



**The Kennedy Center**

**OPENING STAGES**

**A Quarterly Newsletter for People with Disabilities Pursuing Careers in the  
Performing Arts**

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**FROM THE EDITOR:  
THE USES OF ADVERSITY**

Recently I read the script of "Third," the last play that Wendy Wasserstein wrote before her death. Wasserstein wrote some fine plays, including "Uncommon Women and Others," "The Heidi Chronicles," and "The Sisters Rosensweig." Unfortunately, "Third" is not nearly of their caliber. It struck me that, if it were not for Wasserstein's famous name and the sad fact that she was dying at the time of its production, this play would never have received the lavish New York attention that it got.

For a short time I felt angry that stars can get away with less than stellar work, while the rest of us do our best and often receive no recognition. But then I started to realize that there are also rewards, however bittersweet, to adverse fortune.

Many years ago I had a play accepted by a theater in SoHo, and for the first time in my life I was about to become a professionally produced playwright. I was very excited and built up elaborate hopes about my burgeoning artistic life. Then, abruptly, the production was canceled. A financial crisis forced the theater to shut its doors. And, the door of opportunity slammed shut on me, locking me in depression.

Contemplating this fiasco, I wondered what it had to teach me besides self-mocking laughter. I wondered if maybe this success that I desired was wrong -- too shallow, too vainglorious, too greedy.

Superficially that was a true: I was led on by the old triumvirate of worldly passions -- money, fame and the love of women. But, I had deeper needs, too. I desired first and foremost to use my play to forge a connection between myself and others. I hungered to touch people with my words and hold them to me.

To forge this kind of empathy means to be valued. And, my desire for validation has been conditioned by the fact that I have a physical disability. As a wheelchair user I am a member of a socially marginalized and devalued minority. Having a mainstream production would have been a vindication that my life experience was universal enough to be meaningful to others.

My second deep desire was to achieve the alchemy of art: the transformation of the dross of suffering into the gold of beauty. I wanted to make my mortal struggle into a cause for celebration.

But, the celebration was canceled when the theater closed its doors.

So, would it have been better if I hadn't desired so much for myself? Sometimes I'm tempted to think so. But, if I gave up the struggle, I would impoverish my life simply because I was afraid of losing. I want instead to have the courage of desire. And the important lesson that disappointments, such as I experienced with my play, can teach is how to develop this courage. In essence, we learn by surviving. The fact that, despite my loss, I am still here, still writing, gives me greater faith in myself.

We can't all have the luck to be a Wendy Wasserstein or other superstar. But we can all keep doing our art through good times and bad, whether the world rewards us or not.

Paul Kahn

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## **PERSPECTIVES**

### **POST PARTY DEPRESSION: LOOKING BACK AT THE CHICAGO FESTIVAL OF DISABILITY ARTS AND CULTURE by Mike Ervin**

May 1, 2006. I'm deep in that realm of satisfied but restless exhaustion one feels the day after returning from a great vacation. Low motivation for jumping back in the normal flow. I want to be back where I was for the last 10 days.

For the last 10 days I've been right here at home in Chicago. But our inaugural festival of disability art and culture has been whirling around me. I've been checking out and hanging out with some of the disabled artists I admire most, such as writer/performers Mat Fraser and Lynn Manning and Tekki Lomnicki.

Our festival was called Bodies of Work. It took place in more than 20 venues across the city and suburbs. On Christmas Eve 2002 I got a call from Dr. Kristi Kirschner of the Rehabilitation Institute of Chicago, and she invited me to attend a meeting in January to begin planning an expansive celebration of disability culture. I said sure I'd be there, but of course I was skeptical. This was a super ambitious idea, and it would require an unprecedented mobilization.

But the meeting actually happened and so did another and another and more and more. And before we knew it April 20, 2006 was here, opening night of Bodies of Work.

I direct the Access Project at Victory Gardens Theater, Tony award recipient for best regional theater in 2001. For our main contribution to Bodies of Work, we brought in Mat Fraser from England to perform his solo show *Sealboy: Freak*. Mat's disability is phocomelia, which is a fancy medical word for short arms. In *Sealboy*, he plays two roles. One is Stanley Berent, a real freak show performer from the 1940s whose stage name was Seal the Sealboy. Stanley would amaze the audiences that packed his circus tent by performing incredible feats like shaving himself and sawing wood. The other role Mat plays is a fictitious contemporary actor named Tam Shrafer who has the same disability as Stanley but can't get acting jobs because he looks too freakish.

*Sealboy* is hilarious but also offers painfully sharp insights into the disability prejudices of casting directors and the polite veneer behind which they hide them. Its exploration of our freak show performance heritage makes it a great historical piece, too. Fraser is an energetic performer with the acting range to weave all the elements together beautifully.

