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Radical Kindness and Disability Identity on the Contemporary Spanish Stage

Introduction

Kindness is defined by Aristotle as “helpfulness towards someone in need, not in return for anything, nor for the advantage of the helper himself, but for that of the person helped” (*Rhetoric* II, vii). Contemporary definitions of kindness similarly tend to focus on the recipient in need by relating kindness to the domain of caregiving, implying a passivity on the side of the recipient. For this reason, when the word kindness is used in the context of disability it often acquires troubling connotations. That is, notions of charitable kindness are often embedded in what has been called an “ableist gaze,” which, as Kathy Gagliardy explains, “has been used to highlight the lack of power experienced by people with disability in cultural representation” (Gagliardy 2017). The confluence of ideas of kindness, inspiration and disability are therefore highly problematic when grounded in an ableist perspective, which by its very constitution exerts control over the image of the disabled community by highlighting dependence rather than agency; appeals to the emotions of the non-disabled; and portrays ordinary skills as extraordinary. Avoiding “unkindness” in performances of kindness from the non-disabled community therefore depends largely on problematizing the notion of normalcy itself and on questioning the limits of representation of a dichotomous paradigm built on the privilege and power of the “norm.” If kindness as typically conceived is yoked to ableist perspectives about disability that render the recipient passive, “radical kindness” can be defined as those practices that highlight the agency of disabled individuals both in everyday life and in cultural representation. As Burton and Turbine write, radical kindness is “the core of articulating, recognizing, and valuing the complexity and beauty of the human condition, and putting this into practice in order to dismantle harmful systems of oppression and subjugation” (2019). In this view, theatre enacts radical kindness when it is put at the service of social change by allowing subjects with disability to speak for themselves, countering prevailing ableist prejudices.

In this essay, I examine the implications of this framing of radical kindness in relationship to depictions of disability in two contemporary Spanish plays: *La extinta poética* [*Extinct Poetics*] by Eusebio Calonge and *Deseos* [*Desires*], by Antonio Alamo. By exploring specific representations of neurodiversity and non-normative bodies, these Spanish authors challenge some of the biases inherent in common perceptions of kindness in the context of disability. Both productions pose embodied alterity not merely as a metaphor but rather as a form of resistance that functions more as an interrogation of existing ethical and aesthetic paradigms than as objectification of the non-normative. But as they do so, they display different degrees of radical kindness in the extent to which they represent disabled agency, independence and strength with (or without) the participation of actors with disabilities. I wish to acknowledge that I am not writing from inside the experience of disability. An aim of the article is to examine how non-disabled scholars and theatre practitioners might extend their understanding of representations of disability in performance through engagement with critical perspectives from within disability studies. I am especially interested in how such an approach might be applied in the context of my own field of study, which focuses on social justice in performance by addressing the need to lend visibility, agency and voice to minority cultures.

La Extinta Poética [Extinct Poetics]

Most of the works by Eusebio Calonge, resident playwright of the theatre company founded in Jerez de la Frontera La Zaranda, revel in the presence of non-normative, often infirm bodies placed center stage. A large part of the corpus of this dramatist seeks to create a new theatrical language through which to redefine the aesthetic gaze and pose new sensibilities and conceptions of the body. Within a theatrical career that spans more than 40 years, Calonge has produced several works centred on the destitute, the dejected and marginalized, framed as metaphors for social ailments. *La Extinta Poética* (2016) toured Spanish theatres for over three years, was taken to Argentina, Colombia and Uruguay, and in 2019 opened the 34th International Theatre Festival of Miami. In this production about the “frenetic pace, insanity and sickness of modern life” (Pérez 2019), social criticism takes the form of struggle against invisibility by posing a paraplegic ballerina with cerebral palsy in the role of the SISTER in the midst of an abusive, materialistic, hypochondriac and grotesque family.

