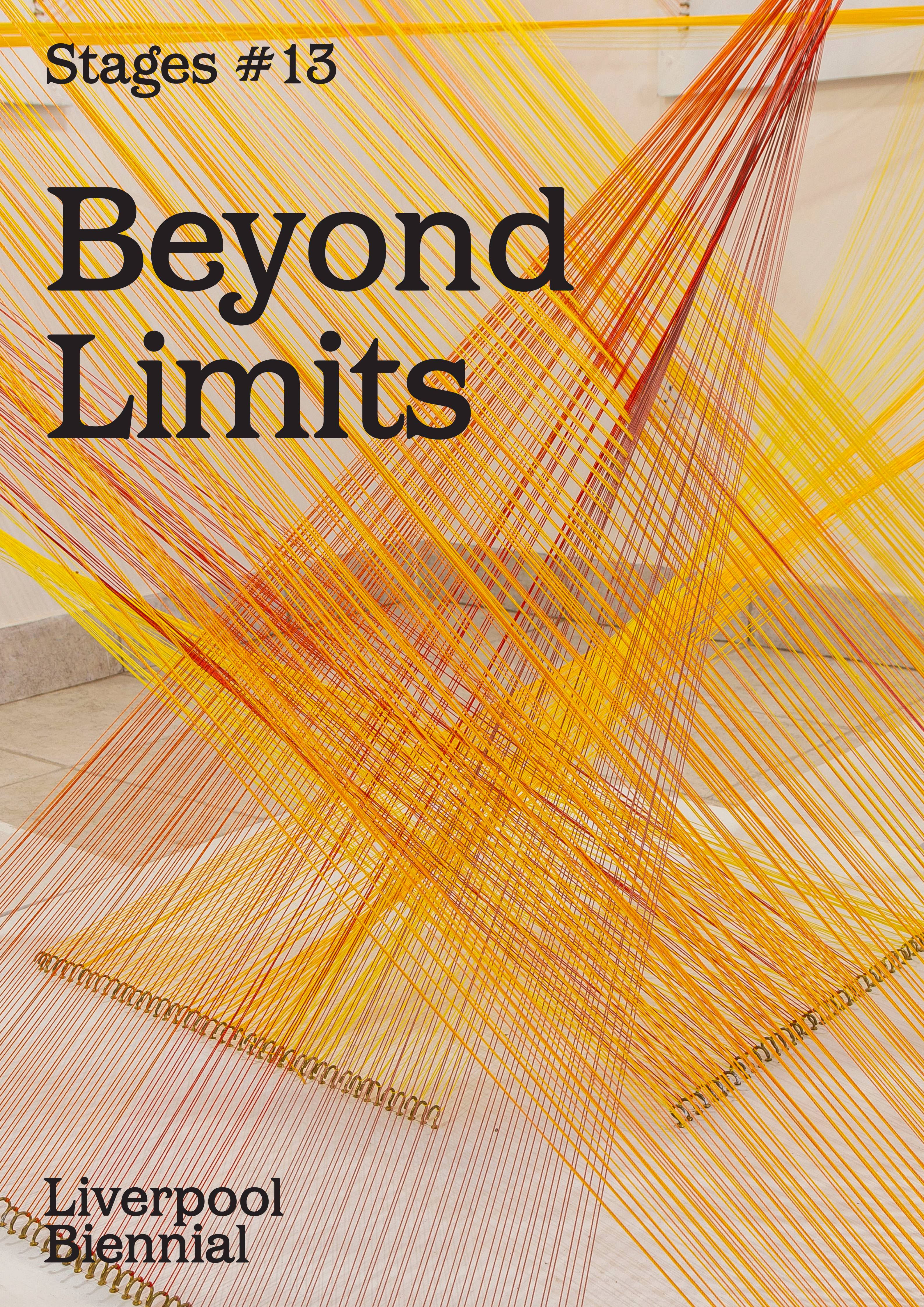

Stages #13

Beyond Limits

Liverpool
Biennial

Introduction

Dr Erin Pritchard & Dr Claire Penketh

Beyond Limits: Disability at the Heart of the Arts, is the focus of the 13th issue of Stages Journal. The symposium was co-produced by Liverpool Biennial, partnering with DaDa and the Centre for Culture and Disability Studies (CCDS) at Liverpool Hope University, and took place on 6th November, at FACT, Liverpool.

These partnerships, and the work that went into delivering Beyond Limits, were initiated as a way for Liverpool Biennial to explore the premise of 'A Biennial for Everyone' through the lens of disability. This initial work, which followed the symposium and the subsequent development of this issue of Stages, was all made possible through funding from Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

Dr Claire Penketh, Professor of Disability and Art Education, introduced the CCDS, which recently celebrated its 15th anniversary. Founded in 2009 by Professor David Bolt, the CCDS is internationally recognised for challenging social inequalities experienced by disabled people as a result of cultural factors, including a multitude of disability representations in literature, television and film and music, to name a few. Its core members, most of whom are based at Liverpool Hope University, are known for their work predominantly within cultural disability studies.

This one-day symposium aimed to engage and foreground a range of disabled artists and practitioners working within the Liverpool region and beyond. Cathy Mager (Artist, Curator and Director of Spectroscope) provided an insightful and thought provoking keynote that addressed the importance of Disability arts in promoting Deaf culture

This journal includes documentation of Strings of Hope, an installation by Tanzanian artist Lilian Munuo, who was part of Biennials Connect, the international curator cohort partnership between Liverpool Biennial and British Council. Born from Munuo's personal journey of navigating disability and self-expression, the installation transforms simple threads into powerful metaphors of resilience and optimism. Through woven forms and sculpted elements, Munuo invites viewers to trace lines of struggle and triumph, reflecting on strength, creativity, and the enduring capacity for hope.

Going beyond what is typically expected within Disability Arts, the contributions to this special issue include a focus on dwarfism, a condition that remains on the margins of the disability community, including within Disability Arts. Dwarfism is popular within the entertainment industry. It is probably one of the few conditions which is mistaken more for a form of entertainment than an actual disability. Pritchard (2021) argues that dwarfism's identity as a disability must be hidden in order for stereotypes of the condition to remain popular within the entertainment industry.

The symposium launched Dr Pritchard's latest edited book, Dwarfism Arts and Advocacy: Creating Our Own Positive Identity, published by Emerald. As Pritchard (2024) argues, dwarfism is often missing from Disability Arts. This special issue contains Tamm Reynolds' chapter, Midgitte Bardot: Using drag performance to challenge people's perceptions and attitudes of dwarfism. What is interesting is that Reynolds, aka Midgitte Bardot, explains how they feel more welcome within Queer spaces than Disability arts, because their experiences in the latter include being questioned as a disabled person and subsequently feeling like an outcast. This forces disabled artists to question their own prejudices in relation to inclusion within the sector. How can Disability Arts call itself an inclusive space for disabled people when it actively excludes those who do not fit the ideal disabled person?

Reynold’s work is one of shock, so be prepared for references that may make you feel uncomfortable, including her poem that demonstrates the emotional impact of derogatory representations of dwarfism. Whilst readers with dwarfism will likely relate to Reynold’s poem, it is hoped that readers who do not have dwarfism can take away an important message. People with dwarfism are not figures of entertainment, and we do not ‘worship' performers with dwarfism who engage in stereotypical performances that undermine our equal standing within society.

The special issue continues with the promotion of dwarf voices, with the inclusion of interviews from Dr Amanda Cachia with Amy Claire Mills, and Dr Debra Keenahan with Dr Erin Pritchard.

Dr Keenahan, an Australian artist and advocate with dwarfism, explains how she uses sculpture to educate and challenge problematic behaviours towards people with dwarfism. More specifically, Keenahan engages with the photographer, David Heavy’s Realpolitik to ‘reverse the stare’. As a result, Keenahan’s work demonstrates how Disability Arts is important to challenge long held beliefs about dwarfism and the subsequent behaviours from general society. However, while spaces can provide refuge, they can also be restricting.

Dr Keenahan explains why it is important to move beyond Disability Arts in order to avoid ghettoisation. As Cathy Mager also highlighted in her keynote, Disability Arts normally exist ‘down the back’, ‘round the corner’, or in the ‘other bit’. Thus, it leaves the important question open, how can we advocate for all disabled people beyond our own spaces? How can we also maintain this advocacy once the biennial has finished and plans are made for the next theme.

Visual notes. © Gee Collins

In Conversation with Dr Debra Keenahan

Dr Erin Pritchard & Dr Debra Keenahan

Dr Erin Pritchard:

Please tell me a little bit about yourself, including what you do, especially with relation to dwarfs?

