

BODIES IN  
TRANSLATION:  
ACTIVIST ART,  
TECHNOLOGY, AND  
ACCESS TO LIFE

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# RELAXED PERFORMANCE

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Report Highlights:

Exploring Accessibility in the Canadian Theatre Landscape

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Learning about and investing in  
Relaxed Performance





**Welcome!** You may have opened up this booklet because you're interested in creating more access in the art world. Learning about and investing in Relaxed Performance are great ways to start enacting access.

This booklet highlights findings from research co-sponsored by the British Council and Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology and Access to Life, a research project at the University of Guelph. We relate the findings in this report to disability arts and legislation (such as the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, or AODA, and Bill C-81: The Accessible Canada Act). This booklet is based on interview, survey, and environmental scan research that aimed to understand representations of Relaxed Performance and explore experiences and impacts of Relaxed Performance training.

We invite you to consider how the findings can be of use to you. For example, you might be interested in deepening your practice of access in theatre, or learning more about creative ways that people are moving toward greater accessibility in the arts.

**Cover page: Brian Solomon performing at Crippling the Arts 2019, photo credit: Michelle Peek**

**Left: Erin Ball performing at Crippling the Arts 2019, photo credit: Michelle Peek**

# What is a relaxed performance?



A Relaxed Performance (RP) is a performance in which there are modifications to the theatre environment and sometimes the performance itself.

The question of how to ensure that arts patrons can access arts spaces—and how to open up arts spaces to those who have never considered themselves “arts patrons”—is a critical question for our time. RP contends with this question. RP aims to open up the theatre space to welcome differences.

Rather than requiring people to stay seated and listen silently, RPs invite attendees to move, speak, leave and return, eat, etc.



They also often include other modifications:

- Dimming house lights
- Reducing sound levels
- Reducing or removing strobing lights and flashes
- Providing a “chill-out space”
- Creating a visual story (gives people information about what to expect at a venue and in a performance)
- Making introductions to the cast before the performance

The British Council, has been leading a major effort toward integrating Relaxed Performance into Canadian theatre. Since 2015, the British Council, in partnership with Tangled Art + Disability and with the support of Canada Council for the Arts, has designed and delivered Relaxed Performance trainings for people working in theatre in nine cities across Canada. Trainees have included front-of-house staff, executive and artistic directors, producers, and, in some cases, actors and directors. Approximately 200 people have received training so far; many of those people have begun to produce Relaxed Performances in theatres.

Relaxed Performance grew out of the work of Autistic communities in the UK in the 1990s, when there was a recognized need for live theatre to be more accessible to neurodiverse people and/or those with sensory sensitivities. In our work, we expand the principles of Relaxed Performance to anyone who may be excluded from “typical” theatre or performance contexts. The aim is to welcome difference—in bodies, in minds and in cultural practices—into theatre, on and off the stage, and to ‘let bodies be bodies.’

# Why do this research?

Many people in the arts across Turtle Island (the land currently known as North America) want to facilitate accessible experiences and pose important questions about how this might be done. These include:

- What is an accessible arts experience?
- How does it look different in different segments of the arts landscape?
- Who benefits from accessibility in the arts? What are the policy implications of accessibility?
- How does accessibility in the arts relate to larger debates about accessibility in disability studies, Indigenous studies, Critical Race studies and elsewhere?
- What is access, and what is inclusion?

**The following outlines four main areas of focus that people have identified as important for Relaxed Performance in Canadian theatres:**

- Training
- Theory
- Community
- Policy



# TRAINING

## People's experiences of Relaxed Performance Training

The vast majority of people who have completed RP trainings have become meaningfully engaged in working towards accessibility and inclusion in the theatre.

- They express a desire for a deeper understanding of disability experience.
- They want an even more expansive training that moves beyond accessibility checklists or audits alone.
- Participants expressed that they want to learn more about how to design accessible features with specific spaces, content, and audiences in mind.

