Careers in the Performing Arts for People Who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

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Presented as part of Arbos Theatre's International Visual Theatre Festival

Personal Manifesto:

I believe that all people should be welcomed to the creative process and to public performances. I have dedicated my career to encouraging and advocating for the full participation of Deaf and hard of hearing in the performing arts. I also welcome people from different ethnicities, cultures, religions, countries, and genders to the performing arts. I have done this in the United States and in collaboration with over 80 countries. I am proud of the impact that I have had. However, I am equally grateful for the opportunity to do this kind of work. Through the process, I have grown as an artist, as an educator, and as an individual. To me differences and diversity are not barriers, they are opportunities.

This presentation will look at:

- · What is a career in the performing arts
- · Strategies for entering and succeeding in the field
- · The state of inclusion in the field
- · Laws and regulations requiring access to the performing arts
- · Resource to support inclusion in the performing arts

What types of jobs are there in the Performing Arts?

The performing arts is a collaborative art form. It takes a team of people to create, produce, and present a performance. Here is a brief listing of jobs in the performing arts:

Actor, director, playwright, screen writer, costumer designer, set designer, lighting designer, stage manager, director of sign language, property manager, casting director, marketing director, house manager, and many, many more

Most people in the performing arts have skills and experience in a few job types. However, even if you are a solo creator and performer, you still need to work with and depend on other people for your work. Therefore, to be successful in the field, it is important that you have a strong foundation in the creative and production process. Your participation in the performing arts should be in a number of educational, cultural, and employment situations.

There is Work Out There

The good news is that more Deaf and Hard of Hearing artists are working in the field than ever before. Here are just a few examples:

 The feature film "<u>CODA</u>" won best picture at the Academy Awards. <u>Troy Kotsur</u> won best supporting actor. The film also features Academy Award winning actress <u>Marlee Matlin</u>. While the awards "CODA" as received are noteworthy, the fact that an ensemble of professional Deaf

- actors forms to core of the film's ensemble. This strength of the ensemble and the energy they give to the film is one of the major reasons for "CODA's" success.
- Lauren Ridloff became the first Deaf actor to perform a superhero in Marvel's film "Eternals."
 Ridloff also has a recurring role in the television series, "The Walking Dead." Ms. Ridloff also
 received a Tony nomination for best actress in her performance of Sarah, "Children of a Lesser
 God" on Broadway.
- Alexandria Wailes is currently performing in the Broadway remount of "for colored girls who
 considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf." Miss Wailes also served as the Director of Sign
 Language for "CODA."
- Michelle Banks served as the Director of Sign Language for "for colored girls...". She also recently directed the world premiere of "Trash."
- Joey Caverly is "Trash's" playwright and performed in the show's premiere in New York. Mr.
 Caverly also had a recurring role in the highly success television series "Only Murders in the
 Building." Mr. Caverly will perform the lead role, Harold Hill in Olney Theatre's production of
 "Music Man" this summer.
- Russell <u>Harvard</u> recently performed the roles of Link Deas and Boo Ridley in the Broadway
 production of "To Kill a Mocking Bird." Prior to that he performed the role of the Duke of
 Cornwall in "King Lear" on Broadway with Glenda Jackson. Mr. Harvard also had a recurring role
 in two seasons of the television series "Fargo."
- Monique Holt is an assistant professor at the Gallaudet University Theatre Department. She is an actor, director, playwright, and Director of Sign Language. For several years, she has been a guest artist at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She will also perform in Lincoln Center's production of "Sweeny Todd" in New York.
- Annie Wiegand is a faculty member in the Gallaudet University Theatre Department. She is a lighting designer who has designed shows for several professional productions including "Spring Awakenings" at the Roundabout Theatre in New York and "Eclipsed" at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre.
- Willy Conley is a playwright, director, actor, poet, and photographer. He recently retired as a professor at Gallaudet University's Theatre Arts Department. His plays have been produced and presented by Royall Tyler Theatre, Kennedy Center, Baltimore Playwrights Festival, Quest Visual Theatre, and the Bailiwick Arts Center. Mr. Conley performed throughout the United States as a member of the National Theatre of the Deaf. He also performed at Arbos Theatre's International Visual Theatre Festival in Quest's production of "Lost & Clown'd." He was also one of the show's co-creators.
- Mervin Primeaux-Obryant is an actor, dancer, director, choreographer, and teacher who has
 worked extensively nationally and internationally with Quest Visual Theatre. His signed video
 performance of Gladys Knight and the Pip's song "Midnight Train to Georgia" appeared in New
 York's Time Square on 75 synchronized jumbo screens for one month. He is the winner of a
 Wavy Award in New York.
- <u>Elizabeth Morris</u> is an actor living in Canada. She has toured internationally with Quest Visual Theatre. She has performed at the Stratford Festival, Theatre Passe Muraille, Canada Stage, Young People's Theatre.
- <u>Ramesh Meyyappan</u> is an international Autor and performer based in Glasgow, Scotland. Mr.
 Meyyappan has performed at Gallaudet University's Deaf Way II International Arts Festival,