Dr Debra Keenahan:

Well, I have two strings to my bow. The first half of my professional life, I focused in the area of psychology. I am a registered psychologist, and I received my first PhD in psychology on the subject of dehumanization. That was back in the 1990s. I worked first of all with the multiple sclerosis society and in prisons as a prison psychologist. I then moved into academia to complete my PhD. I stayed there, focusing on dehumanization in human rights and with a focus on disability. I then moved into visual arts where I received my second PhD. In visual arts I focused on disability aesthetics. Looking at the capture of disability aesthetics using the critical social model of disability. I'm a multidisciplinary artist going across photography, sculpture, and of course, I'm an advocate of disability. I have consulted all around disability with the Human Rights Commission here [in Australia] and also with the National Art Gallery and the National Association for the Visual Arts.

EP:

Can you just please explain your journey as an artist? Including any barriers that you have experienced?

DK:

As an alternative career path, it really started 13 years ago, and then I commenced my studies in 2015. What I found is that the joy of art engaged a very broad spectrum of people in a very constructive manner that people would find non-threatening. You could raise very, very powerful problematic issues with people and get them to engage in some very difficult material and open up conversations in a much easier way when using art. As regards difficulties for any artist, I would say the first thing that immediately comes to mind is funding. It's an expensive exercise and so that would probably be the number one issue. And then, of course, it is finding people to work with, depending on the discipline that you work in. I've always worked in teams, even when I was doing things like the photography. And even with painting, I would say, you work in a team because your subject is part of it. Obviously, it's getting those collaborations right. They can be problematic, but when they work it's brilliant.

EP:

Do you think people with dwarfism are adequately represented within disability arts?

DK:

Well, in all honesty, my preference would be to talk about arts generally. The reason for that is that, when it comes to the issue of dwarfism, and the representation of dwarfism in the arts, that's where we fall down. And the reason I want to emphasize arts generally is that, for me, what can all too often happen is that when we're talking about disability arts, it becomes almost like a Ghettoization of the subject. And I think that needs to be avoided at all costs. So, I'd like to see a mainstreaming of all artists, but particularly the representation of disability in arts, in film, in all of those creative industries. What is the greatest issue, I think, is stereotypical representation, particularly of the condition of dwarfism.

EP:

Can you elaborate on that a little?

DK:

Well, you know, I think we're all familiar with the Disney representations of dwarfism. We're only now getting very good representation. You know we're getting strong characters, constructive, positive characters now through the work of Peter Dinklage and Kiruna Stamell - an Australian I might add - over there in in England. Kiruna, for example, was a presenter on Play School over here, which was brilliant. That was an absolutely magnificent role and hats off to the ABC [Australian Television Network]. For that's exactly what needs to happen, the representation of people with disability in mainstream everyday roles where their disability shouldn't have to be the subject of their role or the sole focus of their role. Obviously, side narratives would be that they're also powerful avenues for bringing up particular issues. But if you've got them there purely as comic relief then you're not doing us any justice.

EP:

Can you please tell me more about the realpolitik of disabling dwarf identity formation?

DK:

The realpolitik of disability representation comes very much from David Hevey, who is a photographer who did a lot of work around disability. But for me, the realpolitik pertaining to that term, dwarf representation, also leans on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work, pertaining to being visually conspicuous, but politically and socially erased. The realpolitik of dwarfism identity that I'm referring to is reversing that role of being the subject who is stared at, rather becoming the subject who is looking back and making the observer accountable for their behaviour. Because I would argue with relational disability, aesthetics, critical disability, that what needs to be captured are those microaggressions when it pertains to dwarfism that accumulate over social interactions that actually present the discourse or develop the discourse that an individual has a particular disabling identity. It pertains to my earlier work on dehumanization. It's capturing the interface between the dwarf subject and the society at large, and what is the dynamic of disabling in social interactions, in the social environment.

EP:

How does your artwork challenge representations?

DK:

Let's focus on the sculpture. What my work endeavours to do is not focus on the physical difference of dwarfism, which has historically been the focus in the visual arts in particular. It's sort of like sitting, you know, presenting this physical difference and going, `Look, look at this, look at this difference', and emphasizing the difference. Whereas my focus is on emphasizing the social interaction. Now with the sculpture, for example, how do I change that dynamic? Well, first of all, what I did was place the figure who is me actually, but three of me, in a triangular form. So that the person observing, looking at the sculpture, would have to move around the sculpture. I actually placed the figure in a stance that all too often people with the dwarfism are far too familiar with. Which is somebody bending down and talking to us like a child. Hence, the title Condescension. Having the figure in that stance and triangulated, so that the observer goes around the sculpture. I actually bent the torsos and the heads, so that a person is always being looked at by one of the figures. Hence it's the observed observing the observer. That is the realpolitik that David Hevey is talking about. It is the observed, the traditionally observed, beginning to observe the observers.

EP:

What is the message you want to give to your viewers? What message should people take away?

DK:

Well, what I try to do with all my art, not just the sculpture, but all of it, is to immerse the participants. I actually prefer to refer to them as participants rather than an audience because I like to think of my work as engaging. They participate with the work, and my aim is to immerse them into my lived experience so that people get an understanding of what it is like to be us (people with dwarfism). After my performances there would be awkward conversations. One of the questions people would ask is, ‘Well, what is it like to be you?’. Or they would actually start off with, ‘What's it like to be small?’. I'd say, ‘Well, you already know that.’ I said, ‘You've been a child. I'm about the size of an average 9-year-old. You've been a 9-year-old. You know what it's like to be short.’ Then they'll go, ‘Oh, yes, yes, but what's it like to be you?’ It's a different dynamic. It's not just a matter of being small. It's the social dynamics that come with the recognition of the difference that matters and that's what I endeavour to do with my work.

EP:

What would you like people to know about dwarfism? What would you like to them to be aware of? Or what would you like to challenge?

DK:

I think the greatest thing for people to understand is that for me, the greatest limitations on people with dwarfism is not our height. It's other people's attitudes. That is what I would like people to walk away with. An understanding that it's not the height that's the problem. It's the broader society's attitudes towards our corporality that is really the main limitation.

EP:

What kind of attitudes do we as a society have?

DK:

Some of them can be very, very negative. For example, we can be subjects of jokes. We are not taken seriously. We are treated very disrespectfully in the sense of being spoken down to like children. A subject that I'm currently working on, we are not allowed to be seen to be sexual. So, in other words, we are not seen as equal. Those negative attitudes can be quite broad. People may think they are broad-minded until they are actually confronted with a potentially challenging situation. Let's say, their child's partner. If their child brings home somebody with dwarfism, that can be confronting. One would trust that. Given that the person has chosen a partner with dwarfism, one would assume that they've come from an accepting family. You know that can be one situation, or, for example, if they themselves have a child with dwarfism. It's a very well-known statistic that 80% of people with dwarfism are born to average-sized parents. We may think of ourselves as broad-minded until we're actually confronted with dwarfism. It may be a strong word, but I'd say confronted is also appropriate.

EP:

How do you think parents could be more broad-minded if they have a child with dwarfism? Or what stops them from being broad-minded?

DK:

Well, unfortunately, our society is still very visually dependent. People see too many stereotypical representations. The media doesn't help. There are certainly issues in the medical world, in broader society, pertaining to the notion that somehow height is desirable. The higher the height the more desirable. I think there is an aesthetic that is problematic as well. That needs to be addressed. We all can all too readily become victims of representations and be unaware of the misinformation and stereotypes we hold. So, it is important is to address those stereotypes rather than saying, okay, you've got a child with dwarfism, we can fix that, let's just try and make them taller.

EP:

One last question, any future plans?

DK:

Oh, there are always future plans. There is always the future. I'm currently writing a theatre script on the general subject of disability and sexuality. That will be completed next year. I then have another work at the back of my mind, bubbling away, a comedy, because, as you would be very well aware, not so much disability generally, but certainly people with dwarfism are all too frequently the target of comedy. That will be the next one coming up after this one and then the one after that is about respect for the physical difference of height. And issues around the medical model.

***Dr Debra Keenahan** is an artist, writer, psychologist and disability advocate. She has a PhD in psychology on Dehumanization, and another in visual arts on Critical Disability Aesthetics. Having achondroplasia dwarfism, Debra brings lived experience to understanding the dynamics of interactions of exclusion. As a multidisciplinary artist, Debra's video work was selected for the Cannes Short Film Festival 2022 and her one-woman theatre work Othering featured in the Sydney Festival 2023. Debra has authored numerous books and articles and has acted as a consultant on disability access to the National Gallery of Australia and to the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA). Debra lives in Australia with her husband Rob.*

Keynote Presentation

Cathy Mager

“A few years ago, I made a transition from being a curator working predominantly with hearing and non-disabled people, to becoming an artist initiating disability-led work internationally. One of the key points, and a beautiful moment in my personal journey, was a time when I walked down The Mall in London, having recently completed the Clore Fellowship, a leadership programme in the arts. I passed a memorial on which was written a poem by Ben Okri 'Turn on your light'. The following weekI went to an exhibition at Science Gallery London, which Ben Okri was also attending, which felt like a wonderful coincidence and a magical moment. His poem has since become important to me.

