Accepted version

Accepted on 1 October 2025

To published in *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*

****

Funny Business: Disability, Humor, and Performance in Theatre and Drag Spaces

Abstract

Disability and humor have an uneasy relationship. Research on disability and humor, particularly when concerned with learning-disabled adults, frequently raises questions of comprehension and highlights the potential for ridicule. Yet, we know very little about the role of humor in the lives of learning-disabled adults. Drawing on observations of a theatre group and a drag group for learning-disabled adults, and on interviews with theatre/drag staff and parents of learning-disabled adult children, I recognize learning-disabled adults as *instigators*, rather than *objects*, of humor. Humor is a prominent feature of training spaces and serves various functions, including cultivating a sense of belonging and connection. In public performances, the humor activities of learning-disabled adults, and approving reactions of audience members, reassert the agency, capabilities, and humanity of performers. Despite tensions, such as fears of mockery and exploitation, I recognize how humor is enacted in ways that dismantle a deficit scripting of disabled lives.

Keywords

Arts; Disability; Ethnography; Humor; Learning Disability; Performance

Word Count

8,181 words (additional word allowance agreed with Editor-in-Chief)

Introduction

Social scientists rarely take up humor[i] as a point of academic interest (Watson 2015). For Wilde (2018, p26), this corresponds to a dissonance between the 'trivial' nature of humor/comedy and the 'important/sophisticated sphere of formal knowledge and the approved 'gravity' of 'high' topics and discourses'.[ii] This is despite humor being 'an essential element of the everyday lifeworld' (Cormack et al. 2017, p386). Humor is a social phenomenon, with jokes and humorous utterances, as socially and culturally shaped, constituting a form of communication shared within social interaction (Kuipers 2008).

This absence is particularly felt in social scientific work focusing on disability. This is due, perhaps, to the relationship between disability and humor being an uneasy one.

Research on disability and humor, particularly when concerned with learning-disabled adults, frequently raises questions of comprehension and highlights the potential for ridicule. Yet, we know very little about the role of humor in the lives of learning-disabled adults. Drawing on observations of a theatre group and a drag group for learning-disabled adults (of training sessions and public performances), and more sparingly on interviews with theatre/drag staff and parents of learning-disabled adult children, I recognize learning-disabled adults as *instigators*, rather than *objects*, of humor. Humor is a prominent feature of training spaces and serves various functions, including cultivating a sense of belonging and connection. But humor in the theatre and drag groups also conveys something bigger. In public performances, the humor activities of learning-disabled adults, and approving reactions of audience members, reassert the agency, capabilities, and humanity of performers. Yet, parents and artists also highlight several tensions regarding such performances. They are concerned public exposure, despite having educative and advocacy potential (Aseni 2018; Rieger 2015), will incite ridicule from non-disabled others, whereby performers are laughed *at* rather than *with*. Yet, whilst strains are evident, such as fears of mockery and exploitation, I recognize how humor is enacted in ways that can dismantle a deficit scripting of disabled lives. Together with extending a nascent yet underbaked literature on disability and humor, this article covers areas of the social sciences – humor (broadly conceived) and drag culture – subject to little empirical attention. It is also, from what I can determine, the first empirical study of disabled drag performers[iii]. In what follows, I provide a summary of research on the relationship between disability and humor, before then outlining the methodology and explicating the core findings.

Disabling Humor, Disability Humor

Disabled people, particularly learning-disabled adults, have been presumed to lack the capacity to comprehend and instigate humor. In a systematic review on disability and humor, for example, Venkatesan (2024, pp. 80-81) ponders ‘does humor exist among [disabled people]?’:

> If so, depending on the nature or severity of their disabilities—especially in comparison to the non-disabled able-bodied or healthy controls—do they exhibit humor appreciation, employ humor, have distinctive humor styles, or experience victimization as objects of humor?

In another systematic review, Chadwick and Platt (2018) recognize how humor can foster connections in ways that bolster the physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of learning-disabled adults. However, they also suggest ‘it is probable that people with [learning disabilities] may experience challenges in cognitively processing, comprehending, and appreciating humor’. Doubts are raised about whether learning-disabled people can make, display, or enjoy jokes, and, if so, whether humor styles, perspectives, and preferences are similar to, or distinct from, non-disabled others.

My intention is not to chew out individual scholars or bodies of scholarship, although it is noticeable that such work is regularly grounded in psychological sensibilities. Yet, I do take issue with universal statements, based on quantitative assessments of humor

(e.g. ‘sarcasm appreciation’), about the alleged humor aptitudes of learning-disabled adults. Documenting a deficit in a cognitive understanding and appreciation of humor is short on nuance and grossly classifies (humor) experiences of *all* learning-disabled adults as uniform, negative, and enduring. I would also add there is a static assumption of what *counts* as humor. There is minimal thought of how ‘humor’ is operationalized, who is involved in clarifying it (and who has the power to), and how definitions of humor differ according to a person’s preferences and contexts (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2012).

Another strand of research on disability and humor attends to the potential of humor to oppress disabled people. Reid et al. (2006, p631) distinguish between ‘*disability humor*’ (‘humor that centers disability or is offered by disabled persons’) and ‘*disabling humor*’ (when humor is denigrating and frames disabled people as objects of ridicule). The latter aligns with the ‘superiority theory’ of humor, namely, finding humor in the misfortune of others (Watson 2015). Humor which *punches down* on disabled people has a long history, with disabled people performing as court jesters or displayed for public exhibition (e.g. ‘freak shows’). Humor, thus, has historically been at the expense of disabled people.

