
Back to Back Theatre pushes the boundaries of performance in terms of form, in terms of what it means to act, and in terms of what it means to respond. The company comprises an ensemble of actors who are “perceived” to have intellectual disabilities, and it is from the observations, experiences, and interests of this ensemble that the initial ideas for each performance emerge. These ideas are the basis for intensive periods of improvisation with the company’s artistic director Bruce Gladwin to develop the final performance. Like their previous work Ganesh versus the Third Reich (2011), Back to Back’s Super Discount was a play that directly confronted the politics of representation. Yet, it was different from Ganesh in the sense that it was a performance stripped bare—a “poor-theatre” aesthetic prevailed. This was a work with “super discount” superheroes. The space was exposed, frames were removed, and we could see the cast with minimal props—deliberately exposing the framing devices used to construct and contain the theatrical space. However, lines were blurred. While spectators entered the space to an impressive smoke vortex center stage, there was a sense that once the smoke dissipated, theatricality vanished with it; spectators felt that instead of seeing a finished performance, they were watching a group of actors holding workshop discussions or rehearsing something yet to be finalized. Performers played themselves auditioning for roles and discussing what it took to inhabit a character. They wondered how one might best play “Mark”—an ensemble member obsessed with superheroes, but apparently unable to play one. As in all of Back to Back’s works, what seemed on one level a simple question turned out to be difficult. Unpacking this question, the performance revealed the complexities and limits involved in depicting disability, in researching and performing a character, and in attempting to get it right—in effect, to be the very best actor possible.

From the beginning, the auditionees for the role of Mark discussed his characteristics. Questions about whether or not he made eye contact when he talked, and whether he had Asperger’s or a developmental disorder, as well as Down syndrome, were raised. They agreed that, in fact, he had a number of conditions, as well as some hearing loss, and so they wondered about how to play the character properly. Mark looked on. As things progressed, another company member, Simon, explained to him that he would play “a fictional version” of him, but for “dramatic purposes” he would talk more than Mark generally does. Discussions arose about who could play whom, how one might go about playing a “retarded” (Super Discount 7) person, and how to create a technically flawless representation of that person.

As the performance progressed, the discussion became more heated and objectifying. For instance, Brian wondered whether a performer with Down syndrome was needed to play a person with Down syndrome—that is, to play Mark. Scott, Simon, Brian, and David, the only nondisabled performer in the group, talked about which aspects of Mark’s disability should be emphasized and how; they even...
Brian and David audition in *Super Discount*. (Photo: Jeff Busby.)

Mark (Super Discount Superhero) defeats David (Bad Guy) in *Super Discount*. (Photo: Jeff Busby.)
asked him questions about his habits to assist with their research. When he talks, Mark tilts his head to the side. Brian explained that this is called “bird tilt,” and they discussed how they might represent this – going to the extent of looking it up in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) for a full description. In the process of the discussions, the issue arose of how a “normal” actor might play a disabled actor. The approaches taken by Daniel Day Lewis (in *My Left Foot*) and Dustin Hoffman (in *Rain Man*) were considered, and the idea of impersonating someone to achieve authenticity was canvassed. Things became even more tricky, however, when Brian asked David how he might impersonate someone with an intellectual disability. Although David indicated that this would be “sort of cruel” (12), he also played a disabled actor auditioning for the superhero role. Scott accused him of adding to “the stereotypes of people with disabilities” (14), and in response David revealed his own problems with representation. He expressed a sense of marginalization, explaining that he had felt invisible at post-show Q&A sessions where he did not receive the same praise as the others. He explained that he was using this rejection as motivation. This revelation further complicated the politics of representation by highlighting the kinds of assumptions we often make in our responses to the other; it also generated a sense of confusion about how to react to David’s revelation that he felt as if he were “dismissible.”

Toward the end of the performance, Simon began to feel awkward. He felt that his performance of Mark was, after all, discriminatory, as the two performers were very different. Despite attempts by the others to placate him by arguing that they were in a “post-disability” (18) landscape, he was not happy. Finally, Scott suggested that Mark play “Mark,” and Mark agreed. David lifted Mark onto the table. He lay there motionless; it began to snow “Mark,” and Mark agreed. David lifted Mark onto the table. He lay there motionless; it began to snow

Super Discount was Back to Back stripped bare. It was a show that undermined notions of authenticity and even artifice; a show that reminded us that no matter who you are or who you are going to perform, research is important though it is limited. The performance revealed that despite all the categories in DSM-IV and all the attempts to get Mark “right,” the best person to perform Mark in this production was Mark himself. He was the triumphant superhero who, when the lights came up, could not get down from the table.

Asking what it means to perform, the work demanded that we reflect on perception, perception management, and the transitions between image and reality. *Super Discount* left us contemplating the ways in which Back to Back managed, yet again, to push the boundaries of speaking and showing and, in the process, to uncover the complex ways in which prejudice and vulnerability, strength and frailty, audacity and hope operate to make us human.

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What does it take to stop a war? *Measure Back*, a collaboration between director Christopher McElroen and writer/director/performer T. Ryder Smith, retells *The Iliad* in order to “measure back” to war’s origins. Like McElroen’s 2007 *Waiting for Godot*, performed and set in the Ninth Ward of New Orleans, *Measure Back* engages a community of spectator-citizens with transhistorical ethical dilemmas. Drawing from previous experiments in storytelling, media integration, and audience participation, such as *Living in Exile* (2011), McElroen and Smith problematized tacit acceptance of violence by requiring audience members to act and speak before forty other spectator-citizens. While recent immersive work has fetishized the one-on-one interaction, *Measure Back* argues that politically meaningful interventions must occur in public.

The piece is a series of performative encounters and Homeric vignettes. As I entered, performer Dionne Audain gave me a brick and chalk: “Write