QuestFest International Visual Theatre Festival, and Arbos Theatre International Visual Theatre Festival. He has performed and directed works throughout the world.

- Sandra Mae Frank is an actress currently performing in the NBC television series, "New Amsterdam." She also performed in Roundabout Theatre's production of "Spring Awakening." This year she signed the "National Anthem" and "God Bless America" at the Super Bowl.
- Warren "Wawa" Snipe is an actor, rapper, writer, and dancer. He traveled national and internationally with the National Deaf Dance Company and the Wild Zappers. He has sign interpreted at the Super Bowl two years in a row. He recently appeared in the television series "The Walking Dead."

There are several theatre companies committed to creating and producing works by, for, and with artists who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing. A sampling of these companies include:

- ARBOS Company for Music and Theatre https://www.arbos.at/ Austria with the deaf artists Werner Mössler (actor, translator and sign language coach), Horst Dittrich (actor, translator and sign language coach), and the CODA (Children of Deaf Adults) Markus Pol, Margot Wutte and Sabine Zeller, including the <a href="Academy for Performing Arts Austria for Deaf, Hardhearing, Deafblind, Hear- and Seeing Impaired, Multiple Handicapped Adults and Young People established by Mag. art. Herbert Gantschacher and Prof. Dr. Dževad Karahasan (Former Dean of the Academy of Performing Arts Sarajevo, today dramatist and dramaturg of ARBOS Company for Music and Theatre) https://www.arbos.at/cultural_education plus VISUAL The European & International Deaf Theatre Festival https://www.arbos.at/visual
- Deaf West Theatre United States
- IVT (International Visual Theatre) France
- Riksteatern Crea Sweden

Becoming a Professional in the Performing Arts

To become a professional in the performing arts, you will need opportunities to:

- See performances
- Discuss performances with others
- Participate in education and training in the performing arts at all levels
- Participate in productions at all levels
- Network

Attending Performances

Infants, young children, youth, and adults all need easy and appropriate access to live and recorded performances. For Deaf and Hard of Hearing individuals, this means that performances should be accessible either through sign performances, visual performances, or captioned performances. These performances must be readily and easily available. Producers and presenters should also consider making their productions financially accessible to all audiences.

Live performances should be available in theatres, schools, and communities. Performances engage and inspire audiences. Good performances may entertain, stimulate thought and discussion, and make

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audience members feel a part of a community. Deaf and Hard of Hearing young people should have opportunities to see performances that include Deaf and Hard of Hearing artists. Without these opportunities, young Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and students might develop the erroneous assumptions that they are not welcome and that they shout not seek a career in the arts.

After seeing a performance, audience members should have opportunities to discuss the show. These discussions lead to a better understanding of the work, the development of observation and critical thinking skills, and an appreciation for the creative process. For Deaf and Hard of Hearing audience members, these discussions must be fully accessible. Whenever possible, Deaf and Hard of Hearing people should lead or facilitate the post-show discussions.

Education and Training

All Deaf and Hard of Hearing people should have accessible and inclusive opportunities to learn about the performing arts, attend classes in the performing arts, and engage in training in the performing arts. These opportunities should be available in pre-school, all levels of public education, summer programs, studios, academies, and universities. These educational and training experiences provide individuals with the skills sets, vocabulary, and metacognition that are essential for a career in the arts.