The new era is already here:
Here the new time begins anew.
The new era happens every day,
Every day is a new world,
A new calendar.
All great moments, all great eras,
Are just every moment
And every day writ large.
Thousands of years of loving, failing, killing,
Creating, surprising, oppressing,
And thinking ought now to start
To bear fruit, to deliver their rich harvest.

Will you be at the harvest,
Among the gatherers of new fruits?
Then you must begin today to remake
Your mental and spiritual world,
And join the warriors and celebrants
Of freedom, realisers of great dreams.

You can't remake the world
Without remaking yourself.
Each new era begins within.
It is an inward event,
With unsuspected possibilities
For inner liberation.
We could use it to turn on
Our inward lights.
We could use it to use even the dark
And negative things positively.
We could use the new era
To clean our eyes,
To see the world differently,
To see ourselves more clearly.
Only free people can make a free world.
Infect the world with your light.

Help fulfill the golden prophecies.
Press forward the human genius.
Our future is greater than our past.

About two years after I read that poem, I brought my inner light to the streets of Bristol and founded my company Spectroscope. Spectroscope is an artist collective with an international practice in creating artworks that immerse audiences within dreamscapes, with emotive and uplifting story telling.

For example, the artwork Sign Night was curated for the Arnolfini arts centre and the Bristol Light Festival in 2022. It's a large-scale outdoor projection work showing two women conversing in British Sign Language (BSL) - the vital, visual and versatile language of British deaf communities. Two deaf women share their dreams for the future as they look out over the night sky. Intriguing and sensual, the projected artwork begins with giant hands resembling ships at sea, rocked by waves. The sailing hands represent the lifelong voyage all deaf people must take, navigating discrimination in the hearing world. Sign Night took over the busiest parts of the city with a message that had elements of choreography, text and music. Showing disability arts at the heart of a busy part of the city felt innovative and empowering, countering the exposure disability arts would normally have, often ‘down the back’, ‘round the corner’, in the ‘other bit’. Around 180,000 people saw this artwork over the course of one week. I was unsure whether it would go down well and if people would get it, but I observed people reacting and watching it over again, and I realised it was loved and valued. I understood that I was underestimating my power and the resonance of such work.

I come from a hereditary deaf family. I'm the seventh generation in my family to be deaf. We are born hearing and became deaf in childhood. We have a kind of dual identity of both hearing and deaf. We were excluded from deaf culture. My mother was the first person ever to learn how to sign. She became a really significant activist in the UK, which means that I grew up in a household full of disability rights activists and deaf activists, and we were constantly taken on marches. I grew up with a mixture of people who were really changing things, fighting things, at the time of the Thatcher Government, at a time when there was no funding, no basic access, no captions, no interpreters. I would see them every day, every weekend, going out and doing their sub-cultural arts programmes and festivals, which was such an extraordinary environment. As a child, I did not know this environment was not what everybody else was immersed in, I thought this was normal.

When I became a curator myself, I wanted to bring that with me, but it wasn't straightforward. The aim of my practice is to bring together the communities and stories that are hidden in society and to bring them together through collective work. This means working collaboratively with a range of different artists, musicians, choreographers and visual artists, creating installations that come together in a way that is powerful and impactful. I told myself I would not worry about whether this would be accepted by the ‘Art Gallery World’, and that I would not be concerned if I was not receiving a kind of validation. But as we pursued our projects, it unexpectedly ended up being taken by all the prestigious and brilliant art galleries such as the Wellcome Collection and the Science Gallery London. I think this taught me the importance of keeping track of what matters to you, curating the work that is true and authentic, and this case, proving that disability arts will continue to have the impact that it deserves.”

Since giving this presentation, Cathy discovered that her deaf ancestors did in fact use sign language throughout the 1800s — specifically a Scottish fingerspelling dialect — until the 1920s. With the rise of Oralism, a movement that sought to ban sign language, Cathy's grandfather was discouraged from signing. From the 1920s through to the 1970s, sign language disappeared from the family. It re-emerged when Cathy's mother, Maggie, became active in Deaf politics and advocacy, learning modern British Sign Language. Cathy was then raised within the Deaf community, as her ancestors had been a century earlier.

Visual notes. © Gee Collins

***Cathy Mager** is an artist and curator, and founder of Spectroscope, an international network of artists that create digital dreamscapes and installations in unexpected locations. For Stages #13, we are presenting a transcript taken from Mager’s keynote presentation from Beyond Limits: Disability at the Heart of the Arts, 7th November 2025. She contributed to the symposium with an oral presentation supported by Sign Supported English.*

Ben Okri, Mental Flight*, Head of Zeus, 2022*
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A Girl with Different Abilities

Lilian Munuo

Strings of Hope, Lilian Munuo. Photography: Lameck Balili

In a world where courage blooms,
A girl with strength, a soul that's bright,
With grace, she dances through life's chaos,
Her story rises, day by day

Yet sad is she, for eyes that see,
The stigma's burden was placed on her,
A world unkind, a weight she bears,
Double the struggle, doubled the stares.

But in her heart, a light glows,
A spark within, a steady flow,
For though the world may cast its doubt,
Her spirit soars;

She knows her worth, her soul is defined,
By more than glances, harsh or blind
Her disability is a part, it's true,
But not the essence that shines through.

Embracing self, with love so pure,
Her strength is hers, unique, and new
Being different is not to fear
It is a power she holds dear

Her smile breaks through the darkest gloom
A quiet light that fills the room
Though cruelty tries to dim her way
She finds her worth and chooses to stay

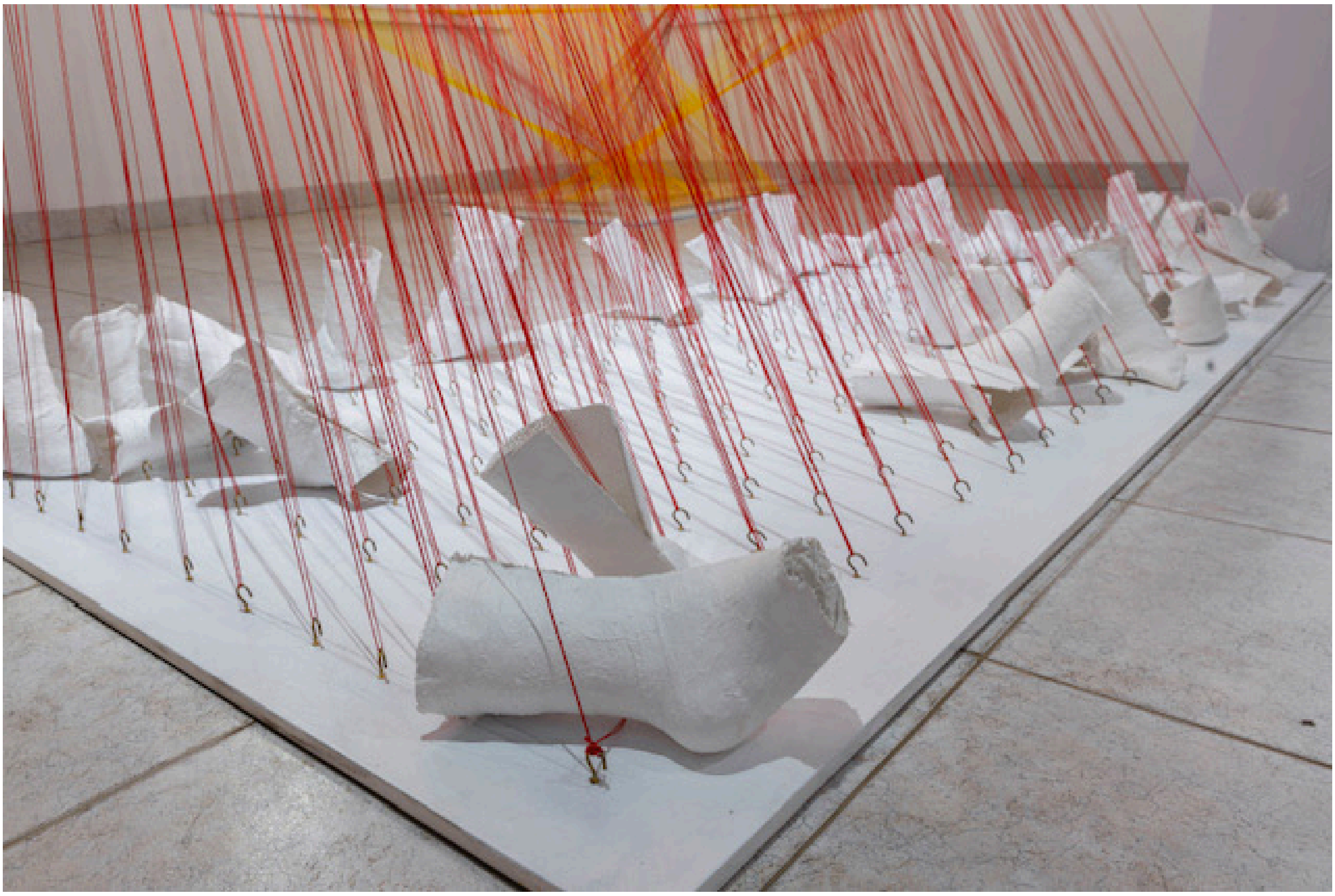
In every hurdle, she finds grace,
A light that glimmers in the space,
Her journey is an inspiring song,
With every step, she'll prove them wrong.