### Takeaway

When implementing RP, keep in mind that some of the changes that may be required will be changes to physical spaces or elements, while others will be changes to attitudes or values.

There are some elements of RP, such as dim house lights, that can be implemented right away with very little training or funding, and others will require more training and/or funding. These changes will be specific to your theatre, and they will depend on your physical space, and on your staff's level of familiarity with disability arts and disability justice.

**Ebony Rose Dark performing Brownton Abbey at Crippling the Arts 2019, photo credit: Michelle Peek**



What is your relationship to  
theatre? To accessibility?  
To disability?

What does accessible theatre  
mean to you?

Who requires access?

Who produces art?

Who are arts audiences,  
creators, and consumers?



# TRAINING

## Beginning to *do* a Relaxed Performance



Relaxed Performance training participants were given a number of actionable strategies for designing a Relaxed Performance. We provide some of them here.

- Generate a “visual story” (guide includes descriptions of the space, what will happen in the space, and what patrons can expect when they arrive) and publish it online before the event
- Dim the house lights
- Reduce sound levels
- Reduce or remove strobing lights and flashes
- Create a “chill-out space” outside of the house (main theatre audience space)
- Let the audience know that they are free to come and go—and model this, if possible
- Invite actors to introduce themselves before or after the performance
- Reduce ticket prices for disabled audience members and their companions
- Attend and debrief a RP with colleagues
- Review physical and/or digital space associated with the theatre venue to ensure that it is accessible
- Critique outreach material from your own and other theatre venues
- Engage in group grant writing to support RP
- Take RP training



Principles of Relaxed Performance may also be used in other training environments.

- Consider font size on handouts and other materials
- Provide educational materials in a variety of formats, to account for differences in audio-visual processing and learning
- Consider where the training is held, and how accessible those spaces are
- Relax the training by modelling what it means to be in a relaxed space (e.g. taking breaks, moving around, etc.)
- Caption videos and films used in training
- Have both facilitators and participants use a microphone when speaking

The approaches featured here will allow you to “relax” your performance environment. These steps help to create a space where audiences feel more at ease. They also go above and beyond standardized accessibility practices—such as providing accessible washrooms and ramps—to remind us that access is about much more than physical space. Standardized practices are essential, but not sufficient for full and creatively-driven accessibility.



### **Create a visual story**

The costs of implementing RP will be venue- and show-specific. In general, one of the most substantial investments of time and money is likely to be the creation of a high-quality visual story. One strong example of this is the [Crippling the Arts Access Guide](#) (🔗). While this example has high production features, you can create a simplified visual story with a modest budget, using Word or Google documents.

Examples of visual stories using Word:

- [Goodnight Desdemona \(Good morning Juliet\) at York University, Toronto 2019](#) (🔗)
- [Literally Titanium at Next Stage, Toronto 2020](#) (🔗)

**Erin Ball performing at Crippling the Arts 2019, photo credit: Michelle Peek**





# THEORY

## Moving beyond the basics: What is disability justice?

In collaboration with the British Council, trainers in Canada adapted the UK model of RP training, notably to increase a focus on disability justice. Disability justice is an approach to activism led by and for multiply-marginalized disabled people, and especially those from racialized and Indigenous communities. This form of activism focuses on experiences of disability and ableism from an intersectional perspective, which takes race, gender, sexuality, class, indigeneity and other identities, differences, histories, and social conditions into account.

***“...a multi-issue political understanding of disability and ableism, moving away from a rights-based equality model and beyond just access, to a framework that centers justice and wholeness for all disabled people and communities.”***

— Mia Mingus, Disability rights scholar and activist



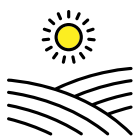
## **“Letting bodies be bodies”**

Thinking about disability justice enhances RP by welcoming difference in, expanding notions of what a “good” audience looks like. RP invites audiences to arrive in all their different bodies and ways of being, and to inhabit performance spaces in ways that are most comfortable to them. RP operates against the Euro-centric ideas of art and life being separate.