Manning, who's from Los Angeles, performed his outstanding solo piece *Weights* at the Museum of Contemporary Art. [See the interview elsewhere in this issue.] It tells the story of how he was permanently blinded when he was shot in the eye in a bar fight. Just three weeks after he was released from the hospital, he was ready to get on with life and learn how to navigate the world as a blind man. But in a hilarious scene, Manning plays the blind vocational rehab counselor who told him she couldn't help him until he went through an appropriate period of mourning. Equally funny are the scenes when Manning demonstrates how he developed the rhythm it takes to successfully walk with a white cane and how he learned how to pee without missing the toilet.

Chicagoan Tekki Lomnicki performed her one-act solo play *Blurred Vision* at Second City and packed the house on a Tuesday and Wednesday night. There is no more engaging actor than Tekki, who stands less than four feet tall and walks with crutches. The show uses her hypochondriac's overreaction to a bout of blurred vision as an adult to explore how her numerous hospitalizations shaped her identity as a child.

Bodies of Work consisted of a lot more than performance. There were exhibits of visual art, such as *Humans Being*, curated by the wonderful Chicago disabled painter Riva Lehrer. At the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum a sprawling exhibit on the history of disabled political activism will remain up throughout the summer. There was music, and there was dance.

We pulled off Bodies of Work because the leaders of some mainstream arts venues were progressive enough to understand and embrace the vision. The City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs also put resources behind it. We also pulled it off because Chicago has an unusually dynamic disability community where people like rehab doctors, academics, grass roots activists and funky artists can actually work together sometimes.

But then it was over, and there I was, wrung out, hung over from a wild culture binge. Oh well, the planning group is already meeting again, and we're shooting for doing another one two years from now. I guess I can plod along until then.

*Mike Ervin is a journalist, playwright and disability rights activist living in Chicago. He is director of the Access Project, a comprehensive initiative to make live theater accessible for people with disabilities, at Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago.*

## **EMERGENCY!** **by Nancy Scott**

Today, we live in a world of distraction, violence and weird weather. Perfect storms, crime and life-changing accidents are still the stuff of fiction, but they're also now the stuff of real life. Is your art protected?

I am a freelance writer and performer of my work. Recently, the first real fire occurred in my 100-unit apartment building. I had a list of things to grab, but I was sure, from previous experience, that this would be another toast-burning false alarm.

For me, thankfully, the fire was a non-event except for having to leave the apartment, as we have been instructed to do, for about a half hour. Many tenants arrived downstairs in various forms of clothing, since it was 10 P.M. (By the way, there was no list of or plan for tenants who might not hear alarms or who could not walk down steps.)

I, after finding no smoke in my hallway, went back to dress. I quickly picked up my talking portable computer, my purse with cell phone and debit card and keys, some cash on hand, and my white cane. I didn't check my emergency list which was in the computer.

In talking to tenants afterwards, it seems that most of us grabbed a few things in happy expectation of not much trouble. But maybe we need to think about what we really value and how we would protect it.

For instance, are your computer files backed up and stored in a fire-rated box? Mine are, and I hope to keep them current. I also store some cash on hand and important inventory lists (such as a full list of where I've had pieces published) in that box. My household inventory includes locations of equipment and important documents as well as a list of necessary phone numbers.

What about storage away from your house for some things? I rented the largest safety deposit box my bank offers, and it contains copies of my published pieces, several copies of my first poetry chapbook, and print-outs of other potential manuscripts that are at or near completion. (Rough drafts are stored in my computer.) And those back-up discs and inventory and phone number lists are in the bank vault, too. And I try to update them every year or so.

What do you suppose would have happened to me with my computer and cell phone but no battery chargers for either device? How long would I have had access? Suppose neither of them was very well charged when I made my emergency departure?

So, what is on my "emergency take list" which is at the beginning of my "to do" file? Here it is: purse with keys, debit card, cell phone, cash on hand not in firebox, Braille phone number files, computer, chargers for cell and computer, Braille manuscripts (3 poetry and 3 prose), safety deposit keys, jacket if it's cold. Would I have time to gather it all? I think so, since I know where it all is. Am I missing things? Well, if I had more time, I'd take medications and perhaps some more Braille writing files. I might even rescue a Braille writer and a few favorite CD's.

Fortunately, I have no other people or pets or pictures or priceless jewels to worry about. (I would likely check on my elderly next door neighbor.) But my art is the most important thing in my world, and it can't be replaced once it's lost.

If you're not a writer or you have a different disability, you'll have a totally different list. What adaptive devices or medications must you have? Are there dried flowers from your first performance or the lucky shirt or music scores or published reviews?

It might be a flood or an evacuation for chemical spills (both of which have happened to friends of mine). It could be a senseless break-in or some other vandalism. It could be something undreamed of. What must you protect for your soul's work?

