

Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 69: Theater

Guests: Jason Dorwart and Samuel Valdez

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by [Cheryl Green](#)

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Introduction

[hip-hop beat with radio static]

LATEEF MCLEOD: This is the *Disability Visibility Podcast* with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Welcome to the *Disability Visibility Podcast*, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. I'm your host, Alice Wong. Today's episode is all about theatre with my guests Jason Dorwart and Samuel Valdez. And I have to confess I was one of those high school drama club nerds, so this is totally up my alley. Jason is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Theater at [Oberlin College](#) and he recently directed a play by John Belluso titled [Body of Bourne](#) about a World War I era essayist, pacifist, and disability rights advocate, Randolph Bourne. Samuel is a actor, playwright, and director who worked with several groups around San Diego such as Sledgehammer Theater, Chronos Theater, Los Amigos del REP, and currently his own performing arts bi-national company CARPA San Diego. Both Jason and Samuel share how they became involved in theatre and the work that remains in making theatre more accessible and inclusive of disabled people. Are. You. Ready? Away we goooooo! [electronic beeping] Away we goooooo!

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.

Introduction to Jason's Interview

ALICE: OK, Jason, thank you so much for being on my podcast today!

JASON: Hi, Alice.

ALICE: So, Jason, why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself?

JASON: So, I am a visiting assistant professor of theater at Oberlin College. I love teaching here, and the students here, they're really engaged. And they come from so many perspectives here.

Directing *Body of Bourne* and audiences accepting disabled characters and actors

ALICE: So, you recently directed a play on campus called *Body of Bourne*, which is a play by John Belluso about Randolph Bourne, a progressive early-20th century writer. Can you tell me a little bit about your experience directing that play and just kinda your creative process as a director?

JASON: The nice thing with college theater, especially since I'm a visiting professor, it's like, OK. Now's my chance to do something that's not usually done. It's just such an interesting

script, and it's only been produced once before. The department here was really excited about it, and the students here were excited about it. I teach theater history here and also teach some classes on disability studies, and it was a chance to teach a bunch of people about disability theory in ways that engaged them in a creative process instead of just reading.

Nobody here had ever heard of Randolph Bourne. His writings have crept up over the last century. He's a pacifist and anti-nationalist and disability rights activist, antifascist. The list goes on and on and on. And every generation has an opportunity to pick him up. Like back in the '60s during the Vietnam protests, some student activists found his writings. And then again in the '70s when disability theory was in its infancy, some people found his early essay, *The Handicapped*. And that's kind of considered an early instance of the social model of disability. And so, there's so much going on in this play, and it really fits in well to the Oberlin campus where there are a lot of progressive ideas.

ALICE: There aren't that many kind of plays like this about real life people who are kind of involved with disability theory and studies, disabled people.

[bouncy, light music break]

JASON: One of the nice things about this play particularly is, instead of having a disabled character that comes into the story to teach everybody a lesson and then exits, this is a disabled person's story being told from his perspective, and the world centers around him. And it's so rare to have a story where a disabled person is centered.

I think part of the problem is that when we go in to see a play, we wanna see people transform. They're supposed to cure something or heal something, and disability is an easy target to be fixed. So, if you have a disabled character, they pretty much, they have to die or be rehabilitated for the narrative form to close. Otherwise, we have this open-ended cliffhanger, almost. Like if the disability comes out the other side of the story and isn't fixed, audiences don't know what to do about that.

And actually, I think this also limits who can play disability. 'Cause then we have able-bodied people playing disability because then we have the safety net of, even if the disability isn't cured onstage, the actor can stand up and take a bow and walk away. And so, the drama comes full circle and the performance can be closed.

ALICE: Well, and there's also the added kind of line about oh, this is a great artistic challenge for a non-disabled actor to play a disabled character. Because oh, how boring would it be to have an actual disabled actor play it as a character?! Which is kind of weird, I think.

JASON: Yeah. Almost like people have the impression that you're cheating somehow. I've even heard people say things like about actors who have become disabled, who are in a famous role in a famous play— What I'm thinking of is a specific instance of somebody I knew who was at an equity theater in Arizona. And comments from people coming out of the theater was, "That was such a great performance by that guy, but I would like to see the role as it was meant to be played." Almost like they felt they got cheated out of a proper performance.

