Research Article

Theater By The Blind: A Retrospective Look at an Off-Broadway Troupe, an International Blind Theater Festival, and the Making of Disability Culture

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Abstract

This historical, ethnographic account examines Theater By The Blind from 2000 to 2005 and the following disability-art themes: 1) identity politics and authenticity/representation; 2) audio description and the Blind In Theatre (BIT) Festival; 3) gaze and resistance. This paper historically documents an emergent cultural movement and highlights the powerful cultural work of blind theater to challenge stereotypes.

Keywords: blind theater, gaze, audio description

Change the world, she needs it
—Brecht on Brecht[1]

Introduction

Theater By The Blind (TBTB) was an off-Broadway theater troupe in New York City that integrated blind, low vision, and sighted artists. In 2008 it changed its name to Theater Breaking Through Barriers to reflect a change in mission to include all disabled artists (see TBTB.org). The reflections herein date from 2000 until 2005 and refer to the original TBTB, when it boasted of being the only professional blind theater company in the United States. Times have changed. What follows is a historical case study about the development of identity and blind culture in the context of emerging 'disability arts' (Thompson & Warne, 2018). It centers on three areas: (1) identity politics and issues around authenticity and representation, such as what is, or should be considered, blind theater; (2) the Blind In Theatre (BIT) Festival and the opportunities it created for the development of blind culture, including advancements in audio description; and (3) issues of politics, resistance, and the gaze. My intention is to highlight the phenomenally powerful cultural work blind theater can do and to historically document the vibrancy of this emerging movement. Details show the transformative power of the arts to challenge cultural stereotypes.

A note on language: I use the term *blind* throughout this essay because that is the language of TBTB and the BIT festival. It is used broadly to refer to any level of legal visual impairment (e.g., low vision and partially sighted to totally blind) unless otherwise specified.

Research Methods, Ethics, and the Ethnographic Context

TBTB was founded in 1979 by Ike Schambelan, a sighted Yale drama graduate who loved classical theater and directed many performances of Shakespeare by TBTB in New York ("Our Founder," n.d.). They were a professional troupe that operated under Equity Union contracts and often received rave reviews (e.g., http://www.tbtb.org/brecht.html). TBTB emphasized that these were high quality professional productions, and not community theater nor a form of rehabilitation/recreational therapy. In fact, Schambelan would often highlight the quality of their performances— "so good you couldn't tell who was blind and who wasn't"—as part of their marketing, promotion, and fundraising pitches (Weber, 2015). This invisibility, of not being able to tell who was blind, served as some form of proof of the excellence of their craft. While this might seem anachronistic in 2020, especially when spoken by a sighted director of a blind company, it is important to remember that TBTB began before the ADA was passed—and the stories herein reflect a world that existed a mere 10 years post-ADA. At that time, this approach was both admirable and problematic, a contradiction that is discussed in greater detail below.

Although I was trained as an anthropologist and worked at the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) as a researcher between 2000 and 2005, my connection to the theater company was personal. I was first friends with, and eventually married to, one of the company's blind actors.[2] Throughout, I identified and was treated as non-disabled. Although I have several invisible impairments that were present then, these were not vision-related. My knowledge about blindness comes both from my professional work as a researcher and ally and through living life with my blind partner.

I had been involved in fieldwork centering around disability generally, and blindness in particular, for nearly 20 years at the time of writing this, in both personal and professional contexts. However, the insights below come predominantly from my role as a participant-observer of blind theater. I use the term *participant-observer* lightly, as I was never an actor and never performed with TBTB. However, I twice attended (2001, 2003) the international blind theater festival (BIT), which has been held biannually in Croatia since 1999,[3] and during which I was treated as a troupe member by both the host organization and TBTB. Additionally, between 2000 and 2005 I conducted hundreds of hours of participant-observation: during the week-long theater festivals in the capital of Zagreb; with members of TBTB traveling to and from the festival and around the countryside in Croatia; and at off-Broadway theater performances, readings, and rehearsals in New York City both prior to and upon returning from the festivals. I also conducted multiple intensive, open-ended interviews with blind and non-blind members of the theater companies that attended the BIT Festival. Lastly, using a modified photovoice methodology (Wang, 1999; Sutton-Brown, 2014), both a video camera and audio recorders were made available to troupe members so they could record their own interviews and impressions of the festival and the reactions by the general public to their presence. Some of this content has been integrated into the discussion below.