Yet seeing disabled people as a source of amusement is still prevalent today. Disabling humor built upon constrictive stereotypes is present in television/film (Lockyer 2015b; Wilde 2018), in comedy performances and festivals (Lockyer 2015a; Martin 2010; Reid et al. 2006), and in public spaces. Indeed, ‘disability hate speech’ is prominent in public life (Burch and Wilkin 2025) and might range from subtle micro-aggressions to volatile trolling, all perceived as light-hearted humor (Doyle 2024). For example, Pritchard (2021) references people with dwarfism being employed for lowbrow entertainment purposes (e.g. ‘dwarf-tossing/throwing’; recruited for bachelor parties). Shakespeare (1999 pp48–49) claims that people with visible impairments are ‘among the key comic stereotypes of Western culture’, and the ‘disabled figure of fun’ nourishes the framing of disabled people ‘as other, as alien, as the object of curiosity or hostility or pity… our differences are suppressed, and their difference is exaggerated, in order to be humiliated’.

However, according to Shakespeare (1999, p50), disability also ‘creates events of rich comic potential’. Jokes between disabled people about the limits and unpredictability of an impairment, for example, ‘achieve much of their comic power because they are so shocking to non-disabled people’. Enacting humor includes what Shakespeare (1999, pp51–2) calls a ‘reversal of expectation’, such as ‘treating what is commonly represented as a tragedy as if it is a farce’. Humor, then, can identify common values between disabled people and expose oppressive social relations; ‘disabled people can now move from the passive endurance of scorn, to the strategic exploitation of wit, to the political deployment of satire’ (1999, p51). Likewise, Noonan (2014) suggests that disability humor can raise political awareness, subvert stereotypes, and empower disabled voices. Disability humor, therefore, has the potential to change attitudes and behavior by disrupting taken-for-granted (and normative) values and expectations of disabled people as pitiful/tragic, as abject, and as incapable of humor (Albrecht 1999; Caslin et al. 2024).

It is disability humor, where humor is offered by disabled persons, that I am concerned with in this article. My intention is not to dissect humor and to assess whether a joke or action is funny or not (or 'right' or 'wrong'). Such assessments depend exclusively on the analyst's reading (Wilde 2018). Instead, I explore how humor is accomplished between learning-disabled adults, and how it is one way to assert their value. In what follows, I provide a short summary of the project's methodology.

Methodology

This article reports on an ethnography of several groups run for learning-disabled adults in the UK – including a professional theatre company, dance and drag groups, and a community café – conducted between February 2023 and August 2024. This included interviews with 35 staff members ('artistic leads' and 'support staff' from both the research sites and based in other arts organizations working with learning-disabled adults in the UK) and 10 parents of learning-disabled adult children. The main intention of the project was to explore how learning-disabled adults (and other allies) navigate dominant deficit narratives and, in turn, articulate their lives in alternative ways which celebrates their value, agency, and humanity. These research sites were selected as they explicitly attempt to amplify the 'voice' and recognize the capabilities of learning-disabled people, albeit in diverse ways (e.g. through the arts or involvement in a café).

In this article, I draw on observations at the professional theatre group and drag group along with interviews with staff and parents, although I prioritize the former. I did not interview learning-disabled adults in this study, although they were invited for informal one-on-one 'chats' in agreement with them/gatekeepers. The emphasis, instead, was on collecting ethnographic data. This was advised by gatekeepers at all research sites, who recommended 'being in the room' (their term). Moreover, whilst interviews were highlighted by gatekeepers as a suitable method for learning-disabled adults, they said that this would only be appropriate for *some* participants owing to their concerns about participation in a more formal dialogue (Thomas 2024).

The theatre/drag groups organized weekly performance training programs focused on learning skills. In the theatre group, members were trained in theatre, improvisation, clowning, dance, and role play, among other things. In the drag group, members were trained in aspects of live performance work (e.g. lip syncing/singing, cabaret, dancing). I participated in the sessions, writing fieldnotes at the earliest opportunity via a notepad and/or my cell phone. Fieldnotes focused on the content and organization of sessions together with interactions between members and staff. Formal interviews with parents and staff lasted between 40 minutes and two-and-a-half hours. Informal conversations with each of them were commonly shorter and more profuse throughout the project. Interviews and conversations with staff members covered their background, how/why they became involved with the organization, working practices, public performances and popular representations of disabled people, and their aspirations and concerns for the future (among other matters). Interviews and conversations with parents covered several issues, including but not limited to their child's involvement in various activities, interactions with members of the public, cultural representations of learning-

disabled people, and navigating institutions (welfare, housing, education, healthcare, and so on). Pseudonyms have been used throughout the article.

Data was analyzed using Timmermans and Tavory's (2012) 'abductive' approach to data analysis. Timmermans and Tavory (2012, p167) contend abduction, rather than induction, 'should be the guiding principle of empirically based theory construction'. Abduction is a form of reasoning utilized to develop explanations or interpretations of data, requiring a persistent dialogue between collected data and wider theoretical and empirical work. The approach acknowledges that researchers enter the field with their own theoretical and methodological sensibilities which guide and develop the analysis. I ensured that during the analytical process, I read fieldnote extracts and interview transcripts together with literature on disability and humor to both understand my data and cultivate new ideas.

The study received ethical approval from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (SREC 307). This project raised several ethical issues (for more information on ethics and the methodology, see: Thomas 2024). This was particularly around 'voice' (e.g. the research design excluding certain people and prioritizing my own voice) and 'consent'. Extensive efforts were undertaken to be inclusive and provide 'informed' consent (e.g. using easy-read documents), yet these research practices were frequently unfastened by participants (e.g. my clumsy use of academic terminology; confusion relating to my role as a researcher; participants not reading documentation). Relating to this article, there is also a concern writing about disability and humor potentially exposes people to *disabling humor*. At the same time, silencing participants' stories risks upholding the status quo: of learning-disabled people being perceived as incapable of comprehending and initiating humor. As such, I contend there is serious value to discussing the role of humor in the lives of learning-disabled adults.