All performing arts classes, workshops, and summer programs that include Deaf and Hard of Hearing students and participants must be:

- Accessible
- Culturally appropriate

Whenever possible, performing arts classes, workshops, and summer programs that include Deaf participants should be:

- Lead by instructors or artists who are fluent in sign language
- · Lead by professional arts who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Productions

All Deaf and Hard of Hearing people should have frequent and meaningful opportunities to participate in the creative and production process. Certainly, participating in a production enables individuals to practice and hone the skills that they have developed in performing arts classes, workshops, and seminars. Being in a show, also enhances one's understanding of the creative and production processes. Most performing arts productions in the various disciplines have similar processes. Having familiarity with these processes, means that Deaf, Hard of Hearing, and hearing individuals share a common foundation, process, and language with hearing people. Frequent participation in productions enable Deaf and Hard of Hearing people to talk the talk and walk the walk in the business. These are very important skills to have if one is to be accepted and respected in the business.

Deaf and HoH actors, designers, and technicians should have a wide range of opportunities to learn and to engage in theatre.

Culturally Based Productions: Deaf and HoH people should have opportunities to explore, grow, and play in culturally Deaf-centered classes and productions. These experiences allow people to engage in

culturally friendly environments and enables students and artists to play and experiment with elements of language and culture.

Look at the doctor's office scene in the recent film, "CODA." It provides an excellent example of how time spent in culturally based theatre experience can pay dividends in different performance settings. Troy Kotsur, is an experienced Deaf actors who plays a father who is suffering from several genital itch and burn. Kotsur uses graphic, Deaf storytelling to explain his condition to the doctor. The signed dialogue clearly and comically conveys jock itch, but it also gives the audience insight to Deaf culture and storytelling. Kotsur is a Deaf son of hearing parents. His years of experience in Deaf-centric productions and classes afforded him opportunities to play with sign language. As a result, he not only knew how to sign well, but he also knew how to play with the language.

Deaf Centric Productions: Deaf and Hard of Hearing artist should also participate in Deaf centric productions which are accessible to hearing audiences through voice actors who speak the Deaf character's lines for the hearing audiences. These productions enable Deaf performers and artists to share their work with a broader audience.

Sing Interpreted/Captioned Performances: Deaf and hearing audience members should be able to attend sign interpreted shows that make "hearing" productions accessible to Deaf audiences. These accessible performances provide Deaf and HoH with opportunities to engage in community and cultural events and expand their familiarity with the performing arts repertoire.

Visual Theatre Productions: Visual theatre productions that use minimal language and where Deaf and hearing actors both express themselves through movement provide a culturally neutral environment where Deaf actors do not depend on hearing actors to voice their lines to an audience. These performances also enable Deaf and hearing audiences to see the same performance and avoid the lag time experienced at interpreted or voiced productions.

Inclusive Productions: Inclusive productions with Deaf and hearing actors performing in the same cast should also be a choice and opportunity of Deaf and Hard of Hearing artists. These productions employ a variety of communication strategies that enable Deaf, HoH, and hearing audiences to enjoy the show.

Building a Career

In building a career in the performing arts, I believe that it is important to commit oneself to excellence. My mantra is "Good work leads to more good work." If you consistently do great work, people will remember that, and they will want to work with you again. Aim to produce a remarkable product, while always enjoying and trusting the creative process.

To have a career in the arts, one must network with others in the field. There is no art without business. Therefore, to be able to do work in the field, an individual must be connected to others in the field. You need to let others in the field know your strengths and interests and what skills you have. To do this, you will also need to prepare basic career tools:

- Resume
- Headshots
- Audition monologues
- Portfolios

- Personal websites
- Social media presence
- Business cards

Deaf actors who are auditioning for acceptance in education or training programs as well as productions which are predominantly run by hearing people, must make decisions about how to make their audition monologues accessible to reviewers. There are several ways to do this. Most theatre professionals are familiar with a wide variety of audition pieces. If you are doing a well-known monologue, share the play, character, and scene with the reviewers. Because the reviewers know the piece, they can simply watch the Deaf actor perform the scene in sign language. Another approach would be to give the reviewers a copy of your monologue to read. The reviewers could either read it first or watch your monologue while glimpsing at the text. A third approach would be to have an interpreter simultaneously voice your monologue while you sign and perform it. You should prepare with your interpreter to make sure that he or she represents your performance well. A final choice a Deaf actor might make for an audition might be some form of voicing and signing. An actor could simcon (sign and speak simultaneously) or alternately speak and sign. This approach would allow the reviewers to evaluate your acting and speech. This approach is not for all Deaf actors, but I have known a good number of actors who have used it successfully.