I received no institutional support or funding for this project. AFB did not sponsor this research, and my invitation to participate with TBTB and attend BIT did not come from my

position at that organization. I took unpaid vacation-time to attend the festival and all the equipment used was purchased privately. Thus, there were also no honoraria provided to participants and no IRB oversight. Nonetheless, my professional ethics dictated that in all cases, troupe members and other festival participants knew that I was both a personal guest and an anthropologist. Verbal consent was solicited prior to beginning any travel to Croatia and again upon being introduced to new theater companies and new festival participants, and I provided accessible/non-print means for participants to contact me. The head of the Croatian troupe sponsoring the festival, Vojin Perić, gave me permission to videotape the performances, rehearsals, and interviews, and performers and interviewees were explicitly told when recording devices were being used. Unless otherwise requested, names and identifying features of the troupe members discussed below have been altered for privacy.

BIT: *Novi Zivot* and the International Blind Theater Festival

BIT is an abbreviation for Blind In Theater, which was chosen intentionally by the festival organizers for its clever word-play. *Bit* (pronounced 'beat') in Croatian also means "the essence of things." As Nina Kleflin, one of the festival producers explained on opening night in 2001, "…Often we say that blind people see the essence of things with their inner eyes, which I think is very important in their theater performances. So this component of meaning, the essence, is also very important. As you know, 'beat' in English means 'the rhythm,' and the rhythm is very important for the plays, especially for our plays."

The performances took place at the Vidra Theatre, a 150-seat capacity, proscenium-type theater located in central Zagreb. The Croatian National Blind Society was located on the third floor of same building and contained offices and other rooms that were used for rehearsals, roundtable discussions, workshops, and social gatherings. There was a stylish café in front of the theater that was frequented by theater-goers who wanted to meet prior to performances for a drink. It was accessible from the street and open to the general public who similarly used it as a gathering space. Bar stools and wall coverings were designed with a variety of tactile materials (such as natural-haired cowhide contrasting with smooth leather), but it otherwise had no obvious indications that it was a 'blind café.' The staff at the café was acclimated to the presence of blind people and this was apparent in their social interactions (e.g., verbally announcing their presence rather than presuming a patron knew they were standing nearby to take their order). In general, the degree of integration I witnessed at the café and in the surrounding businesses struck me as impressive.

The theater itself also integrated blind and non-blind events. Priority for its use belonged to *Novi Zivot*, the theater troupe associated with the Croatian National Blind Society and the organizers of the BIT Festival. However, they hosted mainstream and non-blind performance events there when the theater was otherwise not in use.

The BIT Festival has continued to grow each year. The second year I attended, the program had nearly doubled in size: there were 10 different companies with troupes representing Croatia (2), Italy, Spain[4], US (3), Great Britain, Slovenia, Hungary, Norway, and Brazil. In previous years it had featured companies from Belgium and Russia as well. The festival is ongoing; 2019 marked the 11th time it has been held. The years I attended the

festival, the organizers provided each visiting company, depending on their size, with one or two translators. These translators doubled as both tour guides and sighted guides, helping blind visitors navigate the city. During performances the translators provided simultaneous live translation.[5] The translators also performed double duty during performances by providing spontaneous audio description (more below).

Blind Theater and the Politics Of Identity, Authenticity, and Representation

What Is, or Should Be Considered, Blind Theater?

Since 2005, the growing disability rights movement has led to the development and proliferation of a number of professional theater companies with blind artists. Whether the presence of blind performers alone is sufficient to constitute a primary aspect of their identity as a troupe, however, remains open (let alone, how many, or what percentage would be needed to reach critical mass). Further, is it sufficient for a company who employs disabled actors but who otherwise does not engage in a disability identity to consider themselves part of the disability arts movement? Do they have to be performing disability content (whatever that may be), or is their mere presence in the professional arts world sufficient standing to be considered a disability arts organization? These questions were debated at the BIT Festival both years I attended and were pervasive in scholarly venues at that time (Fahy & King, 2002; Lewis, 2004), and they remain ongoing concerns within disability arts (Kuppers, 2014; Thompson & Warne, 2018).