## **Intersectionality**

Several participants noted that it would be valuable to have the trainings led by disabled trainers, people who have both the lived experience of disability and an understanding of RP in the theatre. Bringing in disability justice, it is important to consider the various and intersecting spaces that trainers occupy (e.g. race, indigeneity, class, gender, sexuality, etc.) and how these impact training.



## **Social model vs. medical model**

One way to begin making accessibility central to theatre is to make space for conversations about access that center disability as a social identity and an expression of human diversity, rather than a problem or a pathology. This will help cultivate an understanding of why investing in RP is crucial for the arts, and how it might engage more diverse publics with theatre.





Participants in the trainings shared that centralizing disability helped shift their focus to disability as a social identity and culture:

***The main thing that really struck me [on] the very first day [was the] medical definition versus the social definition [of disability]. It just kind of rocked my world, to think that really, the only thing that's causing disability in our culture is the fact that we don't allow for it. It's our structures, our social constructs, our buildings, those are the things that are disabling people. And that sort of turnaround in thought was really big for me.***

The training connects RP to accessibility and to the experience of being human more broadly:

***You're offering a larger human experience – it integrates everybody into that performance. RP is like the difference between a high Anglican and a gospel church experience. It's participatory in a no-pressure way.***

Jackie Hagan performing at Crippling the Arts 2019,  
photo credit: Michelle Peek

*Relaxed Performance shifts our ways of seeing what is disruptive and what belongs in the theatre. As one participant said, “Some days you WANT the version of Rocky Horror where you’re throwing the toast.”*

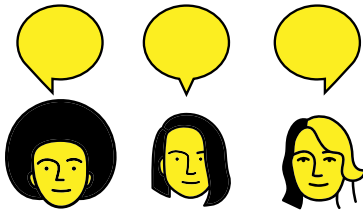


## **Audiences**

Participants were particularly interested in expanding the understanding of RP beyond something that is exclusively for Autistic people and their families and friends. While RP often aims to serve Autistic communities, our research recognizes the necessity of integrating disability justice into the fabric of RP.

Other people who may benefit from RP include anyone living with a disability or difference, anyone who experiences restlessness during performances, or anyone who finds the etiquette surrounding contemporary western theatre to be alienating.

This could include people living with chronic illness, people whose trauma experiences are awakened due to the action on stage, those who need to use the bathroom frequently, people who need to stand periodically, etc.



## Leading with difference

A key theme noted by folks who had taken the RP training was that RP invites all kinds of people into the theatre experience. One training participant called RP “the most radically inclusive form of accessibility that we have now.”

“Leading with difference” means developing and supporting the work of people who live with difference. This means projects that speak to experiences of disability must be led by disabled people or people who have lived experience of the intersections of mind, body, and other differences.

If we wish to lead with difference, we need to consider how to make space for different bodies not only as audiences, but also in trainings and professional interactions, backstage, and on stage.

Leading with difference will also help expand the reach of RP training. Participants emphasized the importance of getting multiple stakeholders involved in training on RP. Funders and decision-makers, as well as front-of-house staff, executive and artistic directors, producers, actors, and directors can benefit from learning about the importance and challenges of implementing RP. This is one place where we can challenge traditional boundaries between who RP training, and RP itself, are for.

# COMMUNITY

## How folks connect with others doing Relaxed Performance

In our research, there was a strong emphasis on how RP thrives on community.

- Those involved in trainings found that connecting with individuals and organizations bolstered their confidence when undertaking RP.
- Several participants highlighted how the trainings created community, and some were already continuing conversations about RP amongst themselves.
- One interviewee shared their commitment to hold a monthly meeting with other training participants to discuss RP successes and future strategies.

### **Building community**

Building more structures (for example, online spaces, scheduling platforms, etc.) for maintaining the communities that have formed may help RP to flourish in and beyond the theatre community. In fact, one of the key recommendations from participants was to formalize the communities that RP trainings have grown. This would allow for the continual exchange of knowledge and resources. This could be a web-based group, a community of practice, and/or a centralized scheduling platform that would help theatres collaborate rather than compete for audiences.