ALICE: Wow. That's really sad.

JASON: Right. Like people think of it as a lack or like a damaged version of some classic character, as if another actor is in a neutral body.

ALICE: Hopefully, the future theater be far more inclusive than the way it is now and the way it has been.

[bouncy, light music break]

The joy of directing and collaborating

ALICE: I guess, what is kind of, for you, the joy in directing a play and the collaborative process?

JASON: It's kind of the same joy that I get from teaching students, is the ability to work with people and get them to understand things in a way that they haven't understood before. And just being in that room, the rehearsal room, with all these people and collaborating and trying to get all these perspectives to come together, you know, it feels great in the rehearsal process. And then if you can come up with a moment onstage that wows an audience, it's just so satisfying. It's fun to see the students grow and really start to find their groove.

ALICE: I'm really curious about if there's any particular playwrights that you're really excited about and want to bring to the stage.

JASON: So, I have just found this playwright named Lynda Radley. She's Irish, but she lives in Scotland now. She wrote a play like five or 10 years ago called *Future Proof*, which is about like the last days of a traveling freak show that is having economic problems. And so this play deals with like audiences not wanting to see this anymore and the medicalization of the freak show and of freakish ness. So this play, the freak show, realizes that their potential for survival as a performance troupe is to normalize themselves. So then the freak show becomes like dieting and exercising, like the fat man loses weight, the like half man, half woman. It has to change their presentation, but very much like a show on TLC or that conjoined twins get separated and that like the medicalization and the fixing the bodies becomes the salable point. This play seem to be, instead of a dramatic attempt to fix the characters, it was questioning the audience's desire to fix them. So yeah, just it felt like a completely different perspective and it was exciting.

ALICE: Yeah. There is the whole gaze of the audience, right? I think that's definitely an element in theater that is always kinda this subtext, right, throughout any play that, what are the expectations of coming to the theater and seeing something for an hour or two.

[mellow, light music break]

Ableist expectations in theater

ALICE: Are there any kinda expectations, you think, by theatergoers that are, you know, I'll just say it, somewhat ableist?

JASON: Oh yeah. This is a moment from a play I was in several years ago, but I was in a production of *Man of La Mancha*. *Man of La Mancha* is Don Quixote's story. And there's a woman that he imagines himself in love with, and he's trying to woo her. But she ends up being assaulted by a band of criminals. So, the woman that was playing Aldonza in our production was in a wheelchair. In the scene, they took her out of her wheelchair and then left her there. So, in the very next scene, she crawled on instead of wheeling on. You know, in the arc of the story, it makes perfect sense, but audiences then had trouble separating character from actor in that moment. They focused more on the perceived tragedy onstage of the person not in a wheelchair rather than on the tragedy of the character who had just been assaulted. To me, that kind of seems to come from an ableist vantage point.

So, let's say that role were played in a wheelchair by an able-bodied person. I think audiences would accept that if she crawled on. But because it's an actual paraplegic crawling on, all they can focus on is that tragedy and not realize the storytelling and the character work that's going on in that.

ALICE: There's something about disabled people as really having these transgressive kind of bodyminds that really makes non-disabled people uncomfortable even though theater, I think, is meant to make people think and be uncomfortable.

JASON: You know, theater is this liminal space between worlds where we're stepping outside of our everyday and going into this ritual world where somebody is taking on some other identity. But real manifest disability of the actor is something that isn't or can't be hidden. It's never fictional. So, it like disrupts the theatrical experience because they're thinking this is some other world, not the real world. So, it's almost like disability is a pinprick into the fabric of space-time of the theater where the real world seeps in and floods in through this pinprick and disrupts the fictionality of the work.

ALICE: We're just too real for them. [chuckles]

JASON: Yeah. And it's also a constant reminder of frailty.

ALICE: Yeah. I think it's a reminder of frailty, mortality, vulnerability. You think about artists being vulnerable onstage, and that's usually, you know, something that's praised and lauded. But yet, for some reason, disabled folks baring themselves onstage is a little bit too uncomfortable for some audiences.

JASON: Right.