'You're All Very Talented and You're All Very Good at Comedy'

Humor was frequently observed in training sessions of the theatre and drag groups. Activities were punctured by jokes (physical/slapstick comedy was popular), bantering (i.e. people joking and teasing each other in a fun and playful way), and simply, most often, by laughter. This was clear in a training session at the theatre group led by Tilda (artistic lead):

> *Tilda has instructed us to dance freely around the room. As she gives various instructions, Harry [member] imitates a rabbit, bouncing around the room whilst smiling. Liam [member] notices this and approaches Harry. Giggling and without verbal instruction, Liam copies Harry. They both laugh as they bounce together around the room. As they slalom towards a corner of the room, they spot Rupert [member]. Liam and Harry stand either side of Rupert, who initially appears unsure as to what is happening. Liam and Harry, still giggling, continue to imitate being rabbits. This causes Rupert to laugh. He then also imitates being a rabbit. They bounce around the room, laughing uncontrollably. The music stops and the group is asked to make a circle. I notice Rupert and Liam*

> *standing next to each other, whispering and giggling. Rupert places his hand around Liam in a hugging embrace. Liam reciprocates and rests his head on Rupert's chest.*

Pretending to be colony of rabbits, Liam, Harry, and Rupert bounced around the room with considerable joy and affection. Laughter was a core feature of training and was regularly cited by members when telling me how much they enjoyed their involvement in the theatre/drag groups. Liam (theatre group) said '[Theatre group] is so fun, making me laugh and stuff', whilst Tom (theatre group) claimed 'I'm with my friends and my people and I have a lot of laughs and stuff'. Artistic leads and support staff were a key part of such humorful occasions. Veronica (support staff) said:

> *When I joined [theatre group], the main thing for me was to treat the actors normally, to have fun with them. They love it when I joke with them. Some of them will flirt with me, and I'll be like, "my boyfriend will fight you". And they're like, "oh, bring him in, I'll fight him". But they love it. They love the banter.*

Staff were actively involved in enacting humor with theatre/drag members. The humor *between* members and staff was clearly demonstrated during a training session led by Wayne (artistic lead):

> *We are doing a warm-up to begin the session. As we do some exercises in the neck and shoulder area, Wayne says loudly 'my neck sounds like bubble-wrap'. A few members laugh. Jacob [member] shouts 'It's called age!' This prompts laughter in the room as Jacob smiles mischievously. Wayne sports a feigned shocked face (opening his mouth widely) and stares at Jacob. 'I'm 14 actually', he replies. Ceri [member] quickly responds 'And the rest!' This causes members to laugh even more. Wilf (artistic lead) says, 'You're getting a lot of abuse this morning, Wayne'. Wayne replies: 'I know! I'm going to have internal bleeding!' Members laugh loudly again as Wayne smiles and instructs members to complete various exercises.*

Training sessions with Wayne contained considerable laughter. In one session, after a particularly energetic floor exercise, Des (member) teased Wayne for struggling to stand-up owing to 'your age'. After Des advanced towards him to offer a reconciliatory hug, Wayne theatrically turned his back on Des and walked away briskly, with people in the room laughing along until Des and Wayne returned to their designated spots. Gentle bantering formed a core part of theatre/drag training sessions. Such humorful enactments seem to help cultivate group solidarity and to foster connection, support, and a strong sense of belonging for learning-disabled adults as well as staff members. Training sessions point to the social aspects of laughter and the need to feel connected to others (Lockyer 2015a).

Theatre/drag members also praised other members for being funny. On several occasions at the theatre group, Peter (with others) referred to Otis as 'the comedian of the group'. When I asked Otis if he liked this label, he said: 'yes I do, I like to make

people laugh'. In addition, when I asked members to describe themselves, several referred to themselves as 'funny'. Harry (theatre group) described himself as 'funny, quite clever, caring, kind, and friendly', whilst Oscar (drag group) said he is 'funny, intelligent, smart, brave, someone who could conquer the world, someone who could do anything'. Likewise, Alvin (drag group) described himself as 'funny, sarcastic, scary, and dramatic', and his drag persona as 'bitchy, silly, sassy, comedic, funny, a big person'. When asked why he wanted to do drag, Alvin said: 'Because it's fun. It's funny and comic as well…I've always had a love for drag acts'. Alvin continued:

> *That's why everyone comes to see our show because they are funny and stupid…I notice every time we do a show, there's different people are coming. It's not the same people. Certain family members, yeah, but people who I work for now, they've come to see a show… Acting with my family and making people laugh and putting on a good show…It's nice that people are here to enjoy it.*

Alvin believes audience members like shows on account of performers' use of humor. He casts himself and other drag group members as capable of 'making people laugh and putting on a good show'. Similarly, when asked about his drag persona, Kelwin said 'I am a very charming and talented guy. And I am hot [laughs] and funny! I'm always confident and never shy… I love performing' (Kelwin adds that he sees himself and his drag persona as the same person). It was obvious at times – including here with Kelwin – that members of the theatre/drag groups used humor in my presence. Harry (theatre group), for example, referred to me on many occasions, on account of my fluctuating presence in the theatre group, as 'the part-timer'.