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## PEOPLE

**SIMI LINTON, PH.D.**  
**AUTHOR, PROFESSOR, ARTS CONSULTANT**  
**Interviewed by Paul Kahn**

*(Editor's note: When we published this interview in the last issue of Opening Stages some words crept in that didn't accurately reflect Ms. Linton's style or intent. Therefore, we are republishing it here.)*

**KAHN: What is your doctorate in?**

LINTON: It's in psychology.

**KAHN: Were you a practicing psychologist at one time?**

LINTON: I trained to do clinical work, but when I completed my doctorate I made the decision that I really liked to teach. I taught at Hunter College and Baruch College for about 14 years. Both are part of the City University of New York. I taught courses in psychology for many years. In the last several years that I taught there I developed a course in disability studies. I had a year sabbatical and I had a fellowship, which is when I wrote my first book called *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. It was a basic overview of the field of disability studies and its history. It's used in the academic curriculum.

**KAHN: Do you have academic positions now?**

LINTON: I left Hunter College in 1998 to be an independent scholar and to be a consultant to arts organizations. I'm on the lecture circuit a great deal. I go to colleges and universities to talk about disability studies and about disability and the arts. Currently I am co-director of the disability studies seminar at Columbia University.

**KAHN: And you have a new book?**

LINTON: It's a memoir -- just out, actually last week. It's called *My Body Politic*. In essence it's the story of my life. But it is more specifically the story of the ways that our ideas about disability have shifted over time, and how that shift influenced the way I saw my own disability. I grew into the identity of "disabled woman," which is now how I primarily identify myself, but that wasn't always the case. I entered the state of disability at age 23. I didn't really identify myself as a disabled woman for many, many years. It took my alliance with the disability community, the growth of the disability rights movement and the growth of the idea of disability for me to gravitate to that identity and to claim it.

**KAHN: Can I ask what your disability is?**

LINTON: I have spinal cord injury due to an automobile accident in 1971.

**KAHN: Your timing was pretty good because it was in the early 70s when the disability rights movement really started to take hold.**

LINTON: Right.

**KAHN: Have the arts figured in claiming your identity as a disabled woman?**

LINTON: I think the arts figure very much in my life. We can express through the arts the various aspects of our experience and make apparent the things that are hidden, socially hidden. I think we can use the arts as a way to excite people about some of the ideas about disability that are increasingly part of our vocabulary and our way of talking about our experience.

**KAHN: Tell me a little more about that.**

LINTON: For instance, theater. Through theater there are ways to put ideas and issues out in a way that makes them interesting to people and makes it possible for non-disabled people or outsiders to the disability experience to grasp some of what we've been putting out about the social construction of disability, about social justice issues, about the civil rights issues that so much shape our lives. The arts can be used to counter the medical ideas about disability that dominated our discourse for a long time.

**KAHN: Do you think we can manifest a culture analogous to the creative output of other minorities? I'm thinking, for instance, of the rich expression coming out of the AIDS experience or the Black American experience.**

LINTON: First of all, I think the cultural production that focuses on AIDS is part of the disability narrative. I am asked sometimes whether there is such a thing as a disability culture, and indeed, I think there is. I think it's not as well known. People with disabilities haven't been given the kind of creative opportunities to explore the many ways that disability can be expressed through the arts. I think that often, when disabled people make art, it's considered therapeutic. Or, it's seen as part of rehabilitation for our troubled lives, rather than a creative expression that has merit, that has excitement informed by ideas, by cultural experience and by community. The African-American experience is analogous but not the same.

**KAHN: African-Americans and people with disabilities are both oppressed minorities. I always wonder why artistic expressions of the disability experience haven't attained the same level of significance or reception in the broader culture, yet we have so much to communicate that is universal.**

LINTON: Well, we have had very little control over the way our experience has been described in the press, in cultural criticism and even in scholarship. So, I think we need to seize control over those images, and I think very slowly, we are getting some foothold in the way that we are talked about in the press and ideas being put forth in films and theater and in writing. Some days I'm optimistic, and

some days, I think we haven't moved the world an inch. But I think this is a critical time. I think this coming year or two will show a critical change.

**KAHN: What do you think will be responsible for that change?**

LINTON: There are a few things going on. Maybe they don't amount to a hill of beans, but maybe they mean something. Let me see if I can think of all of them. Since the movie *Murderball* came out I've noticed a slight shift in attitude, in language and ideas in the papers. In the reviews of *Murderball* and some of the subsequent cultural criticism about disability stuff the critics seem to a little bit more on their toes.

**KAHN: What I've noticed about the reviews of *Murderball* is that the critics have sort of got it. It's like a revelation to them: "These are regular guys."**

LINTON: Exactly. So, I think that really helped. Then Chicago is having a disability and cultural arts weeklong, citywide event, involving many different venues and sectors of the cultural community. That's very exciting. The Theater Initiative that we are working on in New York has gotten a wonderful response from the New York theater community. We've been very excited about that. And we have others in the works that we are planning. The New York theater community seems interested, seems to know that this is worthwhile. And we have a number of wonderful disabled artists who are getting a little more attention. Some casting decisions in movies and in plays are giving more opportunities to disabled actors. And some of the playwrights that I cherish are getting recognition and getting productions.