A professional must use the above tools to share what you are doing with others in the field. You also need to attend workshops, conferences, and performances. Don't just push yourself on others, but truly engage with peers. Establishing a reputation for excellence, along with a reputation as a good, dependable, and enjoyable person pay dividends in building a career.

One important networking and training strategy is becoming a member of professional performing arts and arts education organizations and attending local, regional, and national conferences and gatherings. Here is a sampling of such organizations in the United States:

- <u>Theatre Communications Group (TCG)</u> This organization serves nonprofit theatre companies.
 TCG includes national and international programs and holds an annual conference.
- <u>Education Theatre Association (ETA)</u> This organization serves organizations, individuals, schools, and universities committed to theatre education and theatre-in-education. ETA holds national and regional conferences, publishes newsletters and research journals.
- <u>Association of Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE</u>) This membership organization focuses on theatre and theatre education programs in the university setting. ATHE holds a national conference and publishes newsletters and other publications.
- International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ) This membership organization's name pretty much states what it does. Like most membership organizations, ASSITEJ conducts international gatherings and publishes newsletters.
- <u>Dance/USA</u> Is membership organization committed to promoting inclusion in dance at all levels. Dance/USA hosts national and regional gatherings. It also produces a variety of publications. Dance/USA supports its members working in the field.
- Kennedy Center LEAD Conferences Through national conferences and a database of resources, the LEAD network, established by the Kennedy Center, provides valuable training to organizations and individuals in producing and presenting accessible and inclusive programming and productions.

It is also important for professionals in the performing arts to have access to best practices and research in the field. Here are several important resources:

- Arts Education Partnership AEP is a national network of organizations, institutions, and
 agencies committed to arts education. AEP holds national meetings and publishes scholarly
 work and research. AEP's website includes an extensive database of research in the field.
- Kennedy Center Education Department The Kennedy Center's Education Department provides
 valuable resources for arts educators and individuals committed to arts integration. The
 department has a roster of exceptional trainers who provide professional to teachers and
 practicing artists. The department's website has an extensive library of arts and arts integration
 lesson plans that are freely available.
- <u>VSA Arts</u> The Kennedy Center's VSA Arts Program provides links to US and international resources are arts education for children with disabilities and on accessibility.

A Lifetime of Learning and Teaching

You should dedicate yourself to a lifetime of learning and new challenges. Work on your weaknesses. Take risks and learn new things. Be open to the new. And you must be persistent. You should go into the field because you love it, not because you want to become rich and famous. Most performing arts professionals are neither.

As a Deaf person seeking a career in the performing arts, know that you will need to be better than your hearing peers. Biases against Deaf and Hard of Hearing (HoH) people still exist. Some producers and directors are anxious, or even scared of working with Deaf and HoH people. There are some elitists in the field who think that there is only one way to do theatre, dance, or film and that incorporating Deaf people into the mix diminishes the work.

Not only do you have to be an exceptional artist, but you must also be an advocate for inclusion and access. You will always need to be a teacher by helping your hearing peers understand what you need for appropriate access and how incorporating Deaf and HoH people in the creative process can enhance the process and the product.

You need to have steel and resolve and not take "No" for an answer. If you have prepared yourself, if you have faith in yourself, if you love what you are doing, do not be afraid to take risks and be willing to refute the "No" with an informed rationale for "Yes." You may not get a "Yes," but you must use every moment to affect change. If you are prepared as an artist, if you take a professional approach to all that you do, if you share that you are a value added to a production or program, you will begin to see fewer "No's" and more "Yeses."

If you are a hearing individual and you want to be involved with or want to create performing arts programs and productions that welcome and include Deaf and HoH people, then you, too must prepare yourself. You should

- Learn about Deaf culture and Deaf people
- · Learn at least one sign language and be able to use the language conversationally
- Make concerted efforts to see performances that include Deaf and HoH people.
- Include Deaf and HoH people in leadership roles in your program or productions
- Be pro-active in seeking and engaging Deaf and HoH people.

