Integrating Accessibility and Aesthetics Onstage in Neworld Theatre's *King Arthur's Night*

by Megan Johnson

King Arthur's Night is Vancouver's Neworld Theatre's inventive retelling of the tale of King Arthur, commissioned by the Luminato Festival for its 2017 season.[1] Playwright and actor Niall McNeil and Neworld's Artistic Director Marcus Youssef co-wrote and perform in the show—McNeil in the title role of King Arthur and Youssef in the role of the wizard Merlin. The production also includes original music by composer Veda Hille and direction by Theatre Replacement's James Long. *King Arthur's Night* is grand in its scope, featuring a choir of nearly twenty singers, a small pit band, and an integrated cast that includes both professional actors and community actors from the Down Syndrome Research Foundation (DSRF) in Burnaby, BC. Following their first collaboration in 2011—on a reworking of the Peter Pan story titled *Peter Panties*—McNeil (whose life includes the experience of Down Syndrome) and Youssef partnered with the DSRF to lead theatre and acting classes. It was out of this partnership that actors Tiffany King, Andrew Gordon, and Matthew Tom-Wing joined the cast of *King Arthur's Night* in the roles of Guinevere, Saxon, and Magwitch, respectively.

Developing this show with an integrated cast, in which each member brought diverse lived and theatrical experiences to the process, required a rethinking of working methods customary in mainstream theatre. Central to this rethinking was an adaptation of the development, rehearsal, and production phases to make each step of the process accessible to the diverse creators. In watching *King Arthur's Night*, I was struck by how these processes moved beyond merely being functional mechanisms and were instead incorporated into the aesthetic of the show.

Mainstream theatre companies are paying more attention to accessible practices, particularly initiatives such as sign language interpretation, relaxed performances, audio description, and amendments to physical infrastructure, all of which increase accessibility for audience members. Companies frequently approach these initiatives from a utilitarian perspective, only secondarily considering their artistic implications. And while these practices do benefit audience members, performers continue to encounter a myriad of obstacles in accessing training and performance opportunities (Johnston 37–58). *King Arthur's Night* prioritizes access for performers and, in so doing, contributes to a growing body of performance work that considers accessibility as part of the creation process, rather than a component to be added to a 'finished' production.

'Disability theatre' is frequently used to describe works that are created by an artist who self-identifies as disabled, present disabled characters or performers onstage, or engage with themes of disability or disability justice. In its connection to a wider disability arts and culture movement, itself enmeshed in disability rights activism, Kirsty Johnston notes that disability theatre frequently follows "impulses for social justice in the face of ableist ideologies and practices" while also being rooted in the "recognition of disabled lives and experiences as inherently valuable" (25). Johnston highlights, however, the "ongoing negotiations" related to the definition and use of the term (35), and Petra Kuppers suggests that, in many ways, disability art desires to destabilize categorization and exist beyond fixed aesthetic boundaries (*Disability and Contemporary Performance* 4). While some artists embrace framing their work as disability art and view this as politically advantageous, others rebuff the term given its historical stigma and potential to limit their practice (Cachia 267–72). Decisions around the use of the term frequently intersect with the artist's own self- or non-identification as disabled (Cachia 272), and the ways artists draw creative potential from their lived experiences of disability. For example, in her 2002 manifesto exploring how the lived experience of disability might revolutionize theatrical space, Carrie Sandahl asserts that creating performance from the vantage point of one's phenomenological experience of disability can be generative and provide "doors of perception" into radically new spaces and perspectives (18).

Neither the creative team behind *King Arthur's Night* nor its marketing materials refer to the production as 'disability theatre.'

The absence of the term points to the ongoing complexity around categorizing work that rubs up against identity, inclusion, and representation. Regardless of its categorization, however, productions such as *King Arthur's Night* make an important contribution to discussions of how theatrical aesthetics can weave issues of representation, access, and inclusion together. The approach taken in *King Arthur's Night* produced a unique framework that embedded accessibility in the show's narrative and structure and therefore made accessibility central to the show's aesthetic. In this way, *King Arthur's Night* is an important example of how access and aesthetics might be united onstage.

Scholars describe the integration of accessibility and aesthetics in various ways. UK-based playwright Katie O'Reilly uses the phrase "alternative dramaturgies" to describe "the processes, structures, content and form which reinvent, subvert or critique 'traditional' or 'conventional' representations and routes [of artistic creation]" (32). In Canada, the 2010 report *Focus on Disability & Deaf Arts in Canada* by Rose Jacobson and Geoff McMurchy describes "access aesthetics" as a method that "declares access to be an integral part of creative content and the artistic process from inception to presentation" (8)—a term also used by Johnston to describe the work of the disability-led Graeae Theatre Company (153–161). Sandahl also points to this concept when she describes the transformative potential of "alternative aesthetic choices" that emerge from the "adaptive maneuvers" of atypical perspectives (23). The infrastructure related to these features of accessibility can sometimes remain hidden from the view of the audience, though Kuppers notes how the presence of "alternative

embodiments" in the theatre can also "make the supportive mechanisms appear behind the curtains" (*Theatre & Disability* 2). Rather than attempting to obscure the "supportive mechanisms" needed to make the stage an inclusive and accessible space for its performers, *King Arthur's Night* embraced and integrated these supports into the artistic fabric of the show—transforming them into aesthetic material that enlivened the production by deepening its affective, theatrical, and narrative content.

King Arthur's Night was rooted in an ethos of access and inclusion during its creation because of its direct connection to McNeil's life experience. While the production follows the somewhat familiar trajectory of the classic myth of King Arthur (showcasing the characters of Merlin, Guinevere, Lancelot, and the sword Excalibur as Arthur's allies; the characters of Mordred and Morgana as Arthur's adversaries; and staging Arthur's untimely death at the Battle of Camlann against the Saxons), it is clear that this is not a traditional recounting of the tale. *King Arthur's Night* reworks the narrative from McNeil's perspective, which highlights what he deems the core elements of the story. To develop the script (a method described by Youssef in the program notes as "responsive and improvisational"), Youssef and McNeil engaged in long conversations about the King Arthur story and McNeil's connection to the character. These conversations were audio recorded, transcribed, and ultimately shaped into the script by McNeil and Youssef, with input from collaborators Long and Hille. This method of script development allowed McNeil full access to the process and also enabled him to bring his enormous strengths in associative thinking to bear on the story.

Niall McNeil and Marcus Youssef.
Photo by Andrew Alexander, courtesy of Neworld Theatre

While script development strategies are normally hidden from the audience, *King Arthur's Night* brings the process onto the stage in the first moments of the performance. Opening the show, Youssef and McNeil present the audience with a series of photographs that explain the collaborative working process by which they developed the script. During this prologue, we learn how key moments in McNeil's life (from his memories of the steam at BC's Harrison Hot Springs Resort, to his appreciation for the character of Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings*, to a slightly traumatic childhood run-in with a head-butting goat) were integrated into the narrative and the overall aesthetic of the show. In these moments, Youssef's notes in the show's Luminato Festival program ring true, describing the production as maintaining a "permeable boundary between the source material . . . and Niall's own world." This permeable boundary generate the narrative in unique ways and recalls Sandahl's assertion of the potential for phenomenological ways of working to generate radically new perspectives. As Youssef warns in the show's prologue: "[King Arthur] is powerful. *He shows us worlds we can't normally perceive. Or perhaps choose not to*" (emphasis added).

In addition to the connections that *King Arthur's Night* has to McNeil's life, it is also a show that developed out of methods that directly supported and engaged the cast. This was achieved through a variety of access techniques that were transformed into aesthetic features of the performance. First, *King Arthur's Night* includes various improvised sections, which removed barriers related to memorization by allowing the cast to improvise their text and movements. These sections added a heightened energy to the show by necessitating that the actors be fully present with each other. From Long's perspective, conveyed during a Q&A session following a performance in Toronto, the approach emphasized the actors' focus and connection and attempted to "[do] away with the façade of performance." These improvised moments required

that the actors be attentive and open to their colleagues, adding an electric feeling of liveness to each performance and a sense of cohesion within the company. This attentiveness was particularly marked in an improvised scene between King Arthur (McNeil) and his wife Guinevere (Tiffany King), in which Arthur tells Guinevere that he must depart for war. This scene was a poignant moment of connection between the two characters and its improvised nature allowed the dialogue to unfold in direct response to what the actors were feeling. In these moments it was possible to witness McNeil and King negotiate a fascinating slippage between their embodiment as characters *and* actors, which allowed the audience to enter more deeply into the emotional life of the scene. King shines in these moments of improvisation, her honest and unaffected portrayal of Guinevere making her an irresistible presence onstage. King's charm extends into her scenes with Billy Marchenski, who portrays Lancelot—a charismatic knight and companion to Arthur. In Lancelot's underhanded attempts to seduce Guinevere away from Arthur, King's vulnerability and presence make her assertive rebuff of Lancelot's attempt at wily seduction all the more engaging. A later scene showcases an equally arresting movement improvisation led by Andrew Gordon. Gordon's character Saxon is preparing for the impending battle with Arthur, preparation that requires training an army of goats (formidable opponents to anyone, but adversaries that are particularly intimidating for *this* King Arthur given McNeil's past conflict with goats). In this scene, the goats mimic Saxon's movements—faithfully replicating his gestures to the musical accompaniment of a crashing drum kit and the roar of Saxon's concluding battle cry ("We are barbarians!"). The goats' keen focus in this improvised section highlights Saxon's intensity and ferociousness as Arthur's foe and underscores the control Saxon maintains over his troops.

The performance also used line feeding (again to side-step issues around memorization), a technique normally used only in the rehearsal process as actors begin to rehearse without the aid of a script. Actors audibly prompted their colleagues with their lines, causing the audience to hear some dialogue twice. Interestingly, the use of this technique in *King Arthur's Night* underlined the narrative and the emotion of certain scenes, binding the actors together in interdependent relationships and highlighting the connections between them. This was especially true in the case of Morgana (the conniving enchantress played by Nicola Lipman) and Guinevere (King). These characters were frequently paired in the performance and clearly maintained an intimate relationship as both characters and actors—a relationship emphasized by Morgana's frequent feeding of lines to Guinevere. Further, as Lipman circled around the stage, audibly whispering lines to King who dutifully repeated them back, Morgana's magical powers and her ability to manipulate the lives of the characters were clearly conveyed. As we observe how Morgana's scheming helps orchestrate the climactic final battle that results in Arthur's death, her devious potential highlighted through line feeding is made manifest in the narrative. Thus, a technique with a purely functional purpose in rehearsal was transformed in performance: both as a way of ensuring that memorization did not present a barrier to inclusion and to emphasize certain characters' traits. The interdependent relationships between characters represented through line feeding were further emphasized through the strategy of having actors

Tiffany King, Andrew Gordon, and Niall McNeil.
Photo by Andrew Alexander, courtesy of Neworld Theatre

Cast of *King Arthur's Night.*
Photo by Andrew Alexander, courtesy of Neworld Theatre

physically guide each other on and off stage between scenes. This embodied practice was yet another supportive mechanism that allowed all actors to engage fully in the production while positively impacting the affective resonance of the show.

It was clear that the pacing of the dialogue and action was specifically designed for the actors. Long's direction had the cast moving thoughtfully and carefully across the playing space, each character given the time to deliver their lines and pull focus to themselves. This careful line delivery and movement provided each character with a sense of authority and the steady pacing in many scenes increased the dramatic tension. The measured pacing was reinforced by Hille's rock-style music, which added complexity and interest to the spoken text and gave the show a distinctly contemporary feel. Set mostly as group numbers in which the voices were carefully layered, the music favoured moderate tempos, steady rhythms, and dissonant harmonies to underscore the dramatic moments in the play, thereby prolonging the emotional tension in certain scenes. The stage choreography in the climactic final battle of the piece, which culminates in Arthur's death, proceeded at a similarly measured pace and concluded with each actor slowly exiting the stage. This staging served to extend the resonance of the battle—each actor's precise movements adding a heightened theatricality and providing the audience with time to enter, experience, and process the emotion of each moment.

In addition to the access techniques visible within the performance, there were supportive mechanisms related to the rehearsal infrastructure that were referenced in the show's marketing material and during the post-show Q&A at the performance that I attended in Toronto. When asked about the process, Long cited the rehearsal structure (shorter rehearsal days spread over a longer number of weeks) as a way of working that was different from typical theatre practices. While this schedule had the functional objective of supporting actors who might struggle with long rehearsal days, it ultimately served the entire company, the creative team, and the show itself by allowing a deeper dive into the creative material.[2] This alternative scheduling highlights how prioritizing inclusion can disrupt traditional ways of working that may not be amenable to all bodies, all minds, or all practices. While the economics of theatre may mean that such expansive scheduling is not always possible, it is vital to become aware of and interrogate methods of working that have become normalized despite their exclusionary potentials. In acknowledging what may not be working, theatre and performance have the potential to be a testing ground for enacting different ways of being and creating: as Youssef notes in a blog post for Luminato, "theatre in particular, seems like a natural place for people to come together to define new, radically inclusive ways of working together across . . . difference." By questioning and rethinking creation and presentation methods through an integration of access and aesthetics, *King Arthur's Night* further points to how such "radically inclusive ways of working together" can exist as artistically meaningful aspects of performance and allow for exciting voices to be centred onstage.

Notes

1   The show was co-produced by the National Arts Centre and also received support from the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, Stratford Festival, Bard on the Beach Shakespeare Festival, and Shadbolt Centre for the Arts, alongside community partners Down Syndrome Research Foundation of BC, Kinsight, Inclusion BC, Burnaby Association for Community Inclusion, and PosAbilities.

2   In considering how the principles of inclusive design can be applied to theatre practice, Jan Derbyshire has noted how alternative schedules in performance creation can be broadly beneficial to people regardless of their identification as disabled (265).

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About the Author

Megan Johnson is a performance scholar, arts administrator, and dramaturg. She is a PhD student in the Theatre & Performance Studies program at York University and holds Master's degrees in Theatre and Performance Studies (York University) and Musicology (University of Ottawa). Her research centres on disability performance, infrastructural politics, and inclusive dramaturgy.