I think it's slow. It's not going to be tomorrow, but there are going to be some shifts. I also think the huge number of returning disabled Iraqi vets are going to constitute an entity and a force in the same way disabled vets coming back from Vietnam participated in the genesis of a disability rights movement. Please don't get me wrong. I know the realities. I know how horrible it is. I know the unemployment rates. I know the amount of homelessness. I know the amount of disregard. I know the number of disabled people incarcerated in facilities. I'm not whitewashing that. I, in no way, think we are home free. I'm just saying I think there are some cultural shifts that are important to emphasize, and I think we have an opportunity to do that. I am looking at every opportunity I can to take disability public and make some of these things happen.

**KAHN: Let me ask you about your organization, Disability/Arts. How did you come to found it and what does it do?**

LINTON: Disability/Arts is basically me. It's not like you come to an office, and you see a bunch of us here. I do consulting with some arts organizations and theater projects. I formed Disability/Arts when I left my academic position in order to have an umbrella under which to do my work and to collaborate with other organizations. But within Disability/Arts, we were able to co-produce these

disability theater events this year, along with the Columbia seminar in disability studies and the Non-Traditional Casting Project.

**KAHN: Tell me a little about the events that happened this past year in New York.**

LINTON: In the spring we did one event at Columbia University as part of a seminar on disability and theater. And it was, I think, quite successful. And then at the end everyone said, “This is just the beginning. We have to do more.” So, we created two events for November. One was at the Public Theater, which was by invitation only. We invited significant figures in the New York theater community to come together with playwrights and actors and other disabled people who pursue the idea of disability in their work—John Belluso, Susan Nussbaum, Lynn Manning, Troy Kotsur and Carrie Sandahl, who is a professor at Florida State in the theater department. So, it was a robust panel. And in our audience we had New York theater people who were really enormously enthusiastic. And we had a write up in *American Theatre Magazine*. And, based on that, we have been asked to do a couple more events, which until they’re in better shape I can’t really talk about.

**KAHN: Do you have an artistic practice yourself?**

LINTON: Well, writing. In writing the memoir I used the opportunity to explore a more creative kind of writing than I had done in the past, and I enjoyed that very much. I do paint on weekends, but I’m hardly a painter.

**KAHN: It sounds like you think this may be a good time to be an artist with a disability.**

LINTON: Well, I think that schools cannot reject disabled people as easily as they used to. I don’t mean that it doesn’t still happen, but I think there are more training schools and conservatories and colleges and universities that have theater programs and film and acting programs and painting programs and so forth. We’ve made it harder for them to reject disabled people. That is a positive thing. I think that high schools and elementary schools are still suffering enormously, particularly in city schools, from cutbacks in funding to the arts, and that affects both disabled and non-disabled people. Although, I think there are more restricted opportunities for disabled kids to explore artistic expression in really creative ways, not just through therapeutic endeavors, than there are for non-disabled kids. But I can’t really document that.

**KAHN: The arts are a hugely difficult field for anybody, full of rejection. What would you say to artists with disabilities who are feeling really discouraged because they can’t get their work out and don’t have opportunities?**

LINTON: I don’t want to give simple kinds of encouragement that are empty. I think that we have to work simultaneously, that all of us have to work as a community to seize better control over cultural criticism, to keep working at

issues of equity and finding ways to communicate our messages, ways in which we do not compromise our messages but which are theatrically important and interesting in and of themselves. I don't have words of wisdom or anything like that, except that we have to work together at breaking down the barriers.

**LYNN MANNING**  
**Interviewed by Kari Lynn Pope**

*Lynn Manning is a Los Angeles based award-winning poet, actor, and playwright. He is also a Paralympic silver medalist and former World Champion of Blind Judo. In 2005 he toured the United Kingdom with his one-man play, *Weights*, which is now available on audio CD from Bridge Multimedia at <http://www.bridgemultimedia.com/weights.php>.*

**KARI: I think what I'm most eager to talk with you about is your tour of the UK. Was the response to *Weights* any different in the UK than it has been here in the US?**

LYNN: I had quite a bit of self-doubt about whether a lot of the play was transferable culturally. But that turned out to be groundless. The issues in the play of adventitious blindness, coming to accept and learn what that is all about, and coming to terms with people's perceptions of that transferred just fine.

What surprised me with the tour was the ethnocentric interest, the African interest. Being African-American, I think in terms of the juxtaposed cultures that I inhabit one moment to the next. There's the black culture and the disability culture, and sometimes I'm pulled between the two. I was surprised in the UK to find a very strong black sensibility and an acceptance and understanding from that point of view. The preconceived notions and prejudices and lowered expectations of being Black in America and flipping that with those same lowered expectations of being blind in a sighted world was quite well received.