For example, in Croatia 2001, TBTB performed *Misalliance*, written by a playwright without impairments (George Bernard Shaw) and not involving disability issues.[6] In addition, the performance had a low ratio of disabled to non-disabled troupe members, approximately one to three. (The ratio had originally been about 1:1 but not all actors were comfortable flying within the month after the 9-11 attacks in New York. Further skewing the numbers, that year TBTB also brought with them a sighted stage manager, as well as another sighted partner and myself.) During the time I was involved with TBTB, approximately one-fifth to one-half of the company had some degree of visual impairment, and one of the two co-artistic directors (George Ashiotis) was blind.

TBTB was critiqued by other troupes at the festival that year for being ‘not blind enough.’ In addition, TBTB members themselves made frequent criticism of the content chosen by the director for not being centered around disability themes, not having been written by a notably disabled author, or not containing disabled characters. Other troupes criticized the sighted director as a ‘puppeteer,’ pulling the strings of the blind marionettes on stage. Some other companies also had sighted directors, however the ratio of sighted to blind actors in TBTB made this a particularly poignant issue. In fact, Schambelan *was* reluctant to turn over the reins and allow other members to direct or select works. However, this seemed more about his ego and role in the company than it was, for him anyway, an issue of ‘sighted vs. blind,’ nor did it seem to reflect a belief that blind people were incapable of leading the organization or directing themselves.[7] Nonetheless, this imbalance violated the “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Charlton 2000) principle of the disability rights movement and was a

notable issue both within the company and for outside troupes. Further, Schambelan's disability politics raised additional questions about 'acting blind' and the value or downside of 'passing' (Brune & Wilson, 2013), as indicated below.

'Acting Blind'— Blind Gesture and 'Blindisms' versus Assimilation and Passing

It was in this context that BIT participants debated what was meant by 'blind theater' and what it meant to 'act blind.' At that time, there was no consensus. Hiding one's blindness or being read as 'not blind' by the audience was clearly important to the majority of participants, even if they chose not to do it in all performances. For them, it served two goals: (1) it substantiated the professional quality of their performance as actors, and (2) it was more about disrupting categories and stereotypes than it was about 'passing.' As Jane, a visually impaired member of TBTB described it, "the goal is *not* passing or true assimilation as a sighted person, any more than it is for sighted actors playing the role of a dog to be truly passing as a dog."

Hana, one of the sighted, Croatian translators, reiterated Schambelan's notion that the invisibility of blindness demonstrated true quality:

> "How many barriers they have in front of them...especially when there are three or four blind actors on the stage, how to see each other's faces, how to react, you know, because they can't see. And, how will you make the expression of, let's say, sorrow, if you are sad or something, if you can't see yourself, and make that expression. We can do it in front of a mirror, as an exercise; they can't.… so I think you know, this shows they are really really excellent."

By contrast, some BIT participants expressed concern that 'passing' actually disables blind people: that forcing blind people to rearticulate the gesture of sighted people, rather than to explore a fully new, creative form of expression, did a disservice to blind people, that it reinforced an internalized oppression that 'your way of doing things' is less good. This was particularly true in discussions regarding people who have no usable vision and/or have never seen. Dirk Van Den Broeck, the (sighted) director of the Belgian company, *Licht in Zicht,* explained,

> "It is more difficult when you work with people who have never seen. They have no language of movement, of gesture. And I am trying to find out something about how they move, how they make gestures. Because I don't think that we have to, that seeing people have to oblige them to move like us. [Other participants interrupted and applauded] …We have to be creative."

As an outsider and sighted guest—let alone, anthropological observer—I did not jump into the conversation. However, if I had, I might have commented that the director's perspective seems somewhat essentialist, or more accurately, it says more about the stereotypes of blindness (and/or that these people perhaps have not had much inclusive education or been offered effective 'rehabilitation') than it does about some inherent gestural or bodily language associated with poor functional visual acuity or as 'belonging' to blind

people. My position echoes that of the 'social model,' which locates disability in the social environment rather than individual bodies (Shakespeare 2014).