Members' role as humorous, and particularly as the instigators of humor, was asserted in training exercises. In one drag training session, for example, members were invited to select a song to lip-sync and dance to for an upcoming show:

> *Danielle's (member) song choice is 'Like a Pill' by Pink. Danielle mimes singing the song, strutting around the stage and performing various actions in accordance with the song lyrics as artistic leads, support staff, and members watch. The chorus begins. As we hear 'Where I can run, as fast as I can', Danielle holds a deadpan expression and starts running around the room with her arms in the air. This appears to surprise everyone watching. They all burst into laughter. Danielle returns to the stage and continues her performance. As the chorus approaches again, Danielle throws her hands in the air, puffs out her cheeks in an exasperated fashion, and places her hands on her hips, looking at the audience. As we hear 'Where I can run, as fast as I can' again, Danielle runs off, even more frantically, around the room. Everyone laughs even louder. This continues for one more sequence before the performance ends and the audience applauds. Nathan (artistic lead), who wipes a tear from his face from laughing so much, exclaims 'This has got to go in something, that's definitely going in the show'. Louie (artistic lead) says 'That was brilliant'. Seren (artistic lead) adds 'That little run is one of the funniest things I've seen'. Nathan continues: 'Doing three runs was brilliant. That has to be something you do in*

> *the next show'. Louie provides his final note: 'Fucking well done!' Throughout these exchanges, Danielle smiles and chuckles as she revels in the acclaim.*

As demonstrated within the extracts above, including Danielle's performance, humor saturated training sessions. But they were serious affairs. One of their main functions was to identify material for public performances. Here, Danielle's (comedic) improvised performance was ratified by artistic leads (and members too) as worthy of inclusion in a future show. Artistic leads played a key role, here and elsewhere, of approving humor and offering encouragement and compliments to performers. For example, following a theatre group activity where the primary intention was to make those present laugh, Seren (artistic lead)[iv] offered members praise:

> *You were all able to create little moments of creativity and genius. The thing is guys, you're all very talented and you're all very good at comedy. So, it's great to see all of that come through in some really beautiful moments. Great job.*

Recognizing performers as comic was part of signifying and asserting, in the words of Seren, their 'creativity and genius'. This was also evident in a drag training session, in which Alvin (member) is practicing lip-syncing to a song:

> *As Alvin lip syncs, he walks towards Nathan (artistic lead) who is sitting down. Alvin puts his hands on the back of his head, rotates his hips, and dances and gyrates provocatively in front of Nathan. He then dances in a similar fashion in front of me and Seren (artistic lead). Each time, this provokes laughter and cheering from everyone in the room. Finally, Alvin approaches Wendy (support staff) who is sitting down. Alvin lifts his leg up and wraps it around Wendy, who opens her mouth in astonishment. This prompts laughter from everyone, but particularly Seren and Nathan. Wendy, too, bursts into laughter as Alvin dances provocatively with his leg still placed over her. After Alvin returns to the stage and finishes his set, everyone in the room applauds. Louie exclaims 'Alvin, you found the light and it is beautiful!' Nathan laughs and retorts 'more like you found the line and crossed it'! Alvin appears to enjoy the praise. Isaac (member) calls out, 'You are hilarious, Alvin!'*

Alvin's efforts are sanctioned by artistic leads, support staff, and members as amusing and entertaining through explicit praise and collective laughter. Here and elsewhere, learning-disabled adults are recognized as initiators of humor. Training sessions are a space where members can showcase their creative talents and spotlight their capacity to 'do' humor. As I sketch out below, public performances, and particularly drag shows, were also an important vehicle for enacting humor and for reasserting the agency, capabilities, and humanity of learning-disabled adults.

'Shit, Shout, Fuck'

Despite drag gaining unprecedented attention in the UK and beyond (McCormack and Wagnall 2022), the social sciences have yet to subject it to serious analytic attention. Even as heteronormativity persists, drag is mainstream in the UK and has transcended

the confines of its conventional spaces. Drag performances have long represented an important social and political arena for people marginalized based on gender and/or sexual identity (Newton 1979). Drag is seen as a mechanism to perform protest (Rupp and Taylor 2003) and can challenge misogyny, homophobia, patriarchy, racism, and heteronormativity (Rupp et al. 2010). However, drag performances may not always be activist-oriented. As Dyer (2002) claims, the political dynamics of drag depend on the performer (including drag queens and kings[v]), the venue, and the broader social and cultural context in which it is performed.

In terms of humor, scholars identify the role of stand-up comedy and self-deprecating humor – in combination with dance, singing, lip syncing, talk, costume design, and so on – in drag performance (Zaslow 2024). Indeed, humor was at the heart of the drag group's public performances:

> *For the opening thirty minutes of their show, the performers make several wise-cracks (one included a member's support worker being their drug dealer), sling insults at one another, and throw 'snowballs' (what appears to be tissue-paper rolled into balls) at members of the audience. Audience members cheer, laugh, and clap at various intervals, both spontaneously and when explicitly impelled to by performers. The biggest laugh of the night is heard when Nathan asks Danielle, 'what are you doing?' 'Shit, shout, fuck', Danielle responds. Alvin quips instantly 'which one are we doing then?' The audience erupts into laughter, with Alvin shooting them a coy smile.*

The use of humor was also apparent in another show in which Tabitha (drag member) lip synced along to two separate songs:

> *A loud ringing tone is heard over the sound system. Nathan (artistic lead), hidden out of sight, speaks as if leaving an answerphone message: 'I know [Tabitha] (performing as a drag king) has been a bit randy lately'. Tabitha thrusts their hips forward; the audience laughs. Nathan continues: 'Please don't let [Tabitha] around any of the ladies'. At this point, the song 'The Boys Are Back in Town' by Thin Lizzy plays. Tabitha mimes putting on deodorant, shaving, and applying hair gel…Tabitha faces the audience and screams 'hit it!' The music switches to 'Mr. Boombastic' by Shaggy. This causes cheers and laughter in the audience as Tabitha and the other performers gyrate and dance provocatively. This stimulates louder whoops, laughs, and applause, which surges as Tabitha removes a jacket in a 'striptease' fashion and flexes their muscles.*

The performances by Alvin and Tabitha were clearly well-received by the audience. It cannot be fully determined why they found certain aspects of the show humorous. But one postulation is performances were sexualized for comic effect. 'Campness' was on show; 'camp is above all else funny, at least to those who are in on the joke' (Willox 2003: 266). Camp, in short, 'subverts ideology through its intrinsic ironic, and parodic, humor' – that is, by 'disrupt[ing] traditional categories, usually though not exclusively gender, through over conformity, parody and/or caricature' (2003, p267). Moreover,

the drag group's performances (particularly men performing as drag queens) may be seen as queering norms of gender and femininity[vi]. Nonetheless, I am wary of making these claims. One risk is that I inadvertently energize binary gender systems that drag seeks to disrupt (i.e. by generating inflexible distinctions between men/masculinity and women/femininity) or I frame some performers (men performing as drag queens) as *funnier* than other performers (women performing as drag kings). Indeed, audience reactions during the performances to *all* performers would disprove this conclusion.

