact. In this sense, this part of the production can be understood as both a literal representation of Fischer-Lichte's feedback loop and a form of experimentation with its effects and outcomes. Nevertheless, in conjunction with a reading of Zemlinsky's opera as a critique of society's preoccupation with aesthetic norms, the mirror image in the TNSC production may not, in fact, incorporate the audience as participants in the theatrical anagnorisis of the narrative. By coming into contact with the production's *mise en scène* in this moment, the audience certainly becomes part of the opera's narrative arc. However, rather than partaking in the vital moment of recognition alongside the Dwarf, the audience's role becomes more closely aligned with that of the Spanish court. Indeed, a further case can be made for the audience's symbolic participation in the ill-treatment of the Dwarf by the Infanta and her entourage. Certain issues surrounding the attitudes towards social and political in the original setting of Wilde's fairy tale, as well as in Zemlinsky's Europe, remain equally pertinent today. If the audience is, in fact, confronted with a reflection of society's treatment of difference, there might be some value in pondering the question posed by Aronson: 'what happens when, more than three centuries later, we find ourselves implicated in the Spanish court?'⁵⁵

Bodily authenticity

In the prologue to *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre*, Erika Fischer-Lichte draws upon Johann Jakob Engel's theories of mimic art – an acting technique whereby an audience's fears that the performer may be in any real danger are dispelled – to make a distinction between the semiotic and the phenomenal body.⁵⁶ The phenomenal body, Fischer-Lichte explains, is the performer's real-world body, with the semiotic body conveying the fictional reality of the character.⁵⁷ The author's focus is on the performance of violence, yet her theoretical framework is largely applicable to onstage representations of disability, the notion of distinct semiotic and phenomenal bodies providing a useful perspective from which to approach complex questions about bodily authenticity and disability mimicry.

In terms of a spectator's impression of what is real and what is an illusion on stage, Fischer-Lichte writes that 'it is the semiotic body which brings forth the expression of suffering, while the phenomenal body does not actually suffer'.⁵⁸ In the context of performing disability, the semiotic body is the illusion of disability that is presented to the audience, where the phenomenal body is the (often non-disabled) body of the performer. In the Oper Graz and TNSC productions of *Der Zwerg*, the boundaries between the phenomenal and semiotic bodies of both Briscein and Bronder (as the Dwarf) are clearly delineated, most notably due to the temporary and largely unconvincing nature of their attempts to mimic the physical attributes of dwarfism. Fischer-Lichte's focus, however, is on performances in which such boundaries are blurred. The author uses Max Reinhardt's 1903 production of *Elektra* as the basis of her discussion. This production, in which Gertrud Eysoldt (*Elektra*) performed acts of violence on her own body, is cited as a defining example of the way in which boundaries between the semiotic and phenomenal bodies of actors were becoming increasingly distorted in turn-of-the-century

⁵⁵ Aronson, 'Looking into the Abyss', 100.

⁵⁶ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual: Exploring Forms of Political Theatre* (Oxford, 2005), 1–15.

⁵⁷ Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 4.

⁵⁸ Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 4.

theatre, resulting in a direct impact on the ‘senses and the nerves of the spectators’.⁵⁹ In the aforementioned production of *Die Gezeichneten* in Munich, the lines of demarcation between Daszak’s semiotic and phenomenal bodies are less clear due to the fact that his facial prosthetics (the signifier of his disability) remained intact throughout the performance and into the curtain call. As in Graz and Lisbon, however, the able-bodiedness of the lead performer arguably preserves the separation between the semiotic and phenomenal body: any awareness of Daszak’s able-bodiedness by the audience would provide a clear indication of the fact that the body presented on stage was semiotic. This begs the question, would liminality between the phenomenal and semiotic body be achieved if disabled performers were cast in roles such as that of Alviano and the Dwarf? If so, would the representation of disability be more convincing and less problematic?

Fischer-Lichte provides a partial answer to these questions in her continued discussion of the body in performance in *The Transformative Power of Performance*. The author refers here to a production of *Giulio Cesare* at the Hebbel Theatre Berlin in 1998, the cast of which included ‘a very frail and infirm old man’, a man who had recently undergone surgery on his larynx, an obese man and two women with anorexia.⁶⁰ The author understands that

The actors’ and actresses’ individual physicality had such an immediate and disturbing impact on the spectators that they were unable to establish any relationship to the dramatic characters the performers supposedly represented ... the actors were not perceived as signs for a particular character but solely in terms of their specific materiality.⁶¹