By contrast, Vojin Perić, the (blind) Croatian director disagreed with the Belgian director's politics, stating, "…there are times when a gesture becomes a tic, and this happens unconsciously. And it can deform an artistic creation." Tics, sometimes also referred to as 'blindisms,' have a negative connotation and sordid history within blindness rehabilitation, as a form of behavior that is to be avoided, prevented, and 'retrained' (Scott 1981). The Belgian director refuted, "People have to accept that. That's the way to integrate."

For Schambelan and TBTB the last point regarding being 'blind enough' or 'acting blind' also had to do with the de-ghettoization of disability: they felt that it was important for disabled actors not to be limited to performing only disabled content or roles. To be blind and play a non-blind character or to be a blind company that does a standard production of Shakespeare was considered evidence of equality, true integration in the arts.

Who should be performing what types of roles is still debated within disability arts today, although the 'passing' is reversed: able-bodied actors are critiqued for playing disabled characters, in what is known as 'disability drag' or 'cripface' (Davis, 2009; Evans, 2015; Harris, 2014). The desire for theatrical realism—meaning, it is important for actors to not only look like the parts they are playing, but to 'be' a member of the group they are portraying (Pao, 2011)—is taken as a given and reflects our contemporary cultural preferences. That is, today's realism is preferred because it is suggestive of a more authentic portrayal or representation, yet it also has both political and economic consequences (Fox & Lipkin, 2002; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005). Disabled people face a harder time finding acting work than their non-disabled peers, and are rarely, if ever, hired to play non-disabled characters. Furthermore, there are cultural consequences that can result, by informing, reinforcing, or challenging stereotypes about blindness and performance. Even in 2020 it is quite unusual for disabled actors to play non-disabled characters. Yet this is exactly what was happening very early in blind theater. TBTB and the other troupes deserve credit for this progressive stance.

Blind Theater Culture and Audio Description

BIT also provided an opportunity for the creation of blind theater culture. The festival held performances during the evenings and hosted other events (workshops, trainings, information sessions) during the day with translators playing a critical role in facilitating cross-pollination of ideas and interactions between members of the different troupes. Importantly, innovations in audio description (AD), a technique used for 'translating' visual material into an aural format, were experimented with both in performances and in workshops. AD is used in television, film, dance performances, many museum exhibits, as well as in live theater. It involves the verbal narration of non-verbal content (e.g., settings, costumes, gestures) generally inserted between dialogue to provide 'radio-quality pictures' and is an essential accommodation for blind people in order to have equal access to cultural content. (For readers unfamiliar with the technique, you can hear a sample, and learn more about it, here: http://www.acb.org/adp/ad.html). The UK company, Extant

(http://extant.org.uk), for example, played with AD to indicate location on stage: louder narration for action closer to the audience, softer narration for items further away. TBTB experimented with 'open description.' ('Open description' is a term I coined to reference the way that captions are provided to the Deaf community: as either closed captioned—only those selecting this option will see them—or open captioned, meaning they are visible to all). By reading the stage directions written by Shaw aloud on stage, TBTB introduced what they called a 'Talking Program' for *Misalliance* in 2001 and performed what may have been the first live piece with open description in professional theater.

While much has been written about AD since then (Fryer, 2018; Kleege, 2016; Kleege & Wallin, 2015; Rodas, 2015; Thompson, 2018), many of the ideas for best practices were explored and debated during the festival. For example, the voice of the narrator as something 'objective,' a say-what-you-see approach (see Snyder, 2014) as opposed to something that is part of the tools for storytelling, where it can convey emotion, subjectivity, and interpretation was discussed prominently (see Bridge Multimedia, http://www.bridgemultimedia.com/audiodescription/, which has experimented with "social and emotional language"). Maria Oshodi, the blind artistic director of Extant, preferred the narrator's voice to match that of the 'vibe' of the production, such as using a cockney accent for a production based in working class London; using a 'high class' or standard English accent for the voiceover seemed jarring and took her out of the performance.