The play, which was published in Calonge’s collection *Catálogo de cicatrices* [*Taxonomy of Scars*], presents a bleak, satirical image of contemporary society through a family reduced to their medical records, marred by the hyper-consumption of prescription drugs, obsessed with dreams borrowed from TV, and marked by their dehumanizing contempt of difference. The play defies narration, presenting instead a series of caricatured vignettes that correspond with the myriad of ailments and obsessions of the members of the family: the depressive, pregnant and painfully single daughter, the hypochondriac and emasculated father, and the embittered mother obsessed with unobtainable wealth. By contrast, the script defines the SISTER’s diverse functionalities as the capacity of imagination, poetry and beauty as well as to resist the numbness of what has become “normal” in contemporary society. Through the characters of the family members, the script focuses on the inability of poetry to communicate to those whose linguistic abilities have been reduced to a cultural discourse that constructs wellness as the

capacity to slim down, and leisure as a form of conspicuous consumption of products and services.

While the play, like much of Calonge's work, is striking for its privileging of non-normative bodies, characters and their perspectives, this emphasis is undermined in the case of *La Extinta Poética* by the casting of non-disabled performer in the role of the SISTER. The casting decision was justified by the director by the exigencies of the role. The actress, Ingrid Magrinyá explains: "my character embodies the poetry we all must find. Everything the family lacks is represented by the SISTER, despite her disability and mobility issues. The directors thought this notion would be better expressed by a ballerina" (Teatro Solís 2019). What is of key interest here is the tension between the politics expressed by Calonge as an articulation of radical kindness in the sense outlined by Burton and Turbine, and the negation of the performativity of this kindness in the play's casting. From a dramatic perspective, the issue is one of metaphor: how must metaphor negotiate with the politics of representation? What power is involved in the construction of metaphor?

Jamie Beddard, a disabled actor, director and Diversity Officer at Arts Council England, has been among the most vocal critics of non-disabled actors playing disabled roles:

Unfortunately, some industry people still struggle with the idea that disabled actors may be best-placed to play disabled characters, and continue to represent disability through clouded prisms of metaphor and caricature. Non-disabled actors boost their red carpet prospects by offensively replicating impairments, as if physical appearance alone is shorthand for capturing the essence and character of a disabled protagonist. If he can imitate impairment, give him an Oscar. (Beddard 2009)

Moreover, casting non-disabled actors to represent the experience of disability may be doubly perceived as an act of exclusion and appropriation. As Sandhal writes: "New Disability Theatre aims to explore the lived experience of disability, rather than the usual dramaturgical use of disability as a metaphor for non-disabled people's sense of outsidership" (Sandahl 2008, 226). To utilize disability on stage while disregarding identity politics or the ways in which it reflects personal knowledge or experience implies privileging its metaphorical sense rather than lived experience.

I wish to emphasize that *La extinta poética* avoids "overcoming" narratives and underlines the invisible agency, kindness and mental acuity of the protagonist – indeed, this is what makes it a case study worthy of discussion and recognition. The play also denounces the ableist gaze of the family as they concentrate on oldest daughter's problems while ignoring the SISTER and misconstruing her laboured speech as illogical mumbling. Yet, it cannot be denied that while the play celebrates diverse functionalities, it is also true that the production's casting decision makes problematic its representation of disability. In order to unpack the tension between the play and its production, therefore, I wish to provide some explanation and analysis of the script. In the words of the playwright, the play was conceived in antithetical terms: "tragedy and the grotesque, poetry and vulgarity" (Playbill *La extinta poética*). In this dramatic universe, the

structuring paradox is presented through the delineation of two differentiated worlds: the world of the family, comprised of mother, father and daughter, vs. that of the SISTER, who is marked by alterity and described as having severe cognitive and physical disabilities as “la hermana retrasada” [the retarded sister]. As the play unfolds, the audience witnesses a series of parallel scenes and voice-overs that share the world of the SISTER and, far from showing cognitive impairment, reveal an intensely critical and poetic vision. The SISTER presents us with a world of self-reflection and beauty expressed both through language and movement.