Humor is also not simply dictated by disturbing gendered norms. In performances of the theatre group, for example, whilst content was regularly more 'serious' in tone than drag shows, humor was not absent. The most raucous audience reactions in a theatre performance occurred, for example, when Betty (member) called someone, who had referred to her as a 'spastic', 'a fucking idiot'[vii], and when Hamish (member) referred to himself as a 'sex God'. Laughter triggered from such comments can be attributable to defying assumptions of learning-disabled adults as passive (Betty) and as degendered and asexual/incapable of sexual activity (Hamish).

But, again, I resist explicating *why* particular utterances or actions are perceived to be funny by audiences. My intention is to acknowledge the presence of humor and how public performances offer an outlet for learning-disabled adults to be seen as capable of, and frequently as initiators of, humor – and to dismantle a deficit scripting of their lives. But doing this, interestingly, did not involve centering disability, at least explicitly, in public performances. Scholarship on disabled stand-up comedians captures how their material has radical potential for disrupting 'norms' and for 'poking fun at non-disabled culture' (Reid et al. 2006, p630), as well as for highlighting how predicaments are caused by 'ableist cultural constraints and disabling environments' (Milbrodt 2018; see also: Albrecht 1999; Lockyer 2015a; Martin 2010; Wilde 2018). Yet, this was not evident in fieldwork. Drag and theatre performers did not spotlight disability (or broader social critiques) in performances and, specifically, their attempts at humor. Disabled performers were 'just another character in the humor landscape' (Haller 2003, p170).

Nonetheless, the public performances provide a space for learning-disabled adults to strengthen and flex creative (and comic) muscles, thus demonstrating to non-disabled people they position themselves in their own terms and subvert dominant ideologies of deficit and passiveness (Milbrodt 2018). Simply having learning-disabled adults on a public stage was cause for celebration and one way to 'reveal that their lives are full, rich and well worth living' (Reid et al. (2006, p633). Public performances, I contend, become an avenue not only to 'challenge and renegotiate hegemonic norms around disability' (and with respect to drag around gender, sexuality, and sexual activity too)[viii], but to 'humanize disability in the public sphere' (Lockyer 2015a, p1409). Disability is, in turn, constituted as one more human variation in the landscape of diversity. Yet, as I sketch out in the next section, humor activities are not without their complications.

'The Good, the Bad, the Ugly, the Funny'

During one training session, Seren (artistic lead) informed me about a post on the drag group's social media account. A snippet of the post is provided below:

> *It's okay to laugh with us because we're really funny.*
> *It's not okay to laugh because of our disability.*
> *We want you to laugh with us.*

This extract is from a longer post released by the drag group on the topic of 'voice', in which members stated that it was their own decision to take part in the drag group. It seemed to be prompted by artistic leads being charged by non-disabled others, online and offline, and external to the group, with *exploiting* performers. The above statement permits laughter *with* drag group members, yet also appears to anticipate the potential of being laughed *at* when claiming 'it's not okay to laugh because of our disability'. Some artistic leads said this fear, on occasion, did materialize. Kayleigh (artistic lead), for example, said members of a theatre group she is affiliated with – some of whom have Down syndrome – were 'trolled' (i.e. when someone posts deliberately offensive or provocative messages online):

> *On our [social media account], there's vast amounts of people using the word 'down' as a joke…It's not funny. There were loads of comments like "down for this", "down for that"…People have just assumed "oh, lol [laugh out loud], let's all laugh at people with Down syndrome". It's fucking horrifying. I spend a large amount of time just deleting comments on our [social media account] because they're just nasty.*

Such experiences highlight a tension: there was a desire for increased publicity and spotlighting but, particularly for staff, there was an unease about what members might be exposed to. As Wilde (2018, p31) claims, comedy and humor, 'far from being merely a form of amusement, pleasure, release, or entertainment', can also be 'an instrument of violence and oppression'. There are also complications concerning how audiences might receive a particular performance. Interestingly, several artistic leads and parents said that expected allies of performers – including support workers and other parents – did not always see performances as humorous and, in fact, expressed their concern about ridiculing and exploiting learning-disabled people (i.e. how performances were enacting disabling humor). Speaking about a pantomime performance attended by members of the local council, and specifically members of staff tasked with supporting learning-disabled adults in their occupational role, Vera (parent) said:

> *There was a very large young lady [with a learning disability] who was playing Cinderella. And the learning disability team thought it was demeaning, that she must know she wasn't pretty. And I couldn't believe it, really. This attitude that, what, because [director] wasn't afraid for them to have a laugh and poke fun at each other sometimes. But with some members of the learning disability team, they were very no-no about stuff like that…It's about people feeling that they are doing something valuable. If you don't see the value in what they're doing, then that is your problem, not theirs.*

For Vera, the performer playing Cinderella was perceived by some audience members as being mocked. However, Vera's condemnation of this conclusion can be interpreted as them positioning the performer outside of heteronormative conceptions of femininity (of being slender and 'pretty'). The reaction of audience members, according to Vera, also denies the possibility of learning-disabled adults recognizing humor ('to have a laugh and poke fun at each other sometimes'). Likewise, Lester (parent) discussed a drag performance which seemed to trouble a performer's family and carers:

> *You've got people with learning disabilities who, by and large, aren't the problem, whereas you've got parents and carers, of which I am one, who are quite often the problem. That performance in a cabaret club… One of the guys had nipple tassels on. And his family were mortified [laughs]. It's not the people, it's their families. And this is people who are adults, all the actors and performers are adult human beings. They're not kids. I think it's quite often the case that parents and carers, and this is not just the case here, people are infantilized, and I think sometimes it's difficult for people to see the adult… They're not seen as adults who have by and large phenomenal skills and abilities.*

For Lester, parents and carers constrict learning-disabled adults by 'infantilizing' them and not allowing them to flaunt their 'phenomenal skills and abilities'. Lester suggests that this infantilization explains the adverse reaction of family members to their adult son wearing nipple tassels. This aligns with concerns pertaining to the vulnerability, independence, and capacity of learning-disabled adults. In Noonan's (2014) discussion of a public fallout following a film that he produced starring two learning-disabled men, he says 'it seemed almost inconceivable to many that two men with intellectual disabilities could be the ones telling the jokes, initiating comic moments, and driving the humor'. For Noonan (2014, p73), the two men were perceived as 'incapable', 'vulnerable', and unable to provide informed consent for participation – and, in turn, of not being able to instigate humor.

Certain representations are ruled as objectively degrading.[ix] Noonan recognizes this is understandable owing to mean-spirited and oppressive historical representations of learning-disabled people. There is also a clear need to protect and support learning-disabled adults, particularly given that some people have limited support structures, complex needs, and impairments rendering them vulnerable to harm and exploitation. But for Noonan (2014, p78), whilst the line between 'allowing unfettered independence and providing protection' is complex, rushing in to 'rescue' disabled people is not the solution. In this project, some people (including learning-disabled adults) felt totalizing tags of 'vulnerability', applied to all learning-disabled adults, were unjust and must be avoided (Goggin 2008).

Whilst artistic leads often shared this perspective, they also had concerns. One was they felt their primary audience was primarily, albeit not exclusively, family and friends. This might limit the scope of performances for subverting pathologizing configurations of disability (although my impression was that performances were often well-attended – some drag shows were sold out – by a diverse audience). Esther (artistic lead)

described watching a recent performance with learning-disabled artists, by a different theatre company to which she is affiliated, and the challenges this posed for her:

> *It was fantastic in the sense it was showing the experience of learning disability and neurodiversity in its entirety. But then because of that, I found that I was a little uncomfortable with how funny the audience were finding parts of the show that were meant to be funny, but I felt like it's extra funny because this is coming from that particular person. So, for example, there was a lady with Down syndrome talking about her attraction to this guy or talking about a sort of sexual experience, which I don't know about you, but I've never seen that before ever anywhere where a person with a learning disability talks about sex like that. And it was comic…But, the kind of whoops and screams…I was like, but really, you're laughing more because of the idea of a lady with Down syndrome talking about her body in that way and it's funnier…that made me a little bit uncomfortable… But, when I came away from it and thought about it more, I was like, that's the point, isn't it? That's the start. The more of those plays and films and stuff there is, and the more there is people you know giving that full experience of what somebody with a disability can be – the good, the bad, the ugly, the funny – then the less we'll find it unusual.*

Esther was worried that audiences were *humoring* performers and laughing more than a scene merited. She also worried that these reactions, whilst ostensibly positive, were shaped by a deficit understanding of disability – of deviating from normative scripts of disabled people being agendered, asexual, and/or incapable of sexual activity (though Esther concedes this is 'the point' – to showcase the 'full experience of what somebody with a disability can be'). These frictions indicate how comic readings are unstable. The humor activities of the performers can 'challenge prejudice, educate people, and provide knowledge', but may invigorate negative perceptions (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist 2012, p242). Humor can both dismantle and rejuvenate stereotypes of disability. This seems conditional on who is attempting humor and where (i.e. who the audience is). Whilst disability humor 'may be socially and politically transgressive, we must remember that its success or failure depends on both the teller and audience' (Milbrodt 2018, para 6). Having an audience who understands a teller's worldview is important. Given the histories of disabled people being ridiculed and the enduring propagation of disabling humor, one-dimensional valorizations of humor within performances must be treated with some caution.

Discussion

I have explored the relationship between disability and humor, an area 'still [arousing] deep passions and contradictory messages' (Rieger 2015, para 10). Yet, disability humor holds radical potential for, among other things, dismantling deficit scripts of disability and articulating the lives of disabled people in affirmative terms to recognize their agency, capabilities, and humanity. By shifting the spotlight 'from disabled people as the targets of comedy to disabled people as comedy-makers' (Lockyer 2015a, p1400), drag and theatre group members craft counter narratives which can disturb commonsense understandings. They take charge of representations (albeit, where

required, with guidance and restrictions from artistic leads) and 'subvert pathologizing hierarchies of difference' in ways that reveal their 'multi-dimensionality and humanity' (Reid et al. 2006, p638). Humor, in turn, can be political, even when not acknowledged as such by performers, and can educate as it '*re-presents* disability' (2006, p639).

This is vital as disability humor, burrowing its way into mass culture (Haller 2003), can play a key role in forming cultural attitudes towards disabled people. This highlights the need for disability humor to spotlight 'the ways in which specific forms of power operate in ableism and disablism, in the minutiae of everyday life, and in wider cultural trends' (Wilde 2018, p31). Disability humor and comedy can 'reverse stereotypical and hierarchical relations, serve as a means of catharsis and coping for disabled people, or promote social change' (Reid et al. 2006, p633), from raising general awareness and dismantling attitudes to contributing to transformations in media/political agendas and institutional policies (Caslin et al. 2024).