Most AD is designed for a disabled audience. That is, it evolved and remains a way of increasing access to visual content for non-sighted audiences. However, at BIT, some played with AD as a tool for blind actors, not just audiences. By reading Shaw's stage directions aloud onstage, as TBTB did with their 'talking program,' it enabled actors themselves to recognize visual cues, such as when someone had "silently opened the door" or was now "waiting, hidden in the hallway." Thus, AD has the ability to improve the theatrical experience for blind audiences, but it also can enhance the work of blind actors as well.

This type of sharing, or what anthropologists call cultural diffusion, occurred in both formally structured workshops and informally. It is hard to convey here in academic writing the emotional camaraderie, excitement, and sense of being on the cusp of something profoundly transformative that came from collectively interacting with each other. There was a sense of play and possibility, an overwhelming amount of joy, and of course, always, music. There were spontaneous outbursts of singing and performing, of rhythms and lyrics. Troupes who couldn't effectively communicate with each other because of language barriers would sing, sometimes individually, sometimes together. Music was a universal language of the festival.

When translators were present, there was a tremendous amount of sharing and cross-cultural comparison—over lunch, in the hallways, and on breaks—about what it was like to be blind elsewhere or how to get non-print access to scripts and other tips of the trade. People discussed how to use high contrast set design or suggested running cords underneath rugs on stage, as ways to increase access for blind actors. The Slovenian troupe saw a TBTB actor on the street and received a quick lesson on how to navigate crowded sidewalks and call extra

attention to oneself with the addition of a Bergman Bells[8] attached to their white canes. This non-standard rehabilitation strategy also served as another way to invite the public gaze (more below).

Sharing also occurred more formally through workshops. Extant conducted multiple movement workshops that challenged the notion that blindness impedes physical performance. Another company taught the groups how to do improv and used the common experience of housing discrimination against blind people as the subject for spontaneous skits.[9] The workshops often morphed from information and training sessions into outright acts of resistance. The culture of blind theater is a culture of resistance, and these troupe members overtly and consciously recognized the political nature of their work.

For example, the second time I attended (2003), the companies worked together to collectively perform a piece based on the revolutionary work of Augusto Boal. It had an explicitly political goal and an interactive approach: it was designed to challenge oppression and devise solutions by re-scripting and re-enacting scenarios about blindness in positive ways (Boal 1985, 1995, 1999). Companies also discussed forming an international organization, to gain greater political leverage. And in 2005, the festival intentionally coincided with the national 'disability pride' parade and disability rights march, allowing troupe members to be involved in both.

I witnessed these experiences create transformation: in what 'blind theater' ought to be, in advancing techniques of audio description, and in challenging the status quo of blind actors and the discrimination they face. As a direct result of interacting with blind people from other countries, learning the rights and opportunities they possessed, the Croatian company legally challenged the admission policy into nationally-sponsored schools for performing arts, which at the time were legacies of the soviet-style state programs that denied entrance to anyone with a sensory impairment (Perić, personal communication, October 8, 2013). The BIT Festival, thus, represents the rise of a nascent social movement, advocating for disability rights. In a broader sense as well, the festival was overtly political.

Politics, Resistance, and the Gaze

The political dimension of the festival was clearly recognized by the organizing troupe. They overtly and strategically tried to harness the power of the arts in the development of the Croatian economy and its symbolic position as a tourist destination in order to advance the cause of blind people. There were flyers hung across town to announce the festival, posters covered bus kiosks, and banners were suspended across the main street and above the central square. These objects did more than provide publicity for the festival. They proudly announced blindness and did so in a non-stigmatizing way. They advertised that BIT was bringing in theater from all over the world, including England and the United States, and the accompanying cultural capital that is attached to places like Broadway, Hollywood, and the West End.