So let the world, with all its injustice,
Behold her essence, vibrant life,
A girl with disability, it's true,
But limitless in all she'll do.

She treasures what sets her apart
And wears it proudly on her heart
A woman strong, she stands with pride
In her, the world’s beauty is magnified

*__**Lilian Munuo**__ is an artist, curator, disability rights advocate, and founder of Beyond the Label Initiative (Tanzania). She was a member of the cohort of international curators who visited Liverpool Biennial 2025 as part of the British Council's Biennials Connect programme.*

Strings of Hope was presented with support from the Goethe-Institut in partnership with Rangi Gallery and Together with Tanzania



Resilient, Lilian Munuo. Photography: Lameck Balili

In Conversation: Amy Claire Mills and Amanda Cachia explore Deep End

Amy Claire Mills & Dr Amanda Cachia

Visual notes. © Gee Collins

LB2025 artist Amy Claire Mills and Dr Amanda Cachia explore space, curation and the importance of swimming pools in a conversation about Deep End, exhibited at Bluecoat as part of BEDROCK, Liverpool Biennial 2025.

Amy Claire Mills:

Hi Amanda, I’m Amy Claire Mills, and I'm an artist from Sydney, Australia, and I live and work on the lands of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation. I grew up in Canberra, which is our nation's capital, and then moved to Sydney to attend art school, where I studied a fine arts degree at UNSW. I've been a practising artist for the last seven to eight years, exhibiting extensively across Australia. The Liverpool Biennial was my first big international exhibition and my largest commission to date, which was very cool. I'm a textile, installation and performance artist, so multidisciplinary, and I’m also disabled. My disability encompasses chronic illness, neurodivergence, as well as mental health.

I love being an artist, and I've also done a lot of curatorial work, which is really exciting, and that feeds into my activist-based art practice. I primarily make work about disability culture, which starts from my own perspective. I want my art to be something that people connect with, even if they haven't experienced disability. I love creating experiential art, the kind you step into and feel completely immersed in, where the space transforms you and shifts your perspective.

Dr Amanda Cachia:

I'm Amanda Cachia and I am Professor of Practice in Museum Studies at Arizona State University (ASU) in Phoenix, Arizona, USA. I'm also an affiliate faculty member for their BA in Disability Studies, which is really awesome. I just started the job here and in spring I get to teach my very first class specializing in disability art, called Curating Disability in the Art Museum. I'm really thrilled to be able to share my expertise with the students at ASU. I'm also a curator with 25 years of experience in this role and for the last 15 years I've been curating exhibitions solely about disability.

In my previous career as a gallery director and curator I was always focused on social justice. I had curated exhibitions on feminist art, and a show on war and violence and, when I was based in Canada, I curated a show working with Indigenous artists. However, I had never really curated anything on disability, and that's why I wanted to do my PhD in art history, focusing on the connection between disability and contemporary art. Then I focused all my energy on curating disability, because I felt there was a noticeable gap in the art world - there just weren’t any representations. I remember as an 18-year-old going into museums where I grew up in Wollongong in Australia, and just feeling like there was nothing on disability at all and that was really frustrating. I also identify as disabled. I'm a person of short stature, I'm 4 foot 3 inches tall, and have a rare form of dwarfism. I felt like any representations of little people or people of short stature in art history were very problematic, and just felt like it was very offensive, actually. I know Erin Pritchard has recognized this in her work. So, I was like, ‘I just really need to make an intervention’, and so I started curating in that area. I studied for the PhD and now I have published a couple of books. My second book, Hospital Aesthetics: Disability, Medicine, Activism, has just been published and I've just finished Rehabilitating the Asylum, which explores mental health, justice and contemporary art. My next project is a survey of the political history of disability arts since the 1980s and how that intersects with the civil rights and feminist movements.

So, Amy, it would be great to know more about your practice. The disability lens is unique and really important, and I feel like we still don't have enough work like yours out in the world - that's why your work is so critical. Can you talk a little bit more about your project for the Liverpool Biennial? I’m not so familiar with it, so can you talk about it from the ground up?

ACM:

Yeah, so before that, I just want to comment, Amanda, on not seeing representations of disability in art. I tell this story all the time, but when I was at university, I was told by one of my lecturers that my art was too niche and that it wouldn't connect with audiences because I made work about disability culture. I was very disheartened after I left uni, and thought I was never going to be successful. My professors couldn't give me many examples of disabled artists in contemporary art, so I had to do all the research myself, so I totally get that. This was seven years ago, and I think things are changing now, which is really great, and you have two fabulous books published that people can draw upon for research. Thinking about the Liverpool Biennial, I want to go back to my past self and say, hey, Amy, guess what? One day, you’ll be on one of the biggest stages in the world. Your art will matter, it’ll be seen and celebrated. I’d love to go back to baby artist Amy and say, "Don’t worry, keep going!"

My work for the Liverpool Biennial was commissioned for the 13th edition of the festival, themed BEDROCK and curated by the awesome Marie-Anne McQuay. The work was co-commissioned with DaDa, a Liverpool Disability and Deaf Arts Organization.

There was a curatorial statement for BEDROCK that all the artists were invited to consider when developing this commission. One of the themes I took from it was the concept of third spaces and community spaces, and that's what really ignited my artwork Deep End. I had never been to Liverpool, so I initially found it hard to think about how exactly the work would develop, but I had the opportunity to go on a research trip to the city, which is when I fell in love with Liverpool and ended up discovering some really niche history facts that fed into the work. Conceptually, I was looking at the idea of third spaces and whether they were accessible to the community, and what that meant. At the time, I was doing hydrotherapy, and I had formed this little community of people who were there for so many different reasons: rehabilitation, pain management, strength training. Over six months we'd meet weekly to float, chat and gossip in the pool. As I learned more about everyone's lives, I realized the pool wasn't just a place for therapy, it was also a community space. So then I began researching the history of pools in Liverpool. I even told the group, as soon as I got the commission, that the work would be inspired by our time together at hydrotherapy.

I was interested in how important community pools are, and that connected back to Liverpool in a really beautiful way. Liverpool was the first city in the UK to have public wash houses, set up by an amazing woman, Kitty Wilkinson - she's a bit of a patron saint in Liverpool. She established the first public wash house at a time when women didn't yet have the right to vote. Liverpool was a port city with outbreaks of cholera and typhus, so they set up these wash houses so people could come in and get their clothes washed and have a bath. People started loving the public baths and hanging out in them as social spaces, and I think the last one closed in the 1980s. This led to the city building public pools for families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Throughout their history, the pools across Liverpool were used for lots of different community events. They would cover the pool to hold dances or boxing matches, and there was also a travelling dolphin show in the 1970s. They would drain the pool of chlorine and fill it with seawater, then host dolphin shows there. In my work Deep End, you can spot dolphin motifs, a little nod to those 1970s shows. Probably not great for the dolphins, I'll admit, but such a random, fascinating bit of history. It really made me realize how significant and fascinating these spaces are.

I love the idea that pools are thought of as a staple in the community, but people don't really recognize how vital they are, especially to the disabled community. Marie-Anne, the curator, shared with me that the UK has been going through a period of austerity, with many public pools closing or under threat of closure. That made me want to create the work even more. Swimming has always helped me manage my disability symptoms, so there's this beautiful through-line of my own connection to the work as well. I felt like it was a bit of a love letter and a reminder to the community to not take these spaces for granted.

Deep End leans into a kitsch aesthetic, with bright giant inflatables and glittery letters spelling 'Deep End'. It reflects on disability experience and how unpredictable it can be, sometimes feeling like staring into the deep abyss. There is also a large mural across one of the walls, which was my take on the Liverpool coat of arms and another nod to Liverpool's history and connection to water. Neptune and Triton are part of the coat of arms, as well as the Liver Bird, the symbol of Liverpool.

As part of the commission, I created Hydro Disco, part pool party, part AquaFit class, but made disco. I collaborated with three incredible UK artists: Jordan Connerty, Amina Atiq and Natalia Bedkowska. It was such a fun experience to use a space that maybe people don’t connect with art, and to create a public programme and performance piece.