That helped me get past all questions of cultural limitations. Because there really were none, beyond certain language usages. At one point in the play I make a quote about the owner of the bar where I got shot -- that if his business could survive without Blacks, then he'd be happier than a linen salesman at a Klan rally. That gets big laughs here in the States, but it just fell like a rock over there, because "clan" means something different in the UK. So, around the fourth performance, I decided to change it and say, "He'd be happier than a linen salesman at a Ku Klux Klan rally." And then the laughs came. They knew what Klan I was talking about!

**KARI: Before you went to the UK, you performed *Weights* at the International Blind and Visually Impaired Theater Festival in Zagreb, Croatia. What was different about performing in Croatia?**

LYNN: In Croatia there was a running translation for people who didn't speak English. So, there was a bit of a whisper, hum, or buzz in the audience while the performance was going on, since they lacked the equipment to do this through a closed-circuit earpiece. It was lip to ear translation in real time, which affected the performance somewhat; I would slow down at times to try to let people catch up with me.

This was the second time that I'd performed *Weights* in Croatia. It so moved the artistic director and the host theater company that they wanted me to bring it to the largest possible audience this time around -- that being the opening night audience. The folks who spoke English first hand were very, very much appreciative of the piece, including their Minister of Culture there. And certainly a great effort was made to bring people out from the American Embassy and the American school, to have as large an English-speaking audience as possible, and they responded with great enthusiasm as well.

**KARI: What was your impression of the disability arts and culture scene in Croatia?**

LYNN: I found an odd thing in Croatia when I was asked to participate in an interview on a national television news talk show with the artistic director of New Life, the theater company that hosts the International Blind and Visually Impaired Theater Festival. The host of the show asked the artistic director a question about blind actors and how they could seek training. The director's answer began with what was a revelation to me: that the blind aren't allowed to attend university in Croatia. They have to go to a special school. They're not allowed to attend a general university where they could pursue, say, theater arts.

While I was sitting there with my mouth hanging open, I was asked how that compares with what goes on in the United States. And I had to reply that we now have this law, this Americans with Disabilities Act, designed to protect us from that sort of discrimination and to allow us the opportunity to contest that sort of discrimination in the courts. Under certain circumstances, there are disabled people who do get discriminated against in the collegiate arena when they try to venture into theater arts. Because the general population doesn't recognize that we do this sort of thing. And then a lot of the instructors feel like they have to spend too much extra time with a blind or physically disabled person, and they do what they can to discourage participation in theater. Now, it was my understanding that the day after I left Croatia, they actually had a political demonstration in which several thousand people showed up to demonstrate for greater accessibility to things like university for blind and visually impaired people.

**KARI: 2005 was a really busy year for you—not only with the tour and the Blind Theater Festival, but also “Blind Justice,” the ABC television series**

**on which you served as a technical advisor, as well as a residency in Pennsylvania.**

LYNN: Yes, at the Erie Art Museum, a seven-day residency, where I did workshops in conjunction with a cultural anthropologist and also a curator and a musician. There was a show on display called *The Weavings of War* of rug work from places like South Africa and the Middle East and Afghanistan. These were traditional weavings with non-traditional symbology in them that depicted the submersion of those cultures into contemporary war. For instance, the Afghan weavers incorporated images and icons of tanks and choppers and paratroopers into their artwork. There was a real representation of how something as traumatic as war can affect the art and how the art can reflect the change in the culture and the society and can record that in its own way through its own traditional means.

My involvement was dealing with the trauma of losing my sight, of being shot and blinded, and how the creation of *Weights* grew out of that, and how some of my poetry was born out of traumatic experiences. We had workshops for people to explore creatively traumatic experiences in their own lives, whether through visual art or spoken word, or performance. It was enlightening for me to learn how artists in these other cultures have responded to their circumstances and their environment, and to feel a part of that continuum, not really having thought previously of my work as an outgrowth of a traumatic experience.

**KARI: Let's talk about "Blind Justice" for a bit. What is the role of technical advisor on a TV show?**

LYNN: Well, I would look at the scripts and give my recommendations as to what would work or be believable for this character in this program. (LAUGHTER) I actually spent very little time on the set, or in the offices of ABC. Most of the time I would work from home, read through the scripts, and make my recommendations by e-mail, unless there was some need for a face-to-face with the writers, and then we would arrange transportation and I would go down there.

**KARI: What were some of the recommendations that you made for the show?**

LYNN: The producers wanted to create a situation in one episode where the detective, Dunbar, got separated from his guide dog while crossing the street, and they asked me if that was possible. I said, yes, it is quite possible, whether getting bumped by a car or a pedestrian who's not watching where he's going. The way they did it, Dunbar got clipped by a bike messenger and was calling for the dog. There was a Good Samaritan type character who grabbed him and helped him to the opposite corner. But he pulls free, and by that time he's with the dog again. And of course, his first concern is for the dog, patting it down and making sure it's not injured. But it was a good opportunity to show that often we get help that we're not looking for (LAUGHTER).