Similarly, BIT also pointed to the role of blind culture in the creation of citizenship for a struggling, post-soviet economy and the extent to which disabled people are able to mobilize

State resources. The Dalmatian coast of Croatia along the Aegean Sea had been a tourist destination for much of eastern Europe and former Soviet bloc countries. However, Croatia was at war between 1991 and 1995. Among other consequences, the war decimated the region's once thriving tourist economy. The first BIT Festival was held only four years after peace accords were signed. *Novi Zivot* (literally, New Life), the blind association that sponsored the BIT Festival, recognized the opportunity to support the larger nation-building mission that was just underway in 1999 when the festival began. They were conscious of this opportunity and successfully exploited it. The festival was pitched as a way to bring in international dollars and to revive Croatian tourism and Zagreb's reputation as an arts center. (Zagreb is also home to an acclaimed international film festival.) The BIT Festival was attended by the nation's Ministry of Culture, the country's Vice President, and the Mayor of Zagreb, all of whom spoke about the social, humanitarian, and artistic functions of the festival during the ceremonial opening night events in 2001. Except for perhaps a rare performance at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, I cannot think of a single disability culture event in the U.S. that would draw the same level of governmental dignitaries or national attention.

In addition to state politics, BIT also functioned on the level of cultural politics. Just doing the work, acting, was political and a powerful end in itself. Theater as social space occupied by blind people is atypical. Thus, by becoming performers, these actors destabilized notions of appropriate behavior for blind people, going from objects of pity to agents of cultural production. Ritualized public displays on stage inverted the currency of blindness, as something that sighted people want to gaze upon, not because it is grotesque but because it is valuable. Inviting the gaze in this way creates a shift in identity that serves political ends.

Disabled people have often been subjected to public scrutiny; in academic language, they are objects of the 'social gaze' (Foucault, 1975; Garland Thompson, 1997; Kuppers, 2003; Schweik, 2009). Blind people actively manipulate this gaze through theater. As artists inviting the gaze—by performing on stage—they illustrate that people do not simply react to, or are a product of, their environments. Rather, they actively manipulate and, in fact, invert the power dynamics associated with looking. By controlling who is doing the gazing, when, and at what, blind theater turns the gaze outward and, in so doing, reframes social model questions about which and how environments blind people.

Furthermore, blind theater also allows us to learn more about the power and processes of the gaze in general. Blind people, for example, demonstrate that gaze itself is multisensory. In other words, it can be heard and felt, not just seen. The gaze for blind people is often aural, the equivalent to silence: a room hushes quiet when they enter. One can literally hear people staring.

The growth of blind theater is a conscious, overt effort at manipulation, at forcing the gaze: these blind people want to be seen, in large part to disrupt the categories of blindness–sightedness and the stereotypes of what blindness means. Many of the performers played with and/or removed the 'props' of blindness on stage—e.g., white canes, dogs, sunglasses—and invited the public to witness their true, artistic selves. In other words, it is the performance and presentation itself that was central and not the fact that they were blind doing it: they

wanted recognition as an actor playing a role of a doctor, for example, not a blind doctor nor a blind person playing a doctor.

Blind actors play with cultural symbols of blindness and sightedness, and manipulate opportunities to gaze and be gazed upon, because they are aware of the assumptions and stereotypes that others in their social environment hold. In the words of Lynn Manning, a blind African American artist performing his "Magic Wand" poem at the 2003 festival, said as he unfolded his white cane, "I go from Black man to blind man, with a flick of the wrist… from white man's burden to everyman's burden… the metamorphosis is always profound but the final form is not of my own choosing. I wield the wand, but you alone are the magician."

Conclusion

In conclusion, this article shows that blind theater has historically been a vibrant place for cultivating identity and for challenging cultural stereotypes. By presenting ethnographic examples from TBTB and the International Blind Theater Festival in Croatia, I have demonstrated how blind people are agents of cultural production, who consciously manipulate the gaze and their environments towards empowering ends. I document various innovative practices, including around audio description, that they have developed to increase access to the stage for both audiences and performers. Further, I have described ways that blind theater can destabilize cultural assumptions about blindness for the political goal of improving disability rights. It can also, simply, be great art. This retrospective analysis has shown that change is slow, but possible. Although there has been much progress since these observations were made, culturally there is still a long way to go towards breaking down negative assumptions of blindness and before blind people are deemed capable and welcome on stage, if not elsewhere in society.