AC:

Yeah, that is brilliant. So many things you've said have brought so many different thoughts to my mind. So, am thinking about the power of the pool as a third space, because you said it's an important community space. In your writing about Deep End, you've talked a little bit about this kind of philosophical idea of the third space as well, drawing from different scholars and I was thinking of Homi Bhabha, who developed this idea of the third space as being an in-between liminal space and it's a space that challenges notions of purity. I really like that idea because it gives disabled bodies space to be themselves and that's another reason why I connect to this idea of the pool. When I was young I would love going into the pool because my body could be hidden and people couldn't see that I was little. I just remember using it as a space that brought me comfort because it's the one space where I felt I couldn't be noticed as different. It was also a place that protected me - enveloped me. I just remember going and thinking I can't wait to get in the water just so no one noticed me any more because people couldn't tell how tall I was once I was in the water.

I'm just wondering how other disabled people might relate to that, people who have physical disabilities, because you get in there, and you can just see each other's heads and you don't necessarily notice different limbs, or body proportions, or whatever it might be. And then I was thinking, I don't know whether it's an Australian expression Amy, but when somebody says you're going off at the deep end, it means you're losing it, you're getting cranky, or you're getting mad. I'm trying to think of the deep end. You described it so beautifully just now, as layers of complexity and deepness to disability, but I also like this idea of losing control. I'm thinking of madness a lot right now, because I'm working on a book about the asylum. So, this idea of losing control - I mean, sometimes disabled people have no control over our bodies, but that can also be generative and productive. Being in the water is a place where your body might have lost control, and because you're in the water, it's a different kind of medium for your body to engage with - where you can just float and be free. It's quite liberating, I think.

By the way, I'm a huge fan of swimming too. I love being in the water and the pool, so this work really resonated with me. So, I guess I just wanted to ask if any of those thoughts that I just shared with you resonated at all as you were considering this as well.

ACM:

Yes. Thinking back to my childhood, water and swimming always felt otherworldly to me. We spend so much of our time on land, and being in the water, floating, diving under, felt completely different, like my body could move in ways it couldn’t anywhere else. But the idea of the third space, when I was thinking about accessible third spaces in this context, a third space, is supposed to be a free community space, so technically, a public pool might not fit into the correct definition of a third space. But there are lots of examples, like public parks or barbershops. My mum goes to cards every week, she plays bridge, so that would be thought of as a third space at a community hall. But I thought about the public pool because usually, if they're run by councils here in Australia, they're quite cheap to get in, and you can stay all day. But going back to that concept of a third space, I asked myself, are these community hubs also meeting the access needs for my community as well? And that's where I found it really hard, because we haven’t built our spaces to include everyone.

I also liked what you said about it being a liminal space, that maybe it doesn't fully exist, but maybe it does in ways that we haven't thought about before. And so that's why I wanted to engage with the concept of a public pool, because I don't think people see it for what it is.

AC:

I also think that the pool is a kind of equalizer, like a space where everyone seems to be on the same level, literally. I mean, for me, it really does strip everything away. People just want to enjoy themselves and being in the water is very meditative in a way. It's like you're in the moment and you're just focusing on your body and how it's engaging with the pool. I also just want to credit other scholars who recognize the power of the pool and disability culture. Petra Kuppers is the person that I've cited before, and, you know, Petra's done so many different performances and workshops with communities around the world, actually in the pool, recognizing that the pool is such a generative space for disabled people. I would recommend looking into her work further.

I'd like to add a couple of final questions:

What kind of responses did you get from people while you were there and now the project has concluded?

What other thoughts do you have for future projects?

Do you think that your next projects will connect in some way, or are you done with the pool now?

ACM:

I was only there for the opening, but I think there was a very positive response. From what I've gathered from Anne-Marie and the team at Liverpool Biennial, the work was really well received. It was such a bright, happy, colourful space, and I made sure there was a lot of access within the work. For example, I created a giant tactile towel from different coloured and patterned fabrics. I literally spent months searching through different towels and then patchworking them all together. We also produced a creative audio description of the work, which was such a beautiful part of the commission. I was mentored by the brilliant Mandy Redvers-Rowe, who works across theatre to develop Audio Description in the UK. We developed the idea of guiding people through the space as if they were swimming in the pool.

Having objects that people can touch, feel, and cuddle is an important aspect of my art. Usually, in galleries, you just use your visual sense, and we miss out on how people can learn through their senses. I'm very sensory-seeking, so I like to touch things to understand how they are constructed. It's almost like locking the experience into my brain. If I just see something, I don't remember it well, but if I touch, it locks it in for me and I remember that experience so much more. That's what I wanted to give to people - that kind of tactile sensation. I love working with textiles, thinking about the textures and how they play off one another, whether in harmony or contrast.

What's wild is I'm actually doing a Hydro Disco again here in Sydney, come December for International Day of People with Disability. This time, I'm collaborating with an extraordinary group of Australian artists from Midnight Feast, Sarah Armstrong, Heath Ramsay, Thomas Maxwell, and Kylie Heart. I'm also lucky to be working alongside my friend, the remarkable theatre maker Bedelia Lowrenčev.

In terms of what's coming up next, I'm going to do an exhibition in Canberra, my home city, in February 2026, which is a restaging of Deep End, but I'm looking at Canberra pools. Its first public pool was called The Swimming Pool, which I just love. No notes, Canberra! So, right now I'm looking at the history of pools there.

I'm also interested in libraries as third spaces, and the way they connect people to weird and wonderful objects. I find them fascinating spaces of knowledge, translation and decoding, and I want to explore that through a neurodiversity paradigm lens.

AC:

Good luck. I just want to credit you and say I'm really pleased that you're doing that, you know, you're an advocate for haptic activism. An area that is really important in my research as well, is thinking about creative access. We need more work that can be touched, and I had mentioned an Australian artist that does that work as well. There are so many others in our disability communities that would appreciate your work because you can touch it and it allows more of a sensory engagement. You should send me the information for your event in December, because I'm actually coming to Australia for a week in the holidays. I'm not sure if your event is going be in that time, but if it is, I would love to come to the Hydro Pool Party!

__Amy Claire Mills__ is a textile artist, curator, and producer. A graduate of the University of NSW with a Bachelor of Fine Arts (Honours), Amy is a neurodivergent and disabled artist whose work delves into themes of advocacy, identity, and resistance. Focused on disability culture, Amy explores its social and political dimensions as both an artist and subject. Her art serves as a form of protest, blending softness, tactility, empathy, and care with elements of dissent, disruption, and provocation.

Since 2016, Amy has worked with national institutions, festivals and galleries, such as the Sydney Biennale, Art Gallery of NSW, Firstdraft, and Outer Space, to curate and produce exhibitions and events. Her focus is on creative access and increasing representation for disabled artists across the arts and cultural sector.

__Dr Amanda Cachia__ is Professor of Practice in Museum Studies in the School of Art at the Herberger Institute for Design and the Arts at Arizona State University and Affiliate Faculty in the Disability Studies B.A. Her research interests include disability art history, theory and activism, crip curatorial practices and access aesthetics, museums, institutional critique, and social justice, and critical disability approaches to translation, movement, medicine, and health.

Disabled Stars

Amina Atiq

Knock, knocking your door down, pity no more
no token trust, only space enough for our bodies
to create our defined-excellence of art.
Who speaks? When old walls refuse to grow
weigh the lives of disabled arts upon
their traditional scales, worthy of art
misnamed "community is lesser in their eyes?"

We refuse the step to the ramp
art school without a lift, frames hanging beyond
the gaze of a wheelchair user, gallery halls vanish
without interpretation, applaud the image of us,
but silence our voices, future once promised
remains broken, our slow burn outshines
those who rage in whispers, counting leftover coins.

Knock, knocking your door down,
this love story for our bodies to create, fail safely
and builds in a pause, our pace is not failure
when rest shapes a masterpiece. Patience is a gift
for you to search within the house you built
that defines great art and excludes ours.

Knock, knocking your door down, shake the beasts
who frown, steady through the storms and meet us
at the lighthouse. Disabled stars shine when those who act
and promises are born. Thank you for moving with us,
I wish the future is yours to take bravely.

In memory of Garry Robson (1952-2024)

He once said in our Critical Friends Group meetings, "There are disabled stars in the art world that would attract audiences. They are ambassadors and would bring a stamp of approval to a festival."