The audience’s reaction is emblematic of the way in which, as Koppers argues, ‘when disabled people perform, they are often not primarily seen as performers, but as disabled people. The disabled body is naturally about disability.’⁶² In provoking a severe, visceral reaction from their respective audiences, both the *Giulio Cesare* cast and Gertrud Eysoldt failed to make their semiotic bodies discernible. For the latter, this was achieved through self-inflicted violence. For the former, it was a result of the mere presence of anomalous bodies. Fischer-Lichte explains that, ‘by bringing forth their specific and individual corporeality, the artists perform processes that embody their bodies’ vulnerability, their exposure to violence, their aliveness, and the resulting dangers and risks’.⁶³ Regarding the onstage presence of the disabled body, Stacy Wolf similarly suggests that ‘a visibly disabled performer’s body forces spectators ... to confront their own feelings and knowledges about disability and to see disability’s meaning and significance as socially and culturally constructed’.⁶⁴

There may be some correlation, then, between a clearly discernible separation between the semiotic and phenomenal body on stage and the process of disability mimicry. When able-bodied actors appear for the curtain call with no remnants of the disabled identity they have been performing, the audience is released from their engagement with the experience of disability. Siebers’ masquerade metaphor offers an effective summary: the reality of disability dissipates when an able-bodied performer removes the mask,

⁵⁹ Fischer-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual*, 13.

⁶⁰ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 86.

⁶¹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 86.

⁶² Petra Koppers, ‘Deconstructing Images: Performing Disability’, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11/3–4 (2001), 25–40, at 26.

⁶³ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 90.

⁶⁴ Stacy Wolf, ‘Disability’s Invisibility in Joan Schenkar’s *Signs of Life* and Heather McDonald’s *An Almost Holy Picture*’, in *Bodies in Commotion*, eds. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander (Ann Arbor, 2005), 302–18, at 304.

whereas for disabled performers, ‘the mask, once removed, reveals the reality and depth of disability existing beneath it’.⁶⁵ On the other hand, when performers operate within the liminal space between the semiotic and phenomenal, spectators become ‘conscious of their own perception as emergent and elusive’ and ‘perceiving subjects begin to perceive themselves self-reflexively, thus opening up a further sphere of meaning and influence on the perceptual dynamics’.⁶⁶

Initially, Fischer-Lichte’s discourse on the semiotic and phenomenal bodies of the performer seems to suggest that a blurred boundary between the performer and that which they seek to represent might result in a more convincing portrayal of disability while also facilitating deeper audience engagement with the realities of disability as a lived experience, both in contemporary society and, in the case of *Der Zwerg*, historically. However, as founding disability theorist Rosemarie Garland-Thomson writes, ‘history bears ample witness to [the] profound disquiet stirred in the human soul by bodies that stray from what is typical or predictable’.⁶⁷ Both disability studies and performance studies scholars point to the inability of non-disabled audiences to ‘see beyond’ the extraordinary corporeal form and the associated desire to create distance between such forms and the safety of ‘normality’.⁶⁸ With regard to the aforementioned production of *Giulio Cesare*, Fischer-Lichte argues that the physicality of the performers prevented them from being perceived as characters, with the spectators being overwhelmed by the realities of the anomalous bodily form.⁶⁹ The result was not – as Wolf would suggest – a form of productive engagement with the experience of bodily difference, but rather a reaction in keeping with the enfreakment of physical abnormality as a source of horror and revulsion.⁷⁰ The spectators’ perception of these bodies was by no means ‘devoid of meanings and associations’, but ‘any attempt to interpret the performers’ individual physicality in terms of their characters after the end of the performance must be understood as a way of distancing oneself from the immediate threat that those bodies emanated. It was a way to master and oppress them.’⁷¹

Siebers believes that disability mimicry ‘acts as a lure for the fantasies and fears of able-bodied audiences’, but that the absence of authentic impairment in performance reassures audiences and releases them from any form of interaction with disability.⁷² However, Fischer-Lichte’s discussion of audience reactions to the semiotic/phenomenal body suggests that this distancing of spectators from the reality of physical difference is not exclusive to instances of disability mimicry. Thus, another representational conundrum is revealed. When an audience sees an authentically disabled performer, they fail to connect to the character that the performer seeks to represent: the body’s metonymic status is negated as a result of the enfreakment of disability. Yet, when the process of disability mimicry is used, the audience cannot connect to disability due to the inauthenticity of the disabled body. This double bind is emblematic of the wider and more practical issues surrounding notions of authenticity and disability in performance.