**KARI: Did you find that the writers would usually follow your suggestions?**

LYNN: Usually, but not all the time. In another episode Dunbar goes to visit his ex-partner in the hospital and has his dog sit and wait outside the hospital room. I knew this would cause some controversy among guide dog users, and I pointed out to the producers that a guide dog is absolutely allowed in a hospital room and to write the dog into the scene would be a good opportunity to educate the public about that fact. As each rewrite came down—and each script went through several rewrites—and I found that scene still there, I would make a note: “Hey, you guys, take the dog into the room!” But for whatever reason, they didn’t do it. When that episode aired, there were letters, the listservs flamed on, and guide dog users -- including my wife--were very verbal and adamant about Dunbar leaving that dog outside the room and what sort of message that gives people about guide dogs at hospitals.

At times there were decisions made by the directors that would appear on the film, even though they didn’t appear on the script. Luckily, I was involved with the quality control of the audio description for the show, and I had the opportunity to screen some of the episodes as they were writing and laying down the description for them. There was an episode where Dunbar is asked to help motivate a newly blind young guy to do something with his life and move on from grief. There’s a scene where Dunbar has gotten the guy to clean up his apartment. In what I’m sure makes for a very cute scene, the two characters are doing all this work, and the dog is laid out on the couch. But it’s a problematic scene, because guide dogs don’t belong on furniture. This scene was something that wasn’t in the script or described in the script, but the directors had decided that this would be a good shot.

When I got back home I wrote a quick e-mail to Bochco himself, and said, “I don’t know if there’s still time to get the director to clip that scene, but it’s going to create some problems if it stays in there.” I realized what the director was trying to do with that scene, but what he gets in cuteness he would lose in authenticity where guide dog behavior is concerned. And Bochco said, no, it wasn’t too late to do something about that. And they did remove that scene, so when it aired that particular shot was not there.

**KARI: I know that the show was cancelled, and I was wondering if you have any insight to share about why it got cancelled and any thoughts about what the outlook is for shows like this to be created in the future.**

LYNN: Luckily those 13 episodes, that one-half season that they shot, at least completed a story arc. The show was building an audience, but there was an article that came out in the New York Times television magazine, profiling consultants to TV shows. They focused on three brand-new shows that came out that season. “Blind Justice” was one, and “Numbers” was another one. And then there was a third show about a psychic that helps detectives solve cases. I’m blanking on the name of that show, because it pisses me off so much that

people are more willing to believe that a psychic can be a detective but that a blind person can't be a detective and use observation and deductive reasoning.

I think that's part of why "Blind Justice" didn't fly. One aspect of the arc of the 13 episodes had to do with Dunbar's need to have a gun as the definition of being a cop and maintaining his masculinity. We got it in the reviews and the late-night talk shows: how absurd it is that they would let this blind guy walk around with a gun on him. There were a couple of episodes where he used that gun or pulled it out at least. By the end of the 13 episodes, he comes to the conclusion that he doesn't need a gun to do his job, to be a good cop. And he decides to no longer carry it. But people couldn't wait through the 13 episodes.

It also didn't help that there was quite a bit of negative juice coming from certain quarters of the blind community. If it didn't suit their particular frames of reference, for example guide dog users versus cane users, there were complaints registered and lodged episode to episode. When you rarely have the central character of a series being blind, the problem is that in the community everybody wants that blind character to be them -- to have their sensibilities or their lifestyle. So, ABC decided it wasn't worth the problem.

It would be like if every time there was a black character in a show, that character had to conform to every single black person's expectation of them. I remember the first modern, post Civil Rights battle sitcom, "Julia," with Diahann Carroll in the central role. A lot of the black folks around me complained that her character wasn't black enough, that she wasn't urban enough, that she didn't talk street talk. She was a college-educated nurse living in a suburban environment! What is she supposed to do?

There was a blind detective character in the 1960's and early '70's called "Longstreet," and we had a blind detective in 2005 with "Blind Justice." Let's just hope that it doesn't take another 30 years for there to be a lead blind character in some sort of thoughtful, mentally challenging series.

**KARI: I know that you do a lot of community work. What are some of your most important community endeavors here in Los Angeles?**

LYNN: There are three or four basic things I involve myself with. One is my involvement with disability arts and culture, trying to involve persons with disabilities in theater, most often through the Firehouse Theater Company. Another with the Watts Village Theater Company is bringing theater arts to the underserved populations of Watts and other Afro-Latino, impoverished communities -- using theater to tell stories that don't get told otherwise, or to address themes and issues that folks in the communities can relate to, or just as a means to inspire some of the young folks to pursue the arts, at least to the point that it enhances their literacy skills. And another is trying to make people aware of the Paralympic movement -- the great, diligent, dedicated population of

athletes with disabilities out there who are striving for perfection in competitive sport and don't get the exposure or recognition that I think they so desperately deserve.

