

A New Realism For Disability Onstage

BY WARREN SHAW

The portrayal of people with disabilities on stage, screen or in print, used to range from disappointing to gag-inducing. By turns monstrous, vengeful, pitiable or supernatural, the characters were shown as completely swallowed up by their disability.

Take “Anne and Tilly,” a novel from 1869. Picture a saint’s face that has grown holy with waiting and suffering, with the meekest eyes and the sweetest smile that were ever seen in this poor wicked world, set on a poor, deformed, crooked body, forever wasting with pain and anguish, forever being tortured with some unknown, incurable disease and you have Tilly Margery before you.

Stories frequently ended in death, as in “The Little Hunchback,” from 1845. Poor Ellen was hardly seven years old, and yet did she long to die. “Say not it is wrong for me to feel so, dear mother,” she would sometimes say. “Earth is not for me. No one can love me here, but you.”

These aren’t fleshed-out characters. They are signifiers, literary devices, irrelevant to actual people with disabilities. Audiences and readers might be provoked to sympathy, curiosity or dread by such figures, but there was little scope for identification with them.

These tropes are still alive in our culture. Think of Tiny Tim, zombies, Bran Stark, even Freddie Krueger. To be sure, they



Gregg Mozgala and Kara Young

PHOTO BY JEREMY DANIEL

don’t have the disability stage all to themselves anymore. Films like “Coda,” “Crip Camp,” “Ray,” and even the old TV show “Ironsides,” present better-rounded portraits than their predecessors did. But, actually hiring actors with disabilities remains a rarity. So does depiction of characters for whom disability is just routine – more involved perhaps, but not fundamentally different from people who need glasses.

Coming now to Broadway, “Cost of Living,” is a production that seriously pushes those limits.

“Cost of Living,” the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Martyna Majok, weaves parallel stories around two disabled characters. John is a grad student with cerebral palsy, and Ani is a long-divorced woman with double leg amputations and a spinal cord injury from a not-quite recent crash.

On one level “Cost of Living” is a story about consumer directed home care. The other two characters are either hired or volunteer for the job, a plot device that has to be unprecedented, or nearly so. The play’s starting point is home care’s unique exchange of intimate care and day-in/day-out conversation, formalized through at-will contracts and an hourly wage.

But “Cost of Living” is no documentary, or even a movie of the week. It is a story about the characters’ relationships, which are complicated. Ani’s new employee, Eddie, is her ex-husband, who is both still infatuated with her and in need of a paycheck. Jess, John the grad student’s new hire, is a recent Ivy League grad who seems to spend every minute working one job or another.

The grad student is wealthy and snarky. The ex-wife is a tough-as-nails Bayonne native, highly skilled with four-letter words. The play flits back and forth between these pairs of consumers and attendants, with rotating sets to match.

The two disabled employers are gnarly personalities, and anything but passive recipients of care. They supervise and define their attendants’ duties with uninhibited projection. I found that very satisfying.

Still, “Cost of Living” does not entirely escape traditional tropes. The play reveals more of the nondisabled characters’ back stories than the disabled characters’. And while Katy Sullivan’s performance as Ani blasts with emotional intensity, practically her every moment on-stage revolves around disability. Ani’s injuries are severe and fatal, as we learn in the opening. Her story is told in flashback by the ex-husband, portrayed sympathetically by David Zayas. Ani had a full human life before the accident – but not, the play suggests, afterwards.

And then she dies, leaving Eddie bereft, and out of a job.

There are a lot of strengths to the Ani-Eddie story, but for me it smacked, just a little, of Tilly and Ellen.

Meanwhile the team of John the grad student and Jess the college grad employee flourishes. Maybe a little too well, since Jess develops romantic feelings for her employer.

This sets her up for a hit when John runs roughshod over those feelings. It’s not clear whether he does so by accident or by intention, but whatever his motives may be, they seem to have nothing to do with disability.

This is my favorite moment in the play, because it puts the character beyond the usual noble/evil/pathetic stereotypes. John is just another stupid, self-centered man, living his life. Hooray!



Katy Sullivan and David Zayas

PHOTO BY JULIETA CERVANTES

John’s rejection of Jess, if that’s what it is, leads to a reaction scene that highlights Kara Young’s versatile navigation of the play’s most complex character.

The final payoff comes at the curtain call, when we learn that the disabled characters are actually played by disabled actors. Katy Sullivan, who originated the role of Ani, is a former Paralympian and Gregg Mozgala, who won the Lucille Lortel Award for best actor describes himself as a “triple threat: actor, writer, cripple.” Their entrances, as themselves, absolutely brought the mostly nondisabled house down.

“Cost of Living” fits into a growing canon of perceptive rather than reductive takes on disability. As a marker of the distance that the disability rights movement has pushed our culture over the past 60 years, its Pulitzer-Prize-pedigreed arrival on Broadway is nothing less than a triumph.

“Cost of Living” is at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, West 47th St. Wheelchair accommodations include ramp, elevator/access lift, seating platforms, removable seats, ADA bathrooms. Visual accommodation: i-captions. Hearing accommodations: T-coil loop, ALD, audio descriptive; open-caption matinees with TDF.