Whilst accounts of disability humor are growing, there are regularly limited to analyses of single outputs (e.g. stand-up comedy; film/TV shows). This discounts the relational and contextual dimensions of humor – and, specifically, the key role of the audience – that are highlighted in this article. In the theatre and drag groups, the comic potential of performers only gained legitimacy when audience responses – whether in a training session (i.e. other members, artistic leads, support staff) or a public performance (i.e. the audience) – were positive. What is clear, too, is that learning-disabled people and organization staff were all recognized as capable of partaking in humor. Concerns have been raised about who gets to participate in disability humor (Reid et al. 2006). Rieger (2015), for instance, suggests disabled people are 'insiders' who have different rights than non-disabled others, as 'outsiders', regarding what is humorous or not (in relation to disability humor). In this project, staff and members were all seen as *insiders* – although, unlike the research of Reid et al. (2006) and Rieger (2015), disability rarely was at the center of attempts at humor.

In the theater and drag groups, humor is accomplished *between* people; it depends on a teller and recipient. There are accounts of how disabled people deal with awkward situations, in the presence of non-disabled others, with wit and humor to put the latter at ease (Cahill and Eggleston 1994; Stronach and Allan 1999). Humor, then, is seen as a device to 'cope' with difficult situations (Moran 2003). I am uneasy with this notion of 'coping', not least as it is tinged with deficit thinking which articulates disability as something to manage and rectify. As Reid et al. (2006: 640) claim, when seeing humor 'as a means of coping', it is crucial to 'distinguish between creating a positive social image' and a belief that 'dealing successfully with disability involves a functional, if not actual, cure or 'overcoming'. Whilst humor may well become a 'coping' mechanism for disabled people, this article demonstrates how humor constitutes much more than an attempt to manage or rectify fraught interactions with non-disabled others. Instead, it becomes a way for learning-disabled adults to both establish a sense of belonging and connection and to dismantle a deficit scripting of disabled lives.

As previously acknowledged, there is little research on how learning-disabled people are initiators of humor and how they engage with audiences in comic ways. Research on disability and humor should attend to how humor, historically a weapon against disabled people, can be a place where people can find common ground and forms of identification and resistance (Wilde 2018). Such efforts will involve appreciating how disability humor can constitute what George Orwell (1945), describing the potentiality of jokes to resist authoritative and oppressive regimes, calls ‘a tiny revolution’.

References

Albrecht, Gary L. 1999. “Disability Humor: What's in a Joke?" *Body & Society* 5(4):67–74. (https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X99005004007)

Anesi, Juliann. 2018. “Laughing Matters: Humour as Advocacy in Education for the Disabled.” *Disability and Society* 33(5):723–42. (https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2018.1453782)

Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hanna. 2012. “The Politics of Joking: Narratives of Humour and Joking Among Adults With Asperger's Syndrome.” *Disability and Society* 27(2):235–47. (https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2011.644933)

Burch, Leah. and David Wilkin. 2024. *Disability Hate Crime: Perspectives for Change*. London: Routledge.

Cahill, Spencer E. and Robert Eggleston. 1994. “Managing Emotions in Public: The Case of Wheelchair Users.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 57(4):300–12. (https://doi.org/10.2307/2787157)

Caslin, Marie, Harry Georgiou, Charlene Davies, and Sarah Spoor. 2024. “‘Humour Can Open the Door to Conversations’: Exploring the Role of Comedy in Breaking Down Barriers to Employment for Young Disabled People.” *Journal of Applied Youth Studies* 7(1):97–115. (https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-024-00116-3)

Chadwick, Darren D. and Tracey Platt. 2018. “Investigating Humor in Social Interaction in People with Intellectual Disabilities: A Systematic Review of the Literature.” *Frontiers in Psychology* 9:1745 (https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01745).

Cormack, Patricia, James F. Cosgrave, and David Feltmate. 2017. “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Sociology: Goffman, Mills, and Berger.” *The Sociological Review* 65(2):386–400. (https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-954X.12421)

Doyle, Lauren. 2024. “Online Harm? Uncovering Experiences of (In)Visible Appearance-Based Trolling and Hostility.” In *Disability Hate Crime: Perspectives for Change* Burch, edited by Leah Burch and David Wilkin, 74–90. London: Routledge.

Dyer, Richard. 2002. *The Culture of Queers*. London: Routledge.

Goggin, Gerard. 2008. “Disability, Media, and the Politics of Vulnerability”. *Asia Pacific Media Educator* 19:1–13.

Haller, Beth. 2003. “DSQ Symposium, Disability, and Humor”. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23(3/4):1–3. (https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v23i3/4.430)

Haller, Beth and Sue Ralph. 2003. “John Callahan's Pelswick Cartoon and a New Phase of Disability Humor”. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23(3/4):4–16. (https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v23i3/4.431)

Kuipers, Giselinde. 2008. “The Sociology of Humor.” In *The Primer of Humor Research*, edited by Victor Raskin, 361–99. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Lippitt, John. 1994. “Humour and Incongruity”. *Cogito* 8(2):147–53. (https://doi.org/10.5840/cogito19948227)

Lockyer, Sharon. 2015a. “From Comedy Targets to Cmedy-Makers: Disability and Comedy in Live Performance”. *Disability and Society* 30(9):1397–1412. (https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2015.1106402)

Lockyer, Sharon. 2015b. “‘It’s Really Scared of Disability’: Disabled Comedians’ Perspectives of the British Television Comedy Industry”. *Journal of Popular Television* 3(2):179–93. (https://doi.org/10.1386/jptv.3.2.179_1)

Martin, Nicola. 2010. “A Preliminary Study of Some Broad Disability Related Themes Within the Edinburgh Festival Fringe”. *Disability and Society* 25(5):539–49. (https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2010.489295)

McCormack, Mark and Liam Wignall. 2022. “Drag Performers’ Perspectives on the Mainstreaming of British Drag: Towards a Sociology of Contemporary Drag. *Sociology* 56(1):3–20.

