



Shaping the Stage

by **KELSEY CULBERT**

Art, in all its forms, is a powerful thing. It can change people's lives in many different ways; it certainly changed mine. It allowed me to be involved in a career that is often overlooked as an option for those with disabilities. For that, I am truly grateful.

My journey in the arts community began in 2015. I took a class at the University of Regina called Devising Inclusive Theatre. Prior to taking that class, I never even thought it was possible for me to be involved in something like theatre or acting. What started out as a class ended up turning into a theatre company. Thanks to many financial grants (and a partnership with Listen to 'Dis arts organization) and the supportive fans that came to our first shows, *The Other Ordinary* was born.

The Other Ordinary is a great theater company to be a part of. It has allowed me to grow as an actress, but it has also allowed me to develop more of a personal identity apart from the labels and stigma associated

with having a disability. Throughout my academic career, I was very much hindered by the labels put upon me because of my disability. Fellow students saw me for all of my problems rather than my potential. As a result, I grew up assuming these labels were all I was. As I began to develop a sense of what my own reality actually was, I realized these labels didn't have to exist. I could have my own identity outside of them. However, just because I had this realization, does not mean the rest of my world had the same thoughts. That is, until I found theatre.

Participation in theatre has allowed me to see that my body is capable, that my mind is able to quiet itself, and that people believe in me. We aren't people just going on stage and saying, "Look at me, I'm disabled!" We are sending a message.

Once I started with *The Other Ordinary*, I began to understand that my body was not a pile of problems; rather it was full of capability and potential for physical movement. Suddenly my body was not just a filing cabinet of medical diagnoses, it was able to be part of humanity. Let's delve a little deeper into that, shall we?

Art, in all its forms, is a powerful thing. It can change people's lives in many different ways; it certainly changed mine:

Art has changed my life in a way that I never expected. People have started to accept me and I feel wanted. My body has changed as well. Despite its medical labels, I wanted my body to be part of the theatrical experience. *The Other Ordinary* made sure that was a reality. In addition, I would have never had the opportunity to be a part of many new experiences without theatre - travelling, performing, etc. In high school during drama class I was put in a corner and told to do activities outside the group. There was none



of the self-expression or sense of identity that I now experience in theatre. I also got to experience physical growth in the sense that I am now okay with using my body in a way that I was not comfortable with before. This includes comfortably moving about or dancing in front of people. Intellectually, it has helped me connect with my inner self. Participation in theatre has allowed me to see that my body is capable, that my mind is able to quiet itself, and that people believe in me. We aren't people just going on stage and saying, "Look at me, I'm disabled!" We are sending a message.

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My own reality is that I am okay with having a disability; I am okay with it because I don't know anything else. People often say "poor you" but disability is all I know. In theatre, though, suddenly there was far less emphasis on the label that made people

feel sorry for me. Labels are not prominent. No one bothers to say, "You have Cerebral Palsy, you have ADHD, your body is so spastic that you can't do a certain thing, you need to be in a program that can help you, etc." Instead, they draw on your strengths and accept you for who you are.

What started out as a class ended up turning into a theatre company:

It took us a long time; it definitely did not happen overnight. Our assignment for the class was to write about our lives and then turn it into a show for the university, but the prof brought in a director (Tracy Foster) who is an artist herself in the disability community. She wanted to make it more than just one show. We had to go through a lot of steps and avenues to get there, but through that one assignment, eventually, *The Other Ordinary* was born.

I am grateful for everything *The Other Ordinary* has done not only for me,

but for others as well. By watching our shows, audiences get to learn the same lessons I learned through theater. They are able to learn that disabled bodies are capable and have a place in the world. In addition, viewers of our productions get to understand something I've known all along. People with disabilities are just people. We have lives filled with family, friends, relationships, school, work, etc. We may have to do some things a little differently, but that does not mean we are inspirational or worthy of pity. We're human and want to be treated as such.

I'm a 26 year old young woman from Regina, Saskatchewan. One of my passions is to help people, and I love making new friends.

I am an advocate for people of different abilities. I have been public speaking for 4 years in hopes of changing perceptions of disability. I am a member of many groups who advocate for people like myself including Spinal Cord Injuries Saskatchewan and Astonished. I recently graduated from Campus for All at the University of Regina.

In my spare time, I enjoy writing, participating in my theater group (Listen to 'Dis Voice) and visiting with friends.