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Laws are Necessary

Make no mistake, the successes we are seeing today with more Deaf and HoH artists getting work simply would not have happened without laws that require accessibility. In the United States, the American Disabilities Act (ADA) combined with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) provide valuable legal footing for inclusion. Over 30 years ago, when ADA and IDEA first began, many individuals, institutions, and organizations viewed these laws as forced legal requirements. Many people resisted the laws or begrudging made minimal efforts to comply ADA or IDEA. Through the enforcement of these two laws and the practice of the intent of the two laws, accessibility slowly became the norm in most communities in the United States. Through ADA, IDEA, and the persistent advocacy of disability right groups, the United States has realized systemic cultural, educational, and employment change. There is still a long way to go, but we have also come a long way.

Because of ADA and IDEA, two generations of people with disabilities have gone through the education system, interfaced with the network of government and community support for people with disabilities, and then entered the work force. At the same time, non-disabled individuals have learned and worked in settings with people with disabilities. The combination of people with disabilities having access to quality education and knowing their rights protected by law has given many individuals the confidence and wherewithal to pursue careers that 40 years ago probably would have seemed out of reach.

The European Union and many countries around the world have implemented laws like ADA and IDEA. Those countries that have such laws have seen progress in education and employment for people with disabilities.

Laws alone cannot effectuate change. Advocating for disability rights at local, regional, national, and international levels must be ongoing. Gatherings such as the National Forum on Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities in 1998, looked at opportunities and barriers in the field. The Forum published a list of strategies for affecting change. One strategy was to work with National and State Rehabilitation Agencies to identify careers in the arts and to clarify that people with disabilities should qualify for funds for education and training leading to a career in the arts. Subsequent international, national, and regional gatherings have also addressed this issue and put forth strategies for affecting change. The cumulative affect of these gatherings has contributed to further inclusion in school, university, community, and work settings.

Sometimes, simple strategies lead to change. The National Endowment for the Arts and State Arts Agencies many years ago began to require all grant applicants to include in their applications strategies for making their work and programs accessible. This strategy forced arts organizations to think about accessibility when they are putting together a project or program. That nuts-and-bolts requirement in the application also contributed to the systemic changes that we are seeing today. There is a marked increase in opportunities for Deaf and HoH people in education, nonprofit, and for-profit performing arts settings. The question is if this trend will continue, will it expand, or will it go away. There are still too many examples of callous exclusion. For many people who are committed to inclusion, it often feels like two steps forward and three steps back.

While it is encouraging to see the advances made for education and employment for Deaf artists, challenges remain. The real cost of sign language interpreters remains a serious financial barrier. Hiring a Director of Sign Language is also an additional cost. The reality is that those organizations conducting

programs or producing shows that include Deaf and HoH people will always have additional costs. Consequently, inclusion is not just a moral decision, it is also a financial decision. Several national gatherings on inclusion in the arts have addressed this issue and made recommendations to ameliorate the financial challenge. However, the challenge remains.

Technology is Helping

Smart phones, video conferencing, voice recognition, distance interpreting all help facilitate more direct and facile communication between hearing and Deaf artists. Most people's familiarity and comfort with technology make communication between hearing and Deaf artists more natural. This comfort level also contributes to the increased opportunities for Deaf artists.

Technology is also changing how Deaf and Hard of Hearing people view and attend live performances Theatres now have the capability of using software to program the dialogue for a production. The theatre can project that captioning or it can send the captioning to iPods that audience members can borrow from the theatre for a performance. Patrons may also download the theatre's captioning App and view the captioning from their personal cell phones. This technological advance provides Deaf and Hard of Hearing audience increased access to a performance. However, this technology also enables cultural change. Prior to this technology, most Deaf and Hard of Hearing audience members could only attend the few sign interpreted performances that a theatre would offer. Deaf patrons often had to sit in the "Deaf section" of the theatre. Most interpreted performances have interprets placed in front of the stage and to one side. This means that the Deaf patron must constantly be looking back and forth between the interpreters and the performance on the stage. With personal captioning programs, Deaf people can attend any performance and sit anywhere they want in the theatre. They are no longer limited attending only sign interpreted performance shows. With personal captioning, the Deaf patron can also frame the iPod or phone in a location where they can look at the device and look up at the performance. Giving Deaf and Hard of Hearing people that freedom and that choice is a profound sociological change.

