

## **“Disability in Musical Theater: An Exploration of d/Deafness in Musicals”**

I began my capstone by exploring the history of disability inclusion in musical theater, specifically talking about certain tropes frequently used to perpetuate harmful stereotypes of disabled folks. After looking into the history of disability inclusion in theater, I wondered what theater companies were actively working to challenge ableism and produce accessible productions. I was led to Deaf West, a theater company based in LA that works to bridge the gap between the hearing and d/Deaf worlds through performance. The bulk of my capstone is a deep dive into Deaf West shows, specifically *Big River* (2003), *Spring Awakening* (2015), and *American Idiot* (2024). I viewed *Big River* and *Spring Awakening* through the New York Public Library archive in December of 2024, and I watched *American Idiot* in person at the Mark Taper Forum in October of 2024. In addition to watching the shows, I interviewed DJ Kurs, the Artistic Director of Deaf West, to hear about his experience leading the accessible theater movement. I also met with Snehal Desai and Sarah Tubert, the Director and Assistant Director of *American Idiot*, to discuss their stylistic choices and the show’s impact. I also watched the archived version of UCLA’s conference, “*Big River* and Beyond,” in 2014. Key topics in my paper include Deaf gain, disability masquerade, disability expertise, accessibility, inclusivity, and representation.

As I began my capstone, I realized there is still a limited selection of literature about disability in musical theater. Additionally, much of the literature is focused on the inaccessibility of theaters architecturally or disabled characters themselves. My capstone contributes to a growing body of writing focused on d/Deafness in musicals, and it offers firsthand accounts from people directly involved in accessible theater like DJ Kurs. I hope my capstone gives people a new lens they can use to observe musical theater. Disability makes musical theater better, and I want to share what I have learned so others can have that same level of appreciation.

Being a Disability Studies major at UCLA has completely shifted my perspective and changed my life. UCLA Disability Studies has taught me to redefine normal, challenge ableist notions, and look for accessibility improvements everywhere I go. After taking DS 101W, I recognize how disability is created by an inaccessible world, and a singular definition of disability limits all the benefits of other definitions. Anthro 149 helped me recognize that disability must be understood differently in other global contexts; I also learned about how the Global North disables the Global South. Education 132 taught me about educational inaccessibility and helped me see ableism in the school system. And last but not least, Musicology M112 shifted my view on musicals I had seen numerous times and allowed me to view disability in a completely new light.

My capstone was a remarkable opportunity to explore a longtime passion of mine: theater. I believe that everyone should be able to access musical theater if they would like, regardless of disability status. In one of my interviews, Sarah Tubert said that the theater is a place where everyone can belong and where difference is celebrated. The stage should be a place where everyone can come as they are and tell a meaningful story.

In the future, I dream of consulting companies on inclusive practices or helping produce fully accessible musicals. While that dream still feels distant as I find my footing post-grad, my capstone does offer tangible ways to improve accessibility. I outline many practices, some as simple as offering subtitles, that would make the experience more widely available to disabled folks. I dream of a theatrical world that includes more disabled characters/actors, offers more accessibility features, and embraces disability overall. Everyone should be able to express themselves creatively and create, as well as view, art. Art brings communities together and helps us better understand diverse human experiences.