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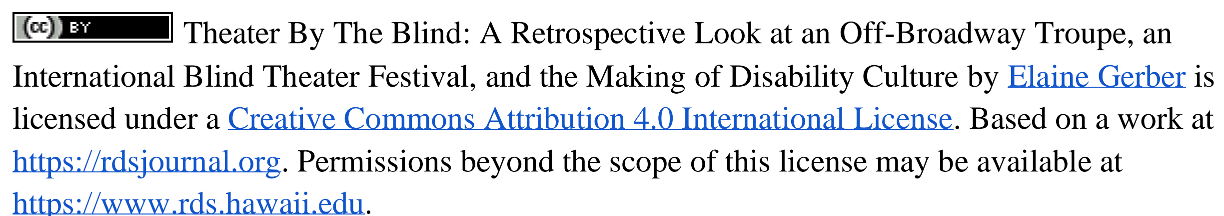
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Endnotes

[1] TBTB performed "Brecht on Brecht" in NYC in 2002, which included this line; they also performed it in Croatia at the BIT festival I attended in 2003. "Brecht on Brecht" is a compilation of the life and works of Bertolt Brecht, formatted for the theater by George Tabori (Brecht & Tabori n.d.).

[2] I later learned that I also shared another connection to TBTB (my mom's first cousin and Schambelan knew each other from college). To say that "we," the troupe and I, were friends is an understatement. From weddings to funerals, we were involved in each other's lives: we spent hours and hours together socially, outside of the theater and rehearsals, having dinner parties, sharing music, hanging out. I mourned the loss of this community, when my connections to them ended.

[3] For more information about the festival, see: www.novizivot.hr/bit.html

[4] The situation for blind people in Spain is different than for those from many of the other countries present. In Spain the national organization of the blind, ONCE, runs the state lottery and thus has a comparative wealth of resources. Although there was only one troupe from Spain present, ONCE sponsors a national blind theater competition each year and sends the winner to an international festival of their choosing. Needless to say, the quality of their performances was outstanding. (http://www.once.es/new/otras-webs/english)

[5] At the time, members of each troupe tended to sit near one another so they could hear what was being said. However, there were times when this system broke down, either because not everyone could get close enough to hear, the dialogue was too fast to interpret so quickly, or because the translators only spoke Croatian and another language and/or English, but not the language of the performance. (For example, one translator assigned to TBTB in 2001 spoke a minimum of four languages fluently, however, none were Spanish, and therefore was unable to translate the performance by the Spanish troupe from ONCE.) It is also difficult to provide spontaneous translation and audio description at the same time. More recent technological advances might change how this process is handled, e.g., by providing simultaneous live translation via podcast or smartphone.

[6] Although George Bernard Shaw won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1925, some retrospectively presume he had learning disabilities akin to ADHD (see https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1925/shaw/biographical/ and https://www.thebrainworkshop.com/in-the-spotlight/nobel-prize-winner-in-literature-george-bernard-shaw-and-his-struggle-with-learning-difficulties/). However, this was not necessarily known about Shaw at the time and never once was raised as a reason in the decision to perform his works. Further, *Misalliance* itself is a comedy with no disability content (https://www.gutenberg.org/files/943/943-h/943-h.htm).

[7] Schambelan and I discussed his legacy, and from those conversations it appeared that he did not want *anyone* – blind or sighted – to usurp his role, at least while he was still alive and involved with TBTB.

[8] The "Bergman Bell" is an ad hoc, non-standard adaptation to the traditional white cane made by Gary Bergman (TBTB member); he used it to clear pedestrian traffic from and generally facilitate navigation of the sidewalks in New York City. Bergman attached a standard bike bell to his cane just below the grip, so his thumb was able to ring the bell without modifying his hand position as he walked. It was also a way to announce his presence at the festival, by ringing it, as he was the only blind person there with this adaptation. Troupes from other countries thought it was a fantastic innovation and assumed it was part of standard rehabilitation practices in the U.S. It is not.

[9] This workshop was called, "Cultural confrontation: the game for human rights" by presenters Natasa Govedić and Vili Matula.