This kind of community-building might be especially helpful for those who work in more rural settings, who may not have the same access to community as those in urban centers. A group might also develop or contribute to a (non-prescriptive) and evolving set of best or promising practices for RP.



## **Valuing communication**

Another finding highlights the importance of conversations about best and promising practices in community: communicating in and beyond theatres is important in order to mount well-developed and thoughtful RPs. Participants noted that the best way to learn about RP was to do it; in order to produce an RP, they needed to think about RP throughout the process, and know how to communicate about it with various people involved, including staff, actors, and audiences. RP is a different experience each time, requiring thoughtful customization of its core principles.

## **Challenging assumptions**

You may be wondering: do all these modifications take away from the magic of theatre? The answer is, emphatically, no. Working collectively to build an RP community that strategizes about RP can also help to clarify another critical piece of the RP equation: RP does not diminish the performance, and in fact adds to it. We conducted two pilot case studies that provide very positive evidence for this. In both case studies, RPs met the needs of over 95% of attendees, who highlighted that they felt at ease, felt a sense of diminished anxiety, that there were clear expectations for how to engage, and that there was less pretense in the experience. The community feel of RP also translated to and involved the audience and the performers on stage.

# POLICY

## Relaxed Performance & and the importance of policy

We have heard much from participants about the value of RP. However, without accompanying policy movement, particularly funding, RP may not be a sustainable option. RP requires investments of time and human resources.

### Need for funding

Training provides essential skills to deliver RPs—and yet, theatre sector professionals see money as a key barrier to producing RPs and a primary reason why they are not able to stage as many RPs as they want to. Given how RPs align with accessibility legislation, it seems obvious that shifts in policy and in funding flowing from legislation can do much to support existing RPs, and expand RP experimentation and delivery, moving us toward open and accessible theatre. For this reason, creating and providing RP funding is *necessary* for moving RP forward.

- Funding might be leveraged through development grants that allow theatres to create RPs together with community groups.
- Travel grants would also be helpful to provide theatre staff with support to attend RP trainings.
- There is also a strong need for infrastructure grants that could be used for building retrofits and/or the construction of new accessible buildings.



## **Collaboration and sharing of resources**

One participant, who has led the charge toward providing funding for RP, presented an example of a model that has allowed more people to be trained in RP and also reduced the cost of delivering RPs:

*There are six or seven organizations that are [committed to delivering RPs this upcoming season]. And so, we decided to fund them. We gave them twenty-five hundred dollars each. To incentivize it, because we usually get some feedback, when there's some changes that are required, that they will stop at some very basic needs, like, 'We don't have the money to do the training.' Or 'We don't have the funds to, to spend time on this.' [...] we want them to collaborate within each other and to act as a group.*

The model shows that incentivizing RPs could be an interesting way to fund and sustain RP, and can integrate a community-based, collaborative element.



## **The value of experience**

Having funders attend training might also help to make RP more sustainable. Given the overwhelmingly positive—and mind-shifting—experience participants had during training, it is not surprising that one recommendation participants had was that funders should experience training themselves.

The vast majority of training participants described the RP trainings as impactful, transformative, inspiring, and in line with their organizational commitments. RP itself was described as a critical first movement toward enacting and embodying access. Our recommendations for training, community development, policy, and research offer opportunities for implementing, sustaining, and growing RP. These actions will help to ensure that RP flourishes in and pushes the boundaries of a world that is not always accessible and open to difference, expanding theater audiences and experiences.