Based on Garry's powerful quote, I was inspired to create this poem

Visual notes. © Gee Collins

*<u>**Amina Atiq**</u> is a freelance creative working across the cultural and educational sector; published poet, performance artist, creative practitioner and award-winning community activist. Currently sits on the Anti-racism board for Curious Minds & Diversity Action Group at the Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse Theatres and Critical Friends Group at Liverpool Biennial.*

BBC Words First Finalist, awarded Steve Biko Young Achievers, featured 100 Inspirational Women of Merseyside and Future List 2022 of Northern Woman awards. Featured on Poetry Please, BBC 4 Radio, Arab News, The Independent, Cordite Poetry Review, Queensland Poetry Festival: Use Words First (Wrecking Ball Press), Not Quite Right for Us (Flipped Eye Publisher, Speaking Volumes), British Muslim TV, Eurovision 2023 and many more

Midgitte Bardot: Using Drag Performance to Challenge People's Perceptions and Attitudes of Dwarfism

Tamm Reynolds and Dr Erin Pritchard

Introduction

Midgitte Bardot is Tamm Reynolds' drag alter ego, who they have been per- forming as, in various UK venues since 2017. While drag performances are well known for expressing queer identity, in this chapter Tamm Reynolds reflects upon how engaging in drag performances allows them to push for a more positive and realistic dwarf identity. Drag shows have a history of combining politics with entertainment (Taylor et al., 2004). This intersection between sexuality and disability, both of which have been oppressed throughout history, permits Tamm to engage with political performances. Tamm, who can be considered a crip, queer solo performer, believes that having a drag alter ego permits them to do anything with an air of confidence that someone like them is usually not afforded. In this case, it is to be sexy, while exposing the everyday discrimination they face as a person with dwarfism. This is not only to raise awareness but also to chal- lenge any preconceived ideas that the audience may have about dwarfism.

This chapter explores how Midgitte's performances often include shocking material, which some may find offensive. In particular, Tamm includes a poem they recite to audiences to express the psycho-emotional disablism she faces as a result of the actions of one midget entertainer. However, this poem is not the usual offence that you would expect. Instead of mocking people with dwarfism, it mocks a midget entertainer to demonstrate the anger they feel towards them due to the repercussions people like her experience as a result of the choices they make. Referring to themselves as a 'political freak', Tamm demonstrates how they engages in shock performance to raise awareness.

Introducing Midgitte Bardot

Midgitte's performances are an intersection of LGBTQIA+ and disability, engaging with both queer and crip work. One of their latest appearances was in the 2023 July edition of the iconic fashion magazine Vogue, in the LGBTQIA+ special issue of the magazine. Engaging with drag, the purpose of Midgitte Bardot is to provide a queer crip solo performance that challenges the audience's expectations of dwarfism and to change their perspective and attitudes about the condition. Performers who identify as both crip and queer in their work provide us with not only a verbal articulation of these issues but with 'an embodied text' (Sandahl, 2003, p. 25). As a result, Tamm refers to themselves as a 'political freak'. A political freak can be described as a performer whose identity differs from the norm, such as a drag artist or a disabled person, to challenge beliefs and change perceptions about them. Midgitte's performances involve entering the stage and doing everything in her own time. I think what I try to do is subvert an expectation every time there is one. When I come on stage I get in a cabaret setting. Normally people would come on stage, be full of energy and interact with the audience. However, I will probably come on 10 or 15 seconds after my name's been called. I will put my drink down somewhere on the stage. I will see if the props are there. I will arrange my wig and probably will not look at the audience yet. I am just not interested in what they have got to offer yet. Maybe I will wait for them to finish cheering me. I might talk into the mic and say, 'Hi! Firstly, I'll sing a song for you, but before that song, I'm going to say a few words, and then we will go home afterwards'. I think, because dwarfism is so mystified, I really enjoy whenever there is a smoke and mirrors opportunity. I will blow the smoke away and I will show you the mirror. I very much enjoy that as a performer. I think that creates a sense of unease.

I do my classic job of doing a kind of talking spiel. I am quite funny and comedic. I have got a great sense of timing. I think I have learnt a sense of timing, but I think I was born with a sense of timing. I was also born with dwarfism, and I do think that there is probably a connection going on there. In some ways, I am not saying it is inherent, but again, there is a hypervigilance that happens where you become extremely aware, and you learn about people really fast. So, you can kind of see how someone will laugh.

Midgitte does not care about how people around her are reacting to her body or how she interacts with a man-made environment built for someone much taller than her. This is why sometimes when Midgitte comes on stage she will take her time to get on a chair that is too high for her. I want them to be more acutely aware of the space in between us like we are. I want them to feel too big for the place. I want them to feel extremely privileged to experience this world in the way they do. That is what I am trying to generate and play with, and I want to do that with visuals and by changing the shape of the space and the seats that they sit in being able to demonstrate that we have had different lives, and will always lead different experiences because of the world that has been made by them. When a person with dwarfism interacts with a space differently, due to a mismatch in height between them and the space, it can result in unwanted attention from other people (Pritchard, 2021a). As a form of deflection, Tamm believes that the extravagant clothing and make-up that they adorn to become Midgitte Bardot takes some of the focus from their dwarf body and instead places the audience’s gaze upon the appearance they have chosen. Therefore, interacting with a space differently, while dressed as Midgitte, deflects attention from Tamm.

Midgitte Bardot is a drag alter ego performance persona that I created back in 2017 which is when I started doing drag. Before that, I was hosting and per- forming in open mic nights. But I started getting into the idea of the disruption that my body can cause and create. I quite enjoyed experimenting with drag as a medium to do that with. I also enjoyed it and it felt safer to create an alter ego, which then meant that I could do things I would not normally do and say things I would not normally say, but if I was Midgitte Bardot, then I would feel quite safe to do that. Midgitte provides a different persona to Tamm, which offers her the opportunity to express herself in a way that she would not feel as confident doing as Tamm. To aid in deflecting attention from Tamm, Midgitte dons eye-catching costumes, which aid in deflecting attention from her body. I have only recently been able to interrogate what happens to me on stage as Midgitte. I very much feel like a bit of a vessel, a different embodiment. I noticed that one of Midgitte’s traits, which is probably a bit more intentional, is that she is very cool, very calm and very collected. Having that as part of her persona, I would say, has been a coping mechanism to the stressful and taxing experience of being a performer with a non-normative body. I feel safe performing as Midgitte Bardot because I think there is an element where, when I am in drag, I am already demanding or there is some kind of social contract where it is saying you can look at me now. I am telling you to look at me so when I have done that as just, and also being called Midgitte immediately.

The name Midgitte Bardot plays homage to the French actress Bridgitte Bardot. Automatically, Tamm challenges the notion that people with dwarfism are asexual (Pritchard, 2021b), by adopting an alter ego that is based on an actress regarded as a sex symbol. Rearticulating labels that society has used to disem- power and humiliate minority groups, in this case, people with dwarfism, can be empowering (Sandahl, 2003). Midgitte Bardot is a Drag Cabaret performer, who is sexy and will often dress in skimpy clothing, showing off her cleavage ('tits are a big part of Midgitte's personality!') demonstrating how someone with dwarfism can be sexual. 'A primary way for crip queer solo performers to express disability pride is to rearticulate the disabled body as a gendered, sexual being' (Sandahl, 2003, p. 44). Tamm states, 'If you are going to look, then I am going to look fantastic'. Drag performances are known to disrupt typical understandings of sexuality (Taylor et al., 2004). In this case, drag is used to make a body that is usually deemed asexual, sexual.

What Midgitte wears is an important part of her performance, which chal- lenges preconceived ideas about dwarfism, including the notion that dwarfs are asexual. Being sexual is a big part of Midgitte's personality. She is very sexual. She does not necessarily perform in a sexualised way, but she wears sexy clothing, such as netted fish nets with big holes in them, big boots, some kind of tight dress, a big wig and a push-up Bra which gives her big tits. That has been her look for as long as I can remember. 'Unlike able-bodied women whose bodies are over-determined sexually, disabled performers struggle to be considered sexual beings at all and tend to use nudity and provocative clothing simply to claim a sexual identity' (Sandahl, 2003, p. 45).

Midgitte's outfits provide a juxtaposition between the ability for someone with a non-normative body to be sexy and conceive themselves as such. I think Miss Piggy is a very big inspiration for Midgitte. I enjoy just the way that she looks, and I think she is beautiful, and I love her personality, born and dying diva, and she ought to be like that for the rest of her life as she should be, and we should all be listening to that. There is also this element of the joke of Miss Piggy that she is a pig and she is the most beautiful woman in the world. I think Midgitte is similar; she is a force to be reckoned with and feels very much in control. She is slow, she takes her time, and she is also really sexy, she knows it, and she's a dwarf.

The Adoption of Queer Spaces

Both disabled people and members of LGBTQIA+ have experienced margin- alisation, which has often led them to occupy particular spaces. I perform in mostly queer places, but also bars, venues, theatres and live art spaces. Going out in queer spaces, I would experience active protection via the means of drag queens who were working on the door, which meant that I always felt quite safe in those spaces. When you are a performer in those spaces, you are not only safe, but you are also royalty. The acceptance of a dwarf body within these spaces can be down to the fact that both disabled people and members of LGBTQIA+ share a history of marginalisation and injustice. It makes sense that the people who experience some of the most intense marginalisation and abuse outside of those walls are the ones who want to go into them and perform as royalty, and feel safe there. However, Tamm states that queer spaces need to be more accessible for disabled people. Thus, while the meaning of a space can make it inclusive, for disabled people to access these spaces, they must also be physically accessible.