A seemingly logical solution to the various issues surrounding the performance of disability discussed here is authentic casting (casting disabled performers in disabled roles). But while this provides a solution to the many problems associated with disability

⁶⁵ Siebers, ‘Disability as Masquerade’, 18.

⁶⁶ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 149.

⁶⁷ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, “From Wonder to Error: A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity,” from *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, vol. 1: *Demonstrare*, eds. Asa Simon Mittiman and Marcus Hensel (Leeds, 2020), 89–98, at 90.

⁶⁸ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 90; Wolf, ‘Disability’s Invisibility’, 304.

⁶⁹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 90; Wolf, ‘Disability’s Invisibility’, 304.

⁷⁰ Wolf, ‘Disability’s Invisibility’, 304.

⁷¹ Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, 86–7.

⁷² Siebers, ‘Disability as Masquerade,’ 18.

mimicry on the one hand, it also generates a number of associated questions and contradictions on the other.⁷³ For example, Sandahl identifies the existence of a dilemma for disabled performers whereby they must 'battle on two fronts: to be cast in roles that resemble their own identities and to be cast in roles that do not'.⁷⁴ Non-traditional casting provides a partial solution to this problem, as it concerns 'the casting of ethnic, female, or disabled actors in roles where race, gender or physical capability are not necessary to the characters' or play's development'.⁷⁵ For example, rather than being perpetually cast as characters such as Rigoletto or Zemlinsky's Dwarf, disabled singers should be considered for roles often assumed to be able-bodied. The German bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff resisted performing in staged opera productions for many years, writing that it 'seems an unnecessary display of my disability'.⁷⁶ He also notes the frequency with which he was offered the role of Verdi's Rigoletto, thus highlighting some of the complex issues surrounding the representation and the perpetuation of stereotypes with regard to the casting of disabled performers in disabled roles.⁷⁷

For Koppers, 'the performance of disability relies on the understanding that disability is transparent, uni-vocal, easy to see, and wholly reproducible in theatre'.⁷⁸ The author alludes to a kind of oversimplification here, which has its roots in real-world understandings of disability and further manifests itself in the ways in which disability is depicted in cultural productions (in this case, on stage). I would argue that, in turn, the interpretation of disability in theatre and opera further entrenches disability stereotypes, which themselves go on to inform public understandings of disability. As such, the oversimplification or dilution of disability results in a problematic cycle of representation. This representational conundrum is just one of the many that emerge when considering the matter of authentic casting.⁷⁹ In fact, almost all the issues surrounding disability and performance discussed here are labyrinthine: attempting to uncover solutions to the problems of disability in performance often seems to unearth further challenges. But Sandahl warns scholars in the field of disability and performance studies against 'fall[ing] into the trap of all-or-nothing labelling: bad or good, right or wrong, authentic or inauthentic', instead pointing to Socratic questioning as a useful tool for engaging with disability in performance beyond resorting to reductive judgements of productions as authentic (and therefore inclusive) or inauthentic (and therefore ableist).⁸⁰ Here, the author returns to the example of disability stereotypes:

How might a stereotype have value as a narrative device? If a stereotype is a shortcut to meaning, what meaning is implied? How are stereotypes established in different times and places? Might we harness a stereotype's power and instant recognizability to purposeful ends as is done, for example, in parody? If disability always signifies in representation, can we replace negative stereotypes with more positive ones?⁸¹

⁷³ For Sandahl, casting is a prime example of a 'representational conundrum'. Sandahl, 'Exploring Representational Conundrums', 130.

⁷⁴ Carrie Sandahl, 'Why Disability Identity Matters: From Dramaturgy to Casting in John Belluso's Pyretown', *Text and Performance Quarterly* 28/1-2 (2008), 225-41, at 237.

⁷⁵ Angela C. Pao, *No Safe Spaces: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality in American Theater* (Ann Arbor, 2010), 1.

⁷⁶ Thomas Quasthoff, *The Voice: A Memoir*, trans. Kirsten Stoldt Wittenborn (New York, 2008), 128.

⁷⁷ Quasthoff, *The Voice: A Memoir*, 135.

⁷⁸ Koppers, 'Deconstructing Images', 29.

⁷⁹ Sandahl outlines and begins to provide answers to some of the questions raised by this conundrum in 'Exploring Representational Conundrums', 131, 136-7. Further exploration of contemporary casting practices in the opera industry is needed.

⁸⁰ Sandahl, 'Exploring Representational Conundrums', 133.

⁸¹ Sandahl, 'Exploring Representational Conundrums', 133-4.