# Where can you see existing models of Relaxed Performance being implemented?

Many theatres across Canada have had great success in planning, marketing, and presenting RPs. While every theatre will undoubtedly have differing needs, these are some theatre and festival websites you may visit for inspiration. Several other theatres and festivals offer RPs and other accessible arts experiences, but these will give you a sample of how this is described and enacted in a few places:

- PuSh International Performing Arts Festival: [pushfestival.ca](http://pushfestival.ca) ( 🌐 )
- Young People's Theatre: [youngpeopletheatre.org](http://youngpeopletheatre.org) ( 🌐 )
- Theatre Calgary: [theatrecalgary.com](http://theatrecalgary.com) ( 🌐 )
- Luminato Festival: [luminatofestival.com](http://luminatofestival.com) ( 🌐 )
- Inside Out: [insideouttheatre.com](http://insideouttheatre.com) ( 🌐 )
- Theatre Passe Muraille: [passemuraille.ca](http://passemuraille.ca) ( 🌐 )

# Glossary of Terms

**“Chill-out space”:** A space designed to reduce sensory stimulation (e.g., loud noises, rapid movements, and intense visual effects) and to allow theatre patrons to take a break from the main action of the theatre. Usually has a screen playing a live stream or recorded version of the performance.

**Disability justice:** A term and form of activism coined by Black and other artists and activists of colour who live with disabilities.

**Environmental audit:** A review of physical and/or digital space associated with the theatre venue to ensure that it is accessible.

**Neurodiverse:** Refers to the idea that people’s bodies, minds, and nervous systems experience neurological and sensory realities in many different ways. Autism and autistic ways of thinking are common examples of neurodiversity, though there are many other ways to be neurodiverse. A politics of neurodiversity asserts that neurological difference is a desired and valued part of human diversity.

**Turtle Island:** the landmass currently known as North America.



**Visual story:** A document containing information about a venue and/or performance. A visual story typically includes logistical details (e.g., closest public transit, washroom locations, and what access features the space has in place / has considered) and information about what will be included in the performance. A visual story may also act as a familiarization guide that includes descriptions of the space, what will happen in the space, and what to expect when you arrive.

**Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology, and Access to Life** (BIT) is a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council-funded, 7-year Partnership Grant. BIT seeks to cultivate disabled, d/Deaf, fat, Mad, e/Elder, and Indigenous arts using a decolonizing and disability justice lens. We engage with 70+ community and institutional partners, and an ever-expanding network of collaborators. BIT started with a compelling idea: that creating access to art for non-normatively embodied people, and opportunities for the public to engage with such art, would expand understanding of non-normative vitality and advance social and disability justice in Ontario. At the same time that we aim to cultivate disability and activist arts, we work to decolonize disability arts, acknowledging that we live on Indigenous lands and thus are in relationship with Indigenous peoples.

The **British Council** is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. In the arts sector, the British Council Canada promotes a cultural dialogue between Canada and the UK by building partnerships and connecting art communities and audiences from both countries. Their work aims at exploring the potential of art as a transformative power in our societies, and as a vehicle for knowledge for current and future generations. The British Council aims to open spaces for dialogue between cultural agents who share common ideas on artistic and social challenges.

The full report on our research is available at: <http://bodiesintranslation.ca/relaxed-performance-exploring-accessibility-in-the-canadian-theatre-landscape/> ( ④ ).

These report highlights were prepared for the British Council by Andrea LaMarre, Carla Rice, and Kayla Besse.

### **References:**

The term disability justice has been thickened by Sins Invalid ( ④ ) (a performance project which centralizes disabled and queer artists, and artists of colour, as communities who have been historically marginalized), in their Ten Principles of Disability Justice ( ④ ). We invite you to consider these principles alongside this report. Those interested in disability justice work currently happening in Canada might wish to consult the Disability Justice Network of Ontario ( ④ ).

“Leading with Difference” is one of Bodies in Translation’s Guiding Principles. Read Bodies in Translation’s Guiding Principles in full at: <http://bodiesintranslation.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/BIT-Principles-of-Governance-and-Engagement.pdf> ( ④ ), and watch them brought to life in an illustrated animation at <https://vimeo.com/338009901> ( ④ ).

**All images in this report are credited to Michelle Peek Photography courtesy of Bodies in Translation: Activist Art, Technology & Access to Life, Re•Vision: The Centre for Art & Social Justice at the University of Guelph.**



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