**KARI: How has your community involvement served to enhance your career or helped you deal with some of the barriers that you face as an artist with a disability?**

LYNN: My involvement has enhanced my career by bringing me in contact with other artists who are driven in the same way, who have the same aspirations as I and want to contribute to exposing more folks to the joys and pleasures of creative self-expression. The disability arts community is something I wouldn't be conscious of, if I weren't out there in the mix. And that there is such a thing as "disability culture" is something that I could easily not be conscious of either -- the history and struggles of the other artists who are out there pursuing the arts and fighting the struggle for recognition of their art and acceptance of their art as Art, rather than as something "nice," you know, "Look what the poor gimp did."  
(LAUGHTER)

That's been a great gift of this involvement. And even though it hasn't been intended as any sort of public relations on my part, my involvement has gotten me quite a bit of press exposure and recognition. I've gotten an Unsung Hero award from the local PBS broadcasting station here in Los Angeles, recognition from the Media Access Office for workshops I ran for playwrights with disabilities, and NAACP awards for a couple of the plays that were produced in small theaters here in Los Angeles. That stuff has gotten me some limited exposure and some local level celebrity of sorts. And it's gotten me the exposure to get the audio CD of *Weights* made, as well as the spoken word CD *Clarity of Vision*. And then there's *Shoot*, my short, experimental film that runs on cable endlessly!  
(LAUGHTER) I suppose all of those things have exposed me enough so that I could be found by the producers of "Blind Justice" and asked to come onto that project as a technical advisor. I've been asked to advise on other projects as well, most often just as a volunteer, adding a few insights. "Blind Justice" was a well-paying job that I had hoped would continue. But there will be other opportunities, or we'll try and make some! (LAUGHTER)

**KARI: What do you think fuels your creative drive?**

LYNN: It's a challenge to find the most precise and truthful words. I've always wanted to be an artist, as far back as I can remember. Whether it was tempera colors or Play-Doh, I aspired to greatness (LAUGHTER). So, I strove in that direction and I was encouraged to do that by my mother and my stepfather and my early teachers.

I can't imagine doing anything else as my ultimate career. I've worked at other jobs, but they were always simply to support the opportunity to pursue creative self-expression. As far as wanting to use those skills, those arts, and whatever

other knowledge I have to make the world a better place--I'm not sure if that came out of early church teachings or as part co-dependent behavior from being a child of an alcoholic: "Can't save Mom, but I can save the world." (LAUGHTER) I'm not real sure what drives me that way, but I've always been driven that way, even long before getting involved in judo—and part of the judo credo is to make the world a better place through self-perfection. Now, I shoot to make the world a better place one person at a time, one audience member at a time, or one student at a time.

*Kari Pope is on the staff of the National Arts and Disability Center (NADC) at UCLA and coordinates the Arts and Disability Network for California, [www.artsdisabilitynetwork.ucla.edu](http://www.artsdisabilitynetwork.ucla.edu).*

*A version of her interview has appeared in *Breath & Shadow*, a free monthly, online journal of literature and disability culture. It is the only cross-disability literary journal written and edited exclusively by people with disabilities. Visit [www.abilitymaine.org/breath](http://www.abilitymaine.org/breath), or subscribe by emailing [breathandshadow@aol.com](mailto:breathandshadow@aol.com) and putting "subscribe" in the subject line.*

**MICHAEL MAAG**  
**Master Electrician for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival**

**Interviewed by Janet Salmons**

**JANET: Let's begin with a brief description of your career before and after your spinal cord injury.**

MICHAEL: Before the accident in August 2003, I was the Master Electrician for the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. I began in 1999 as the assistant to the Master Electrician and in 2001 became Master Electrician. After the accident I kept the job. I was in the hospital 68 days, and Oregon Shakespeare held the job open.

**JANET: What changes did you have to make in your approach to your work?**

MICHAEL: Before, I was a hands-on manager; I would do anything the crew would do...wiring the impossible. Now I had to learn how to be a delegator, which means I have to communicate, explain and teach others. I had to accept a change in responsibility and trust that the crew would do things as well as I would.

My office is in the basement of the theater. To get between the office and theater—one floor up— I have to go through two buildings to an elevator, and

circle two city blocks. My assistant and crew are willing and able to do what is needed to allow me to succeed as Master Electrician. Oregon Shakespeare Festival has been willing to accept that I cannot do what is written in the job description: climb ladders and lift 70 pounds. Their acceptance-- crew and management-- makes it work. There is a mutual feeling of respect, as we try to figure out what is needed and required for accommodation.

I had to make a transition—from being a physically active person who could do anything to being a paraplegic in a wheelchair. Being in untreatable pain is frustrating. It affects the way you interact with the world. I have to slow down and remember to be patient with others.