Sandahl advocates for a move away from challenging the use of stereotypes and towards embracing them as a tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the performance of disability. In light of the inherent problems with both disability mimicry and authentic casting, I would echo Sandahl's proposal that any attempt to critique the performance of disability should be approached on a case-by-case basis. In the context of the conundrums encapsulated by the productions of *Der Zwerg* at TNSC and Opera Graz, we might ask:

How does the performer use their body to signify disability and explore its meanings in the context of this work?

Has their embodied representation of disability served as a critique or celebration of the representation of disability in the work, and if so, how?

In what ways does the performer draw and manipulate the gaze or the audience?

Does the performance demonstrate an awareness of the complexities of disability as an identity in performance?

Further to this somatic focus, I would suggest that equally meaningful avenues of critical exploration can be found by looking *beyond* the body. I have already touched upon the ways in which scenography can be used to signify disability and emphasise its potential meanings in performance, specifically through the TNSC production's use of curtains and mirrors to dramatised the revelation of the Dwarf's disabled body. It follows that costume and gesture can serve as equally expressive instruments in this regard, and if we are to adopt Sandahl's method of Socratic questioning, we might also consider how a production uses its *mise en scène* to signify disability; how the audience might perceive and understand these symbols; and to what extent the depiction of disability through aspects of production design mirror or manipulate the original portrayal and its associated contexts and subtexts.

Out of place and time: costume as a signifier of difference

As in many other narrative art forms, disabled characters are frequently figured alongside aesthetically normative or conventionally beautiful counterparts in the operatic canon, where the representation of disability (to borrow Garland-Thomson's phrase) 'buttresses an embodied version of normative identity'.⁸² This trend towards depicting disabled/non-disabled characters in terms of their aesthetic disproportion is clearly reflected in the bodily juxtaposition of the Infanta and the Dwarf in Zemlinsky's opera. In the first scene, the obsequious description of the Infanta by the maids depicts her as a paradigm of health and beauty:

Infantin, du bist schön. Deine Schulter ist kühl,
du bist schlank, dein sprühendes Haar ist ein
Sonnensieb für all' deine Schönheit. Wie sagen
wir dir Dank? Infantin, wir haben dich lieb.

Infanta, you are beautiful. Your shoulders are smooth,
you are slender, your radiant hair filters the sun of your beauty.
How shall we express our thanks?
Infanta, we love you.⁸³

⁸² Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1996; repr. New York, 2017), 7.

⁸³ Klaren, *Der Zwerg* (libretto), 8.

Later in the scene, Don Estoban's histrionic account of the appearance of the Dwarf, who has been sent as a gift to the Infanta, provides a striking contrast:

Der Sultan sandte einen Zwerg, als Spiel der
grausamen Natur. Er hinkt, die Haare sind feurige
Borsten, der Kopf hockt zwischen Schultern, die
zu hoch. Ihn beugt eines Höckers Last, klein und
verwachsen die ganze Gestalt, vielleicht kaum
über zwanzig alt, vielleicht alt wie die Sonne.

The Sultan has sent a dwarf, a freak of nature's cruelty.
He limps, his hair is like fiery bristles,
His head juts out from his shoulders, which are
abnormally high. He is bent in two by a hump, and
his entire body is stunted and misshapen.
He might be no more than twenty years old,
or maybe as old as the sun.⁸⁴

The conflicting physical attributes of the Dwarf and the Infanta described in these extracts distance the protagonist from the realm of bodily normality exemplified by the princess. As Lee has explored, this dramatic opposition of the two central figures finds a parallel in the musical disjunction between the 'neoclassicist' court (which is characterised musically by tonal formality, rhythmic rigidity and ornamental artificiality) and the 'expressionist' Dwarf (whose music is highly lyrical, rhythmically flexible and harmonically nuanced).⁸⁵

In Don Estoban's description, the gifting of the Dwarf calls to mind the practice of keeping people with disabilities (dwarfs in particular) at courts, a trend documented from as early as Ancient Egypt and which lasted until the end of the nineteenth century.⁸⁶ As Janet Ravenscroft explains, the presence of court dwarfs in Spain during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries enabled royal families, such as the one depicted in 'The Birthday of the Infanta' and *Der Zwerg*, to 'demonstrate their moral, intellectual, and physical superiority'.⁸⁷ The kind of cultural mindset implied in this statement – one that places the disabled body in direct opposition to a paradigm of health and normality – obtained new significance at the time in which *Der Zwerg* was composed, as the aesthetic dissonance between the protagonist and the Infanta would suggest. Moreover, the sense of mystery and intrigue that has been attached to the bodies of dwarfs in both reality and fictional representation also encapsulates what cultural disability theorists have identified as the objectification of the disabled body as a bolster for normative identity. But how can this sense of aesthetic

⁸⁴ Klaren, *Der Zwerg* (libretto), 13.