I could have joined an acting group. I could have gone into drama and more theatre route and been cast with people with dwarfism. That is the road I could have gone down, but instead, I went down the punk transgressive, queer road. There is something that I do not relate to with disability art, which I think is a degree of earnestness, perhaps, or sincerity. I think I have that in my own work, anyway. I feel that dwarfism is still not recognised by a lot of other disabled people as a disability. I have had quite a few very disappointing interactions in that world, which made me feel as excluded as I already do in most other areas. I remember one person said to me, ‘Do you identify as disabled?’ And I said, ‘Yes, I do’. And they said, ‘Oh, how?’ And I said ‘dwarfism!’ And then they said, ‘Did you say autism?’ And I said ‘No, dwarfism’. And then they said, ‘Oh, I didn’t think dwarfism was a disability’. This was disability arts. It was very strange. But I think again, this is what is tricky, is that I do not like saying disability art, because that is one person. There are multiple others.

Dwarfism is often contested as a disability. An influential factor in dwarfism’s contention as a disability is its historical representations, such as being constructed as ‘freakish’ (Ablon, 1990; Kruse, 2003). Even in the present day, there are repre- sentations of dwarfism that exist, such as midget tossing, that would be less tolerated if associated with other disabled people. Hence, why Tamm recognises that dwarfism does not resonate fully with other disabled people, including within the arts. Tamm recognises that representations of dwarfism differ and subsequently identifies themselves more closely with other minority groups, including those who identify as fat.

There is something about dwarfism that feels a bit like it sits in between disability and something else, and I am not entirely sure what that is. I do not know if it is just plain old prejudice, or being a ‘freak of culture’. That is some- thing that resonates with me. It is something that I have always kind of thought about especially when I am in mostly disability circles. That kind of chat about being a freak in the way the media essentially portrays you. That is not something that all disabled people can relate to and there are also a lot of people who are not disabled who do relate to that, including people who identify as Fat. There is a very common crossover of similar treatment, and similar humiliation attempts and techniques and this act of humiliation and ridicule that we experience is a lot more interesting to me as an artist and a performer. I would rather go to places where those are intersecting and crossing over in terms of the identity of the people who I would be performing alongside or in the venues that I would be in. I guess I do not feel like I have been seen really in the disability arts world. I feel more seen in basements, clubs, queer drag bars and live art spaces.

Using Drag to Challenge Midgetism

As a performer, I was always thinking about what the audience would be expecting from a dwarf performer called Midgitte Bardot, who does drag. Midgitte is of course a play on the word ‘midget’. A term, which Tamm knows is problematic, but as an artist, they constantly push the boundaries of what is normal and what is expected within society. Tamm argues that by reclaiming the term midget, the person who is the object of the joke, takes back the term and is thus in control. In other words, they have used it before anyone else can, and in a way that empowers them. Drag performances are known for their contestation, to subvert dominant power relations (Taylor et al., 2004). It is very disarming and a reversal of power. They also purposely include a word associated with dwarfism, even in a negative way, for the audience to be aware that the performer has dwarfism before they come on stage. Midgitte gives off the energy of 'I already know what you are thinking, or wanting to think or what you're trying not to think' and so I feel I am in a position of power as Midgitte. It also means that they will listen to me, but at the same time take me a bit less seriously because of the drag, which sometimes is great and sometimes is annoying. I quite enjoy being able to feel a bit freer to express myself. There is a clear line of you are talking to Midgitte.

People with dwarfism often have to anticipate the presence of new people. How will they react to someone with dwarfism? Will they laugh and snigger? Will they feel uncomfortable? Thus, Tamm believes that by having a drag name that denotes that she has dwarfism will remove any unwanted reactions of surprise. People with dwarfism often feel anxious when venturing out in public as they anticipate the unwanted reactions, such as staring, pointing and laughter from others, which are commonplace in their daily lives.

I think when I first started performing, I realised that there is a unanimous lived experience, specifically for people with dwarfism where the thought that goes through your head when you're about to meet a new group of people or a new person, or anything like that, or walk into a room that you have not walked into before, and these people are going to be expecting me. I need to pre-empt how they are going to react. I always think about that and it creates this sense of hypervigilance. Tamm uses drag to remove those anxieties and to alter audiences' perceptions of their dwarf body. Tamm wants to repurpose and reclaim that word. As Midgitte, she wants to own the word to rid the Elephant in the room. However, are they then expecting a midget entertainer? Someone who engages with slapstick for the audience to laugh at.[1]

Tamm Reynold's does not pander to anyone, including people with dwarfism. As she previously stated 'I am very aware that people with dwarfism might hate me because my name is Midgitte Bardot. I think it makes people uncomfortable' (Magill, 2020). The play on the term midget is their attempt at reclaiming it. Using the term is a reversal of power, but ensuring it is not used in a derogatory manner can only be done through ensuring that their actual performances challenge what is usually expected from a performer with dwarfism. Tamm believes that their drag alter ego needs to be radical, and to do this she utilises queer spaces, including clubs, basements, as well as live art clubs and theatres. They believes that these spaces, which historically have been stigmatised, are more accepting of the dwarf body than typical, normate spaces (Pritchard, 2023). According to Chappell (2015), both disabled people and the LGBTQIA+ com- munity share a similar history of social injustice, oppression and isolation as they challenge hegemonic constructs of normalcy. Tamm demonstrates how the spaces they occupy as a drag performer has made them feel accepted. Drag performances are known for promoting solidarity and staging political resistance (Taylor et al., 2004). Drag is something that gives them confidence and a sense of belonging. It reverses the power relations, between them and the audience, who are predomi- nantly non-disabled and of average stature. It is something she believes she can get attention safely, but recognises that in the current political climate, drag is not safe. In the United States drag performances are

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[1] Midget is not used as a slur, but as an academic term to identify those who partake in entertainment that reinforces problematic stereotypes of dwarfism. These representations often solely focus on the entertainer's height, which is constructed in a derogatory manner, such as being a figure of fun.

being banned, including in the state of Tennessee, as they are considered devious and dangerous by some people (Nossel, 2023). Yet, these same states will unapologetically hold midget tossing or midget wrestling events.[2] This makes them question how society readily accepts midget entertainment, but frowns upon drag, especially when drag performers interact with children.

Tamm believes that the pantomime is more traumatic and damaging for children, especially for children with dwarfism than drag is. Imagine, being a child with dwarfism and seeing somebody who shares your condition being humiliated on stage. Imagine being surrounded by an audience who are pointing and laughing at ‘the dwarfs’, which makes you anxious about getting up from your seat when the show finally ends. As a result, Tamm provides a performance that does not adhere to midget entertainment.

I think it is quite exciting to be me, just as Tamm and as Midgitte, loving attention and loving, performing and being good at it and having a presence. There is also another element where I am going to try to offer something that they have not seen before. If there is another person of dwarfism in the room then that is great. They can watch something that I have chosen and wanted to do and it has shaken the room a little bit at the same time, which is wonderful. That is not an experience we, as people with dwarfism, get very often. The experience we get normally is of someone with dwarfism doing a performance that they probably did not sign up for, did not really want to do, but were told to do. The room has probably been more excited about this, and we have been the ones who have been shaken, and think that it was horrible, yet everyone loved it. It is rather put on us. Of course, midget entertainers have free choice in taking those roles, but Tamm does not believe any child with dwarfism grows up wanting to dress as an Oompa Loompa or wants to hire themselves out.

Midgitte is a character that is constructed to avoid oppressing people with dwarfism. Drag performances are known for communicating counter identifica- tion to reject or mock gender stereotypes (Taylor et al., 2004). Similarly, Midgitte uses drag performance to reject cultural stereotypes associated with dwarfism, but with a slight nod to it. In one performance Midgitte wears an ill-fitting Oompa Loompa costume that she slowly takes off and discards, to show that while the audience may expect dwarfs to dress up like this, most of us have complete disregard for it. Again, Midgitte uses a particular costume to challenge precon- ceived ideas about dwarfism.

Tamm reflects upon some of the choices midget entertainers make, and reflects upon how they would want their younger self to feel watching that exact per- formance. Midgitte Bardot’s performances are known for criticising midget entertainment. She wants to hold midget entertainers accountable for their actions. These actions play into the social oppression people with dwarfism experience and as a result impact the psycho-emotional well-being of people with dwarfism, which Thomas (2007) refers to as psycho-emotional disablism.