**JANET: Have others responded differently to you?**

MICHAEL: I attended a lighting design conference, where I would expect to be treated with respect, based on my position and business dealings with vendors. I was ignored until they saw my business card! They look over you. At belly button level you have to be aggressive to attract attention to yourself.

**JANET: Do you encounter many other professionals in theater technology fields who have disabilities?**

MICHAEL: No. I simply cannot be the only one, but have not encountered others. This is a field where most Master Electricians or Lighting Designers started by moving things around and doing physical work.

**JANET: What would you suggest to someone with physical disabilities, who is interested in a career in theater technology in terms of training?**

MICHAEL: Changes with emerging technologies make it possible for people with disabilities to pursue professions in the field. Robotic equipment and CAD (computer aided design) allow for pre-visualization of lighting designs. In this industry usually people do more than one thing, and, if you can't hang lights, it would be hard to find a job that used computer design entirely.

It is hard to pursue a standard career track, given disability. My current situation depends on the acceptance of current crew and management. Someone could just say, "we can't have an ME who can't climb a ladder -- it's in the job description." But I feel I have the skills. I appreciate the arts, and I want to contribute.

**JANET: Is there anything else you would like to add?**

MICHAEL: I want to stress my belief that these physical disabilities are not what define me. I am still the same great ME. The knowledge, the know-how, the experience is all still there; I just have to use others as a conduit to get that stuff out into the real world. This accident has greatly changed my perspective. I now know that we must cherish every moment and take nothing for granted. It is wonderful to be a part of a great arts organization like OSF, and to be able to contribute in any small way.

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## NEWS AND NOTES

### NEW FREE SERVICE PROMOTES PERFORMERS WITH DISABILITIES

Disabled actor Danny Murphy and a group of friends are developing **Value Added Script Services** (V.A.S.S.), a not for profit consulting service for Writers Guild of America (WGA) writers to help them create characters with disabilities. According to Murphy, "V.A.S.S. will also provide producers, casting directors, and directors with all the information they need to add the special flavor of disability to their stories to make them even more successful."

Murphy's goal is to get the complete support of all of the performers and screenwriters guilds and to publicize the fact that performers with disabilities are a highly trained professional group of actors that are being underutilized. This fact is confirmed by the SAG/U.C.L.A. report produced by Dr. Olivia Raynor at the National Arts and Disability Center, which found that performers with disabilities appear in film and television 0.5% of the time.

The V.A.S.S. website is <http://add2scripts.com/>. It is designed to provide information needed on any type of disability. Murphy's wish is that every television and film producer in the industry make a pledge to designate at least one role in each of his/her casting breakdowns as "SUITABLE for PWD" in the same way that they write "ALL ETHNICITIES."

After the successful launching of V.A.S.S., Murphy plans to develop a separate production company for people with disabilities. The company will be looking for screenwriters and Los Angeles based people with skills running a camera, directing, and editing. To comment on the web site or contribute ideas contact Murphy at [danny@dannymurphy.com](mailto:danny@dannymurphy.com) or 818.762.8969.

### CANADIAN DISABILITY ARTS & CULTURE NETWORK ESTABLISHED

Canada's first Disability Arts & Culture Network was recently established. The purpose of the Network is said to be "the creation of a national strategy through which disability arts and culture can continue to garner the respect they merit across Canada and internationally." For more information contact Michele Decottignies at [michele@stage-left.org](mailto:michele@stage-left.org) or Nicole Dunbar at [nicole@stage-left.org](mailto:nicole@stage-left.org).

## INCREASED FUNDING FOR NEA AND NEH

The U.S. House of Representatives has passed the Congressional Arts Caucus Amendment to increase funding for the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) by \$5 million each. The amendment passed impressively by a voice vote.

The Congressional Arts Caucus Amendment was sponsored by co-chairs Reps. Louise Slaughter (D-NY) and Chris Shays (R-CT), Humanities Caucus co-chairs Jim Leach (R-IA) and David Price (D-NC), and Interior Appropriations Subcommittee Ranking Democrat Norm Dicks (D-WA).

## ANNUAL LEAD CONFERENCE TO BE HELD IN WASHINGTON, DC

The 2006 Leadership Exchange in Arts and Disability (LEAD) Conference will be held at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts on August 3-6 in Washington D.C. For more information go to

[http://www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility/KC\\_LeadConf\\_06.pdf](http://www.kennedy-center.org/accessibility/KC_LeadConf_06.pdf) or email [access@kennedy-center.org](mailto:access@kennedy-center.org). According to our own Betty Siegel, Manager of Accessibility at the Kennedy Center, the conference will be another exciting opportunity for participants to engage in stimulating dialogue on issues ranging from physical and programmatic access to ticketing policies and marketing strategies. There will be opportunities to explore the latest access technologies, learn about universal design and here from the experts on legal issues that impact cultural organizations.

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