Milbrodt, Teresa. 2018. ““Today I Had an Eye Appointment, and I'm Still Blind”: Crip Humor, Storytelling, and Narrative Positioning of the Disabled Self.” *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *38*(2) (https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v38i2.6163)

Milbrodt, Teresa. 2022. *Sexy Like Us: Disability, Humor, and Sexuality*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

Moran, Carmen. 2003. “Beyond Content: Does Using Humor Help Coping?” *Disability Studies Quarterly* 23(3):62–7. (https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v23i3/4.434)

Newton, Esther. 1979. *Mother Camp*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Noonan, Michael. 2014. “When Comedy and Intellectual Disability Collide: Who Says What Goes, and How Far, When Actors with Intellectual Disabilities Appear on Screen?” *Research and Practice in Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 1(1):71–81. (https://doi.org/10.1080/23297018.2014.902725)

Orwell, George. 1945. “*Funny, But Not Vulgar”*. Leader Magazine, 28 Jul 1945.

Pritchard, Erin. 2021. ““She Finds People Like You Hilarious!” Why Do We Laugh at People with Dwarfism?” *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 15(4):455–70. (https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2021.35)

Reid, D. Kim, Edy Hammond Stoughton, and Robin M. Smith. “The Humorous Construction of Disability: Stand Up Comedians in the United States.” *Disability and Society* 21(6):629–43. (https://doi.org/10.1080/09687590600918354)

Rieger, Alicja. 2015. ““It Was a Joke For Him and a Life For Me”: A Discourse on Disability Related Humor Among Families of Children with Disabilities”. *Disability Studies Quarterly* 25(4) (https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v25i4.605)

Rogers, Baker A. 2021. *King of Hearts: Drag Kings in the American South*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

Rupp, Leila J. and Verta Taylor. 2003. *Drag Queens at the 801 Cabaret*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rupp, Leila J., Verta Taylor and Eve Ilana Shapiro. 2010. “Drag Queens and Drag Kings: The Difference Gender Makes”. *Sexualities* 13(3):275–94. (https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460709352725)

shuster, Stef M. and Laurel Westbrook, L. 2024. “Reducing the Joy Deficit in Sociology: A Study of Transgender Joy”. *Social Problems* 71(3):791–809. (https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac034)

Shakespeare, Tom. “Joking a Part”. *Body and Society* 5(4):47–52. (https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X99005004004)

Stronach, Ian and Julie Allan. 1999. “Joking with Disability: What's the Difference between the Comic and the Tragic in Disability Discourses?” *Body and Society* 5(4):31–45. (https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X99005004003)

Thomas, Gareth M. 2024. ““Can You Tell Me What Ethics Means?”: Collaboration, Voice, and Consent in (Inclusive) Research with People with Learning Disabilities”. *International Journal of Disability and Social Justice* 4(3):4–22.

Timmermans, Stefan and Iddo Tavory. 2012. “Theory Construction in Qualitative Research: From Grounded Theory to Abductive Analysis”. *Sociological Theory* 30(3):167–86. (https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275112457914)

Venkatesan, Srinivasan. 2024. “Humour in People with Handicaps: A Systematic Review”. In *The Palgrave Handbook of Humour Research*, edited by Elisabeth Vanderheiden and Claude-Helene Mayer, 79–101. New York: Springer.

Watson, Cate. 2015. “A Sociologist Walks into a Bar (and Other Academic Challenges): Towards a Methodology of Humour”. *Sociology* 49(3):407–21. (https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038513516694)

Wilde, Alison. 2018. *Film, Comedy, and Disability: Understanding Humour and Genre in Cinematic Constructions of Impairment and Disability*. London: Routledge.

Willox, Dino. 2003. “Whose Drag Is It Anyway? Drag Kings and Monarchy in the UK”. *Journal of Homosexuality* 43(3-4):263–84. (https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v43n03_16)

Zaslow, Shayne. 2024. “Mainstream Novelty: Examining the Shifting Visibility of Drag Performance”. *Sexualities* 27(1-2):330–55. (https://doi.org/10.1177/13634607221091447)

Notes

[i] The word ‘humor’ is unwieldy. I use it here as ‘an umbrella term to cover all categories of the funny’ (Lippit 1994: 147), including wit, jokes, satire, comedy, banter, and so on

[ii] This seriousness is also indicative of a ‘joy deficit’ (shuster and Westbrook 2024) in the social sciences and particularly my discipline of sociology. Thanks to Tom Ryan for alerting me to shuster and Westbrook’s concept.

[iii] The only comparable work I could locate was Milbrodt’s (2022) research on disabled burlesque performers.

[iv] Several staff work across different arts organizations since they share professional networks.

[v] Research has demonstrated the divergent origins and goals of drag queens and drag kings, as well as differences in their gender identities and political allegiances (Rogers 2021). Whilst drag queens and drag kings were part of the drag group in my project, they seemed largely united in their reasons for participation and their objectives.

[vi] It is worth noting femininities in drag is often perceived as ‘funny and entertaining’, whilst ‘performative and entertaining masculinities is still a feat many kings struggle to accomplish’ (Rogers 2021, p38). At the same time, there is a history of men dressing up as women in TV/film and mainstream theatre (‘Dames’) as a source of comedy, ‘making no attempt at either verisimilitude or pulchritude’ (Rupp and Taylor 2003, p239). Part of this intended humor is what is viewed as an incompetent, absurd, and desexualized performance of femininity by men (McCormack and Wagnall 2022).

[vii] Ironically, idiot was previously a technical term in psychiatric/legal contexts to refer to learning-disabled people.

[viii] As Milbrodt (2022) claims, disabled people frequently have their sexuality denied or dismissed in mainstream culture.

[ix] Disability humor, for Albrecht (1999: 67), raises a ‘hidden paradox’: ‘What is so funny about having a disability when others think that it is a tragedy?’