When I see people who have my body, doing jobs or gigs, or work, or per- forming in kind of

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[2] Tamm adopts Pritchard’s (2023) reclaiming and repurposing of the word ‘midget’ to refer to entertainment that engages with ‘midgetism’, in other words entertainment that reinforces problematic beliefs about dwarfism.

roles that seem to be dehumanising them, whether that is a goblin or a fantastical dwarf of another time, or a leprechaun, it has had a knock-on effect on my self-esteem regarding what I thought my body and my job prospects in the future could be, or would be. Growing up as a child with dwarfism and as an adult with dwarfism there are a lot of extremely difficult problems, and we face lots of different challenges, but one of them that I think, has a deeper knock-on effect is the cultural stereotypes and connotations and representations of dwarfism in mainstream, very accessible media.

I perform a lot of monologues to think about different power dynamics. One monologue is about the career path of Warwick Davis, who due to some of the roles he has chosen can place him as a midget entertainer.[3] Warwick has been in some Hollywood blockbusters, such as Star Wars and Harry Potter. Numerous roles Warwick has undertaken are what Alice Lambert refers to in Chapter 4 as ‘suit filler’ roles. For example, in Star Wars he played an Ewok and in numerous Harry Potter films, he played one of the Goblins of Gringotts Wizarding Bank. A lot of things he has done are very mythical, or use prosthetics and plays into the carnival freak show, the monstrous fantastical, such as goblins and leprechauns. My work is often about challenging him on his career path and his choices in the roles, and then parallelling it with my experiences of dwarfism.

Hollywood feels like the world, and it felt like I was being told to look at Warwick’s body like it is this ‘freakish thing’, too. It is quite confusing for a child and can inspire shame and internalised midgetism, and I think probably isolated me. I thought I was supposed to find Warwick to be a role model but he represents things that are used to make fun of me. I believe that as a dwarf performer, where you are sharing yourself with the world, you have to hold yourself responsible for the effects it is going to have on the people in your community who are being called lots of different names. Outside of all of those fantastical roles he worked with Ricky Gervais on Life’s Too Short (2011–2013) which then made another opportunity for adults this time to feel okay about making fun of people with dwarfism because they have done it on television. For example, Warwick Davis is famous, which makes it acceptable and that was extremely annoying.
Tamm recites a poem as Midgitte Bardot for Warwick. The aim of the poem is to the negative impact of his work upon people with dwarfism including Tamm.

> You... have made my life harder.
> You don’t know me - but you have made my life harder.
> The body I have is ridiculed because of the body you have and how you have used it. How you have let others use it and use you. So publicly. You have told people it’s okay to laugh at difference, at deformity - at me.
> I have lost agency over my body and the space around it because of choices you have made. I don’t even know you.
> People tell me to look to you for inspiration. Those people don’t understand the damage you’ve done and the damage you keep doing to society’s perception of me.
> Now I am always public because people have seen you, doing what you do and they

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[3] A person with dwarfism who chooses to partake in entertainment which reinforces midgetism (Pritchard, 2023).

> laughed at you. They're not laughing with you, Warwick, it's at you. And now... it's at me.
> You've made your body about your height, you microscopic malarial mosquito. Your white-cis-male-straight-rich body. And, so, my body is now about how it stands next to yours, or Verne's [Verne Troyer]. Your body in those fantasy flicks, yours in that sitcom about the perils of fame, of being an arsehole. I'm not a fantasy and I'm not famous and I'm not always an arsehole.
> My body is not about my height – though I am very, very short - it's about the circus-freak-culture that your illustrious career has contributed to oh-so-generously. But, Warwick - I would hate to disregard your oh-so-philanthropic Dwarf acting agency and how it has paved the way towards the midget-Macbeth we are all asking for. But alas! Poor Warwick...
> oh shit that's Hamlet, isn't it?
> You do PANTO [pantomime], for fucks sake. The first time I saw another dwarf was in Snow White and that made me think that's the only place I was good for – to serve as a minor gag in a pretty white ladies' rom-com.
> You're the reason I had leg lengthening operations both when I was seven and again when I was fourteen and I was supposed to have it when I was 11 but I got too scared in the anaesthetic room and backed out but it was okay because my consultant said she could have an early lunch break so that means it wasn't a big deal and my crippling yes crippling doubt about changing myself and my body and being in pain for months and months on end so that I could fit into the world that wasn't built for me was fine because my long long long long long LOOONNG legged doctor got to have her tuna mayo sandwich sooner than she anticipated and–
> I had those operations because I was born into a world that doesn't accept my body and you did nothing but fuel that notion.
> I was a wheelchair-user. And you know what? I experienced less shit, than I do by just being a dwarf. Good job, Warwick, keep up the hard work.

This is not the full poem, but a few extracts that Tamm recites as Midgitte Bardot. Tamm explained to me how as a performer they push the boundaries and can often go too far. Hence why they refer to themselves as a 'political freak', someone who uses drag performance to challenge people's disablist ideas. The poem demonstrates how Tamm is robbed of agency, and the psycho-emotional impact Warwick's performances have upon them. Tamm holds Warwick Davis, as well as other midget entertainers to account by revealing the repercussions their choices have upon other people with dwarfism. Tamm emphasises that the choices that Warwick makes, result in society's perception of them.

Midget entertainers such as Warwick are some people's only point of reference to dwarfism and thus people believe that how they permit themselves to be perceived and treated by audiences is how other people with dwarfism can be. Drag show audiences have reported that the shows make them stop and think about typical stereotypes associated with LGBTQIA+ minorities, often changing their perceptions for the better (Taylor et al., 2004). I want the audience to leave feeling a bit enlightened about harmful stereotypes of people dwarfism and how it affects us, the damage and hurt to our self-esteem, confidence, our safety, our job prospects and our rights.
Tamm anticipates that outside of the dwarfism community, Warwick is held in high regard. For

example, the Shaw Trust often includes Warwick Davis in its annual list of the 100 most influential disabled people in the United Kingdom. According to the Shaw Trust, the aim of the list is to 'To bring together the most influential disabled people in Britain and shine a light on their successes. Encouraging the talented leaders of tomorrow to connect with role models and see that aspiration and ambition can be fulfiled regardless of disability or impairment' (De Havilland, 2021, n.d.). However, for people with dwarfism, those who partake in midget entertainment, such as pantomimes, are not always deemed good role models. For years people with dwarfism have been turning their back on the entertainment industry (Adelson, 2005), especially as they realise the impact midget entertainment has on their social standing. However, this change does not seem to have registered within the wider society. The Shaw Trust claims that it wants to change the public's perception of disability, but it will not change the public's perception of dwarfism by holding a person who reinforces midge- tism, in such high regard.

The poem offers Tamm's audience a new perspective, one that is informed by the emotional impact midget entertainment has upon them. Of course, Warwick is not the only midget entertainer to influence how she as well as other people with dwarfism are perceived and treated within society. While Midgitte also mentions the late midget entertainer Verne Troyer, Warwick is used as a reference to all midget entertainers. However, using him, probably the most well known, British midget entertainer, makes the audiences rethink their perceptions of him and what he does. Perhaps the Shaw Trust should listen?

A powerful part of Tamm's poem is the insight as to why she underwent leg-lengthening as a child, which as shown is a very long drawn out and painful procedure. Yet, this is something they felt they needed to do to fit into society. They attempted to change their body to not be associated with the notion of dwarfism that people like Warwick encourage. That is a big commitment to make and shows how much of a negative impact midget entertainment has on people with dwarfism and how much they want to be disassociated with it.

Conclusion

Performing as Midgitte Bardot permits Tamm to challenge ableist stereotypes. Drag is another way for artists with dwarfism to create their own identity and push back at the one that is often placed upon them. Performing as Midgitte allows Tamm to be sexual. This chapter has shown how drag performances that intersect with disability can aid in challenging hegemonic beliefs about dwarfism. As Midgitte, performing in spaces she feels more comfortable within allows Tamm to raise awareness about dwarfism. This chapter has shown that the spaces she performs in are important in providing the right power dynamics that come from feeling accepted.

This chapter has questioned how midget entertainment is readily accepted by society, despite its damage to people with dwarfism. Tamm shows, through their alter ego Midgitte Bardot, the problems of midget entertainment, including its emotional impact upon those who do not partake in it, but nonetheless experience its unwanted repercussions.

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Dr Erin Pritchard
Dr Claire Penketh

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Julia Gros

Copyeditor
Jackie West

Design
Mike Carney

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Beyond Limits: Disability at the Heart of the Arts Symposium
took place at FACT Liverpool on 6th November 2024

DaDa *is an award winning and pioneering disability and Deaf arts organisation based in Liverpool with international reach and impact. As an organisation they are most known for DaDaFest, their biennial cross-arts festival which has nurtured and supported many renowned Deaf and disabled artists from the UK and beyond. Between festivals they support artist development, working with artists to 'try, develop, become'.*

DaDa were one of the first disability-led arts organisations in the UK and since starting in 1984 they continue to campaign for greater equality and access for disabled, Deaf and neurodivergent people within the arts.

Gee Collins *is an artist and artworker, based in the North West of England. They create art with other people to create spaces for justice and expand our ideas about what the world is allowed to look like.*