⁸⁵ Lee, 'The Other in the Mirror', 222.

⁸⁶ Betty M. Adelson, *The Lives of Dwarfs: Their Journey from Public Curiosity Toward Social Liberation* (New Brunswick, 2005), 4–21; Toubia Ghadessi, 'Perfected Miniatures: Dwarves at Court', in *Portraits of Human Monsters in the Renaissance: Dwarves, Hirsutes, and Castrati as Idealized Anatomical Anomalies* (Kalamazoo, 2018), 53–98. For a comprehensive account of the gifting of dwarfs and their role in the Spanish royal courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, see Janet Ravenscroft, 'Dwarfs – and a Loca – as Ladies' Maids at the Spanish Habsburg Courts', in *The Politics of Female Households: Ladies-in-Waiting across Early Modern Europe*, eds. Nadine Akkerman and Birgit Houben (Boston, 2014), 147–77.

⁸⁷ Ravenscroft, 'Dwarfs – and a Loca', 149.



Figure 1. A. Haag, Costume design, *Der Zwerg*. Theaterwissenschaftliche Sammlung, University of Cologne, 1922.

disproportion and its associated contexts be depicted on stage, beyond the embodiment of disability by a performer?

In A. Haag's sketch of the costume design for *Der Zwerg*'s world premiere in 1922 (reproduced here as [Figure 1](#)), the Dwarf's costume reflects the original historical period of Wilde's narrative and provides a striking visual impression of the protagonist's physical appearance, which seems to adhere closely to Don Estoban's description. The red and green colouring of the costume calls to mind the archetypal court jester or 'fool', long associated with intellectual disability.⁸⁸ Examples of the 'loyal Fool' or 'holy Fool' stock

⁸⁸ Irina Metzler, *Fools and Idiots?: Intellectual Disability in the Middle Ages* (Manchester, 2016), 184–220.

character can be found in operas such as Modest Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (1869) and Schreker's *Der Schatzgräber* (1920).⁸⁹

In European courts between 1600 and 1800, dwarfs, like jesters, were seen as a source of entertainment. This is certainly the case for Zemlinsky's protagonist, who, despite being oblivious to his condition, is asked to perform for the Spanish court at the Infanta's birthday celebrations. Around the time that Wilde's fairy tale is set, dwarfs were surrounded by a sense of intrigue and exoticism and were employed as royal companions, marvels and fantastical curiosities.⁹⁰ Due to their perceived exoticism, these figures were sought alongside unusual objects and animals which were to be displayed as an exhibition of mystery and wealth, and also frequently featured in paintings. Mitchell and Snyder have attributed disability's narrative potential to the sense of mystery surrounding bodily difference, accrediting disability's capacity to incite narration and imagination to its 'very unknowability'.⁹¹ In a similar vein, Bérubé suggests that the pervasiveness of disability as a metaphorical device is grounded in the 'underrecognized and undertheorized facts of bodily difference'.⁹² Many representations of disability in opera (as in literature, film and theatre) situate physical impairment alongside notions of the unknown or abnormal, framing bodily difference as an exotic or mysterious manifestation of otherness. Given the work's literary and cultural origins, this is particularly true of Zemlinsky's opera. Some of Klaren's alterations to Wilde's original narrative imbue aspects of *Der Zwerg* with the cultural discourse of degeneracy. In Don Estoban's description, details about the Dwarf's origin (as a gift from the Sultan) and the suggestion that he may be 'as old as the sun' are loaded with implications of mystery and exoticism, with the Dwarf himself embodying the era's fears of and fascination with the figure of the cultural outsider. This context was manifested in Lesley Cho's costume design for the 2008 production of *Der Zwerg* at the Los Angeles Opera, which bore certain similarities to the original sketch by Haag for the 1922 premiere.⁹³ The style of Cho's design is in keeping with that of the Spanish baroque: the colour scheme calls to mind the jester figure while the costume's decorative embellishments, including jewels and beading, conjure an image of stereotypical oriental opulence.