The SISTER, who is never referred to by name, calls herself Ophelia, identifying with the role she auditions for in her special education class. Despite her blurred speech, we can clearly hear her choral, judicious thoughts in voice-over as she comments calmly and compassionately on her family’s hopelessness and brutality. Her character, far from reproducing *overcoming*¹ narratives, is marked by independence, strength, and acts of kindness that neither need nor expect reciprocity. By way of contrast, the parodic and extreme stylization of the family members displays rigidly puppet-like, vertical bodies and is marked by automatized, hoarse and often cruel speech.²

The disparity established between the SISTER’s inner beauty and the family’s vulgarity results in a dual mode of kinetic representation. The family’s “norm” is embodied by grotesque, free-standing bodies moving with hyperbolic and mechanical rigidity. On the other hand, the poetic vision of “difference” is manifested in the laborious yet delicate movements of the SISTER, who gracefully crawls or glides, self-propped on a clinical trapeze armed with lifts and pulleys. While the image of the caricaturized family corresponds with the well-entrenched tradition of presenting the grotesque and deformed as allegories of moral or existential stigmas (think Richard III, King Lear or Max Estrella), the character of the SISTER reverses this aesthetic to individualize herself as differently abled. Her physiology and movements display a form of divergent off-centre physics “of contact” that challenges notions about the norm. Her “atypical” movements imply utilizing her surroundings as support points to compensate for the weakness of the lower body, producing balance through asymmetrical motion, swinging curled extremities, and using gravity as a manner of self-lowering. Faltering motions are repeated with intentional rhythm and stealth while lack of balance and stumbling seem to create new, dynamic openings. If her stride, aided by contact with wheeled instruments, challenges notions of symmetry and verticality, her motion also entails contiguity, contrasting with the normative free-standing stance. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s text *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) has been evoked to help reframe the aesthetics of disability through the rhizomatic model and the concept of “haptic smooth space” which (in its contrast with the ableist “striated,” ordered space,) speaks about simultaneity, continuity of spatial arrangement and the tactile relations between individuals, spaces and surfaces (Kuppers 2011, 92). In sum, smooth, haptic space helps explore the tactility and contiguity of disabled bodies and diverse functionalities as organic parts of their environment, while the rhizomatic model opens space to a wide variety of experiences and positions subverting and resisting normative privilege in conceptions of height, verticality, symmetry, or balance.

From my brief evocation of the play in performance, I hope it is evident that in its kinaesthetic rendering of the physical suggestions of the script, the production attempts to dislodge possible

metaphorical readings of the character by challenging directly accepted narratives about disability and cure. As Petra Kuppers observes, “In the medical model, disability is intrinsic: this body is disabled, faulty, in need (and potentially able to be) cured, managed, rehabilitated” (Kuppers 2011, 95). In contrast, the SISTER embodies a condition that defies instant associations of dependence and invisibility and that, far from being intrinsic, simply implies different rules of engagement with an environment designed for alternate bodily types (steps, levels or stairwells, for example). Despite being reduced by the family to the space of the hospital crane, the SISTER is defined by self-determination and creativity, in stark contrast with the rest of the characters who are marred by sickness and the parameters of their clinical records, thus enacting a reversal of normative assumptions about sickness and wellness.

In short, Calonge shows his preoccupation with difference in various manners: through the painful inclusion of detail, in the psychological analysis of character vis-a-vis the mirroring of prevailing social attitudes, and the invisible reality and experience of individuals with diverse functionalities. The symbolic dreariness in the family’s life (the TV as horizon, the clinical record as synecdoche of existence, the stationary bike as the new hamster wheel) contrasts with the poetic luminosity in the SISTER’s world, which is characterized by spiritual independence. In fact, part of the originality of La Zaranda’s theatrical language consists of the ways the company denounces segregation and isolation while interrogating existing conceptions about normalcy and the body. While in the past embodied alterity has often been posed as an allegory of the corruption and degeneration of the social body, *La extinta poética* presents the SISTER as a model of resistance to invisibility, as a poetic means of exploring the body’s own limitations and as a way of probing entrenched assumptions about what is normal.

Yet, all being said, the result only allows the spectator to participate in a poetic recreation that deploys metaphor and stylization rather than be witness to representation of the experience of disability controlled by disabled individuals. As Carrie Sandahl reminds