Inclusion vs Access

In the first phase of the disability right movement, one of the central principals was – "Nothing about us without us." Now the approach is – "Nothing without us." This is a significant paradigm shift. 50 years ago, people with disabilities were on the outside looking in. After more than 30 years, of laws requiring access and inclusion in education, workplace, and cultural experiences, people with disabilities know that they belong. Many have received training. More and more have had meaningful employment in the arts. There can be no turning back.

Formerly, schools and theatres thought about the need for access for productions separately from the design and production process. This meant adding interpreters or captioning after a show has been cast and designed. In contrast, an inclusive production approach necessitates that Deaf and HoH become involved in all aspects of a production from the beginning. Set design, lighting, costume designs occur with Deaf and HoH designers and directors onboard. Marketing, interpreting, and captioning are all part of the production process. As a result, an inclusive production becomes accessible.

We Belong

Deaf and HoH artists know their rights. They know they need quality training and opportunities. There is a growing confidence in the community believing "We belong." This confidence combined with determination and constant networking is another factor leading to more representation in all aspects of the performing arts.

More Deaf artists are not waiting for hearing organizations or directors to hire them. They are instead generating and producing their own work. Advancements in technology and the reduction of the cost of equipment for producing TV and film has enabled more and more Deaf and HoH artists to produce their work. The videotaping of live performances has also become much easier and cheaper. The Internet and its various outlets such as YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok have provided global outlets and audiences for Deaf generated work. That exposure strengthens the Deaf network and community, but since the Internet outlets are also available to hearing viewers, more and more people in general are seeing this new work by Deaf and HoH artists. This increasing interface is also helping reduce another one of the barriers for artists who are Deaf and Hoh, the "fear factor." The fear of the unknown and the awkwardness of communicating with Deaf people has traditionally made hearing people hesitant to work with Deaf people. Since all performing arts projects are risks, adding Deaf people to the process has often been a bridge to far for some hearing people.

The gestalt of years of accessibility and inclusion legal requirements, government support, advocacy, interaction, familiarity, and determination present the appearance of systemic change. More and more "hearing" artists are interested in working with gifted Deaf artists. More and more Deaf artists are more comfortable working in mixed environments and having a network of hearing and Deaf professionals who they can call upon the do work. Is this a paradigm shift? We shall see.

Some Additional Thoughts

Educators/Professional Theatre artists should continue to conduct gatherings that address inclusion in the arts and making the arts welcoming to all people

Gatherings by artists, disabilities right advocates, educational institutions, government agencies, funding sources, and arts organizations to address issues related to careers in the arts for people with disabilities have played an important role in advancing the field. These types of gatherings must continue to insure the inclusion of all people in the education and production process in the performing arts. Some past gatherings include:

- National Forum and National Summit for Careers in the Arts for People with Disabilities
- NEA Deaf Theatre Summit
- Deaf Way II Conference and International Arts Festival
- QuestFest
- QuestFest Deaf Theatre Summit
- Deaf Artist Summits
- Austrian International Visual Theatre Festival

Below are some recommendations and issues identified from the above gatherings:

- Training and production opportunities in school
- After-school opportunities in productions (many schools don't have support services or late buses for after school activities)
- · Summer opportunities for training and production
- Access to quality interpreters
- Membership in theatre organizations
- Networking opportunities
- Publications that highlight the work of Deaf and hard of hearing artists
- Accessibility and Vocational Rehab support for post-secondary studies
- Opportunities for summer stock

Artistic gatherings such as Deaf Way, Deaf Way II, QuestFest, and the Austrian International Visual Theatre provide opportunities to share work, see work, training, networking, and exposure.

Helpful Links

Inclusive Theatre Companies

<u>9 Theater Companies Putting Actors with Disabilities Center Stage - The Latest National Disability News</u> (ameridisability.com)

American Theatre Article on Incusion

AMERICAN THEATRE | Inclusion: We Can't Do It Alone