The aesthetic dissonance between the Dwarf and the Infanta is brought into the context of the production in Lisbon through the use of costumes. An eclectic mix of period allusion and timelessness characterises the costumes of the Infanta and her playmates, which comprise ballgown style dresses and skirts in dull hues of purple, pink, blue and green. Other members of the court, Ghita and Don Estoban, are dressed, respectively, in a cobalt blue dress and a purple suit, colours which form a contrast to the neutral pastels of the Infanta and her entourage. Nevertheless, a certain congruence is established by the contemporary, stylised simplicity of their garments, perhaps a testament to Sá Nogueira's aim to create 'an abstract and unsettling atmosphere'.⁹⁴ There is a similar lack of historical specificity in the protagonist's costume, for which Sá Nogueira drew inspiration from a number of popular cultural figures. One of the designer's sketches (Figure 2) is a collage featuring a character from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* known as 'The Man from Another Place', played by the American actor Michael J. Anderson. The Man from Another Place inhabits a realm of erotic and phallic symbolism known as

⁸⁹ In fact, Schreker also draws upon the popular association of disability with court jesters or fools in *Die Gezeichneten*, where, the final scene, Alviano searches deliriously for 'my cap - my pretty cap - red and with silver bells'.

⁹⁰ Ravenscroft, 'Dwarfs - and a Loca', 147.

⁹¹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 6.

⁹² Bérubé, 'Disability and Narrative', 570.

⁹³ Image available at lindacho.com/427450/the-dwarf/ (accessed 16 July 2021).

⁹⁴ Mariana Sá Nogueira, email correspondence with the author (16 February 2018).



Figure 2. Mariana Sá Nogueira, costume design images for the Dwarf. Email correspondence with the author, 16 February 2018. Included with artist's permission.

'The Red Room', and the protagonist, Dale Cooper, refers to him as 'the little man' (like Anderson himself, the character is a dwarf). The black and white image above shows the German actor and circus performer Harry Earls, also known as 'Harry Doll' of the 'Doll Family'. Below is a snippet of Irving Penn's 1947 photograph of Salvador Dalí.

Juxtaposed with this selection of twentieth-century popular cultural figures is the inspiration taken by Sá Nogueira from period styles more in keeping with the time-setting of the original narrative (Figure 3). In the production, the Dwarf's costume comprises a long cloak, breeches and ankle boots in heavy red velvet – described by Sá Nogueira as 'the most tragic of all fabrics' – along with a Regency-style white shirt.⁹⁵ While his attire forms a contrast to that of the other characters due to the fact that it is more historically informed, its period of origin is ambiguous. This vague backdating of the Dwarf's costume implies the difference between the protagonist and the court.

⁹⁵ Mariana Sá Nogueira, email correspondence with the author (16 February 2018).



Figure 3. Mariana Sá Nogueira, costume design images for the Dwarf. Email correspondence with the author, 16 February 2018. Included with artist's permission.

The protagonist's visible incongruence also implies a lesser degree of civilisation. In Wilde's original narrative, the Dwarf is the son of a local charcoal-burner and, as such, his otherness is underscored by his class distinction, which conflicts with that of the court. One aspect of Klaren's quasi-biographical interpretation of the story for Zemlinsky was the inclusion of certain details that imply the protagonist's mysterious and exotic origins. Despite these changes (which incidentally result in his raised social status) and the high regard in which his musical talents are held, his discordance with the Spanish court is maintained: the Dwarf is mocked by the court as an ignorant fool, and the Infanta makes the assumption that he does not speak Spanish.⁹⁶ His treatment by the court suggests their supposition that he is somehow less developed, either as a result of his 'primitive', exotic origin or his disability. In the TNSC production, the implication of the Dwarf's otherness as a result of his 'primitive' nature is denoted by the anachronistic backdating of his costume – which renders him not only out of place, but out of time. In contrast to the persistent neatness of the court, his appearance also becomes gradually more dishevelled throughout the production, further emphasising his otherness and reflecting the way in which he is perceived to be less rational (and less civilised) in

⁹⁶ Klaren, *Der Zwerg* (libretto), 16. Michael Davidson has also discussed the characterisation of the Dwarf as a Jew in relation to Weininger's influence on the libretto. Michael Davidson, *Invalid Modernism*, 618.

conjunction with the increasing clarity with which he sees himself and, crucially, his difference.⁹⁷ In Lisbon, the Infanta enacts her sexually exploitative nature by stripping the Dwarf, which, coupled with his gradual dishevelment throughout the production reflects his increasingly primitive nature in the eyes of the court. This dismantling of the Dwarf's claim to normality and by association, his civilisation, is echoed by the gradual exposition of the mirror: the removal of the curtains alongside the unveiling of his body by the Infanta constitutes the exhibition of both his disability and his outsider identity – drawing the gaze (or stare) of the audience.

Performing the non-disabled stare

Scholars in the field of disability studies have often explored the enduring use of disability as a source of intrigue and excitement for non-disabled onlookers. Associated with this enfreakment is the act of looking, gazing or staring at physical difference. The act of looking at disability is referred to variously by disability theorists as the 'non-disabled gaze', the 'able-bodied gaze' and the 'ableist gaze', yet Garland-Thomson makes a distinction between gazing and staring, suggesting that 'we may gaze at what we desire, but we stare at that which astonishes us'.⁹⁸ She expands upon this by noting that

We don't usually stare at people we know, but instead when unfamiliar people take us by surprise. This kind of staring between strangers ... offers the most revealing instance of the stare: how it works and what it does. An encounter between a starrer and a staree sets in motion an interpersonal relationship, however momentary, that has consequences. This intense visual engagement creates a circuit of communication and meaning-making.⁹⁹

A comparison can be drawn between Garland-Thomson's words here and Fischer-Lichte's notion of the feedback loop – both are autopoietic in nature and neither starrer/spectator can function within the cycle without staree/performer. In the opening scene at the TNCS, the Infanta's playmates seem mesmerised and lethargic as they throw the petals adoringly at the Infanta. But with the arrival of the Dwarf, their listlessness gives way to an air of haughty self-importance, and their body language became markedly more alert, even agitated. In the libretto, the playmates react to the Dwarf's arrival with hyperbolic exclamations such as, 'A monster! ... I have never seen anything so hideous in my life!'¹⁰⁰ In Wilde's original narrative, the anthropomorphised flowers, upon setting eyes on the Dwarf, 'curled up in disgust' and cried, 'He is really far too ugly to play in any place where we are ... He is a perfect horror!'¹⁰¹ In the Lisbon production, the playmates scurry across the stage to form a huddled group in an apparent effort to create distance between themselves and the protagonist. Their bodily demeanour in this moment reflects the narrative tendency of disability to incite curiosity, fear and revulsion. In both the opera and the original fairy tale, the playmates' reaction to the Dwarf is an example of

⁹⁷ An interesting parallel can be drawn between the notion of the protagonist as a 'primitive' or less-evolved figure and *Der Zwerg's* own standing as an example of fairy-tale opera. Adrian Daub, *Tristan's Shadow: Sexuality and the Total Work of Art after Wagner* (Chicago, 2014), 73.

⁹⁸ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (Oxford, 2009), 13. The author explores the distinction between staring and gazing with reference to the male gaze and the colonial gaze on pages 40–2. See also Bill Hughes, 'The Constitution of Impairment: Modernity and the Aesthetic of Oppression', *Disability & Society* 14/2 (1999), 155–72.

⁹⁹ Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 1.

¹⁰⁰ Klaren, *Der Zwerg* (libretto), 15.

¹⁰¹ Oscar Wilde, 'The Birthday of the Infanta', in *A House of Pomegranates* (London, UK, 1915), 49.

'freakery', which David Church defines as the process by which a 'non-disabled audience retains the power to subject a non-normative body (traditionally, that of a person with disabilities) to the ableist gaze as entertaining spectacle, enjoying a mixture of shock, horror, wonder, and pity'.¹⁰² The excerpts above demonstrate the way in which the enfreakment of the Dwarf is embedded in both Wilde's narrative and the opera's libretto. The TNSC production emphasises the parallels between the two works in this moment, as the playmates are characterised along similar lines to the residents of Wilde's garden.

The Dwarf's entrance in the TNSC production elicits simultaneous fear, excitement and revulsion on the part of the playmates. Before picking up their books and beginning to read, they rotate their small, handheld mirrors so as to catch a glimpse of the protagonist – their actions emblematic of the tendency to treat disabled bodies as the 'voyeuristic property of the non-disabled gaze'.¹⁰³ By contrast, certain moments in the Oper Graz production see the reversal of the Dwarf's role as the object of the non-disabled stare. Despite the fact that the portrayal of the playmates as inmates in a 'mad-house' arguably constitutes a somewhat problematic portrayal of mental illness, the absurd bodily repetitions and rituals of the Spanish court draw the gaze of the audience and, in light of Garland-Thomson's evaluation that the stare 'sculpts disabled people into a grotesque spectacle', the binary between the normality of the court and the abnormality of the Dwarf is thus overturned.¹⁰⁴ The court is othered (or 'enfreaked') as a result of its presentation as a spectacle or curiosity and, as such, the homogenous paradigm of normality that sets the Dwarf apart from the Infanta is eliminated. Instead, the protagonist is presented, in this opening scene, at least, as the only rational figure in a seemingly irrational world. Nonetheless, such an interpretation still renders Zemlinsky's protagonist incompatible with the customs of the Spanish court – his juxtaposition reinforcing his outsider identity.

* * *

Through its initial considerations of disability mimicry, authenticity and casting, this article has explored the performer's body as both medium and subject in two contemporary productions of *Der Zwerg*. In each case, the phenomenal bodies of Bronder and Briscein are unable to convincingly embody the physicality of the operas' protagonist: the metonymic nature of the body in performance is negated during instances of disability mimicry, because the impairment presented on stage is inauthentic. Whether as a result of altered gait and bodily demeanour, costuming and make-up or the use of visible disability aids, it would seem that in the theatre, disability mimicry invariably results in disability's simultaneous exhibition and erasure. These coinciding yet conflicting outcomes are expounded by the notions of ephemerality and disappearance as theorised in performance studies. In these productions, the erasure or disappearance of disability is most palpably reflected in the transition of the performers from their semiotic to their phenomenal bodies between the dramatic action and the curtain call. However, even the seeming solution to this problem – the use of authentic casting – is equally affected by this particular conundrum. But disability can be and is portrayed in myriad ways.

Although disability studies scholars such as Siebers problematise disability mimicry on the grounds that it engenders modes of perceiving disability from a voyeuristic perspective, these productions in fact use processes of enfreakment to present disability through

¹⁰² David Church, 'Freakery, Cult Films, and the Problem of Ambivalence', *Journal of Film and Video* 63/1 (2011), 3–17.

¹⁰³ Hevey, *The Creatures Time Forgot*, 72–3.

¹⁰⁴ Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 26.

the modes of theatrical production and aesthetic choice. The exhibition of the Dwarf's disability is dramatised through the use of curtains, with the audience's figurative participation in the protagonist's cruel fate revealed with the uncovering of the mirror (in which they themselves are reflected) in the final scene. However, by the logic of Fischer-Lichte's semiotic/phenomenal opposition, any responsibility to grapple with such issues is dissipated alongside Bronder's return to his phenomenal body during the curtain call. Nevertheless, the revelation of the Dwarf's physicality in this moment meets the trifecta of conditions to constitute a form of experimentation with the feedback loop. The audience's resulting intrusion into the fictive world of the drama renders them active participants as opposed to passive observers. Elsewhere, the concept of the non-disabled stare is translated into the action on stage, where the enfreakment of disability is explored in conjunction with ideas about looking at and perceiving anomalous bodily forms.

The performance of disability in these productions raises pertinent questions about why and by what means the disabled body is mobilised (or not) on the operatic stage, highlighting, moreover, disability's tendency to indicate meaning in registers beyond the body. It therefore follows that, by foregrounding this body on alternative terms, we can begin to see how the disabled body in opera bridges and demarcates the space between the textual and embodied forms of disability. By partially shifting our analytical gaze away from the disabled body, we might remove the curtain to better understand its manifold meanings in both representation and performance. These productions also serve as a lens through which to grapple with the politics and practice of 'performing' disability through modes of bodily authenticity and mimicry alike. The field of disability studies offers a wealth of approaches which can inform our discussions here, while theoretical insights from the field of performance studies offer further perspectives from which to consider the diverse contexts and implications of disability's function and representation on the operatic stage. But these perspectives can only take us so far. Further to the void in hermeneutic considerations of disability in opera, quantitative, ethnographic research is also needed to establish the current state of play in today's opera industry. Questions around casting, performance practices and the real-world impact of opera's preoccupation with disability stereotypes on performers and audiences with disabilities remain undressed, and there is much work to be done.

Charlotte Armstrong is a postdoctoral research associate and visiting lecturer at the University of York. Her research takes place at the intersection of opera studies, disability studies and cultural studies, and her PhD thesis examined the representation of disability and pre-Fascist discourses of 'degeneracy' in the operas of Franz Schreker and Alexander Zemlinsky. Charlotte has published her work in *Contemporary Theatre Review* and *Modernism/Modernity* (forthcoming). She has created and maintains operaanddisability.com, a blog dedicated to exploring the representation of disability in opera. She has worked with opera companies and disability rights initiatives in the UK and North America, giving lectures, leading events and workshops and writing programme notes and blog posts. Currently, Charlotte is a postdoctoral research assistant for InterMusE, a digital musicology project working with regional music societies to form a dynamic, open-access digital archive.

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