[bouncy, light music break]

Changes for more inclusion and access in theater

ALICE: What are some changes you'd like to see in the theater community and just in performing arts in general that can be a little bit more inclusive and accessible for disabled people who wanna be in theater?

JASON: There's so much work to be done. When I was looking to go to grad school, I applied to several schools, but ended up choosing my school based upon a building that I could get into. There was another university I got into, and they were excited about me going there. And then at the end, they said, "Oh, but by the way, our theater office is not accessible." So, just fixing that kind of stuff. But the problem is that theater departments just don't have the funding that other departments have. Access to buildings and just the expectation that disabled people could be onstage, I think, is a major barrier we have to get over.

So, when I was directing *Body of Bourne*, the set designer, without even asking me, brought me the set design, and it was completely accessible. And I was blown away. And she's like, "This is your workspace. You have to be able to get onstage." But I'm just so used to not being able to. That's unfortunately the bare minimum, but that's not being done.

ALICE: There's a long way to go, but I think that people like you are just doing the work and just trying to keep it going.

Wrap-up to Jason's interview

Is there anything else you'd like to share with me as we wrap up this interview?

JASON: Oh no. Just thank you. I appreciate everything you do and appreciate the community that you seem to be building.

ALICE: Well, thank you. It's been a delight.

[mellow, light music break]

Introduction to Samuel's Interview

ALICE: Thank you, Samuel, for being my podcast today!

SAMUEL: Yeah, it's a pleasure to speak to you.

ALICE: And Samuel, why don't you introduce a little bit about yourself and what you do.

SAMUEL: Yeah. So, my name is Samuel Valdez. I'm a playwright, director, performer, producer. You name it, I do it in the theater. And I've been working on this all my life.

ALICE: So, you're a playwright, a director, a performer: a triple threat.

SAMUEL: Yes.

ALICE: How did you first get involved in theater?

SAMUEL: Well, when I was a child, I really liked to sing, and I would imagine I was in a concert, and an audience of people would be looking at me. And I really enjoyed that. I really enjoyed playing with that. Growing up, it's been very difficult because of my disability of bullying and, you know, many changes in my life that really made me want to concentrate on something I really liked.

So, at first, I wanted to be a cameraman, and one of my teachers in elementary school said, "You know what? It's gonna be a little bit hard for you to hold the camera." She said, "Why don't you direct the play or the movie?" In high school, I took some classes about disability and drama club. And I really got involved. I directed a show in high school, *The Zoo Story* by Edward Albee, and she really enjoyed the way I directed. And so, that motivated me a lot more to do what I started to love.

So, from then on, I got a future scholarship to go to college, and I went to San Diego State, majored in theater with emphasis in directing.

ALICE: I also was involved in drama club in high school! A lotta people are drawn to the theater or some sort of art because they feel like outsiders, and they're looking to find a home. Was that kind of your also experience?

SAMUEL: Yes. And you know, that's the thing: finding a home, the arts gave me that. It gave me that home and the place to express myself.

[bubbly electronica music break, and music plays through the next few sentences]

I have a story. When I went to San Diego State, second semester I was there, the Chair of the department called me into the office. I was like, “OK, what did I do wrong?” [chuckles] And she said, “No, you didn’t do anything wrong.” And she says, “We are very, very surprised that you want to be here, and we’d like to know how we can make your stay with us comfortable for you to start in our department.” It was something very emotional for me because I really felt that people did embrace me as a theater person.

ALICE: That's so rare that somebody in administration or faculty members wanna be proactive and welcome you.

[bubbly electronica music break]

Playwriting and filling in the missing stories of Latinx immigrants and disabled people

ALICE: I wanna focus on your work as a playwright. You've written numerous plays. What motivates you to write?

SAMUEL: I imagine a lot of stories. I like to write from the heart. It fills me as a person to write something on paper. To make it coherent for other people to listen to or to watch. But for me, I think it's about writing a play is that you get to create characters. You get to give them a voice. And when I write, it just comes out naturally. I'm just creating without thinking about it! And that's what I like about it, that I don't have to worry about what I say. I just get to put story on paper, no matter how bad or how good it sounds. Then I go back and I reread, and I edit it and make it more understandable. But just get it down and just brainstorm on paper is something I really love to do.

ALICE: What are some of the messages that, from your plays, that you wanna express to the audience?

SAMUEL: I tend to like absurd theater, but when I write, I like to write about realistic subjects. And I like to, you might say, educate the audience or open up the eyes of the audience into a realistic setting. You know, you need to open your eyes. You know, you need to smell the coffee and be real about what you're saying.

ALICE: Yeah. I think a lotta things in real life are really dramatic, right?

SAMUEL: Yes.

ALICE: And they're rooted in a reality, which probably makes the drama much more authentic.

SAMUEL: Yes, it is.

[playful electronica music break]

ALICE: So, what are some stories based on the lived experiences of both Latinx immigrants and disabled people that you think are missing and that need to be told in the theater?

SAMUEL: Well, in that, I'll focus on the play that I'm doing at the moment, which is called *And HE Became MAN*. Which is a play that talks about the story of my parents going to the US and in the fields. And what I do is, in this story, I focus on the specifics. For example, I have a monologue where the mother is explaining step-by-step what she does every morning to get ready for work, you know. So, I take the audience step by step in this show, and I amplify those

little moments of life that we don't really see, but they are there. And we need to understand why they are there.

ALICE: Yeah, I think the little moments in life are the most significant ones, right?

SAMUEL: Yes.

And HE Became MAN

ALICE: So, you mentioned your show *And HE Became MAN* is, as I understand it, a one-man show. Is this a show where you're playing different characters, or are you essentially playing yourself?

SAMUEL: OK. Well, actually the show is, it started off to be a one-man show, but a friend of mine inspired me to make it a Greek tragedy. So, I have a chorus in the background, and I have characters that come in and out of the show. So, I'm telling the story, and these characters, little by little, come in and out of the story, just having a relationship with me as a main character and just, like I said, I'm focusing on those specific moments. Also in the show is a lotta music to tell the story. We have the music, which is a whole soundtrack, is a story itself. Then there's the story that I tell. Then after that, we also have slides during the show that tell the same story in another way. So, it's a multi-media show.

ALICE: That sounds really cool.

SAMUEL: Yeah. Yes, every production is totally different because where we are or who we are with. Sometime, I have different actors because of the commitment of the show, you know, a variety of things. So, you never see the show the same way twice. It's always a different type of show.

ALICE: Yeah, yeah. Personally, I think we still need a lot more disabled folks involved in the arts.

[playful electronica music break that plays through the next question]

Getting more disabled people involved in theater

ALICE: How can we encourage more disabled people to be involved as playwrights, actors, directors, producers, crew members and get involved in the theater?

SAMUEL: Really, if you wanna do theater, if you have that little bug in you that wants to do theater, to go ahead and do it, you know? Nobody is gonna invite you in. You have to invite yourself in and get them to know you. Because after that, they're gonna invite you in. As an individual with a disability, you have to open up those doors. Yeah, there are a few people that have helped me, you know, but at the end, it's about what are you doing? I mean, I can take you anywhere. I can put you in the room. But you have to do the work. And I feel I'm doing the work. I'm enjoying what I'm doing. I'm enjoying being around people, being productive as an audience.

Wrap-up to Samuel's interview

ALICE: For those who wanna learn more about your work, how can they find you or reach out to you?

SAMUEL: I'm on Facebook. They can look for me on the Facebook page [And HE Became MAN](#). Also, they can also look at my group's page, which is [CARPA San Diego](#).

ALICE: Sounds good. Well, Samuel, thank you so much for talking with me today.

SAMUEL: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to just reach out and let people know what we are doing in the disabled community.

Wrap-up

[hip hop music]

♪ How far will they go?
Oh yeah, yeah
How far will they go?
Oh yeah, yeah.... ♪

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the *Disability Visibility Project*, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture. All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

You can also find out more about Jason and Samuel's work on my website.

The audio producer for this episode is produced by Cheryl Green. Introduction by Lateef McLeod. Theme music by Wheelchair Sports Camp.

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Thanks for listening, and see you on the Internets! Byeee!!

♪ Rock it to the blast off
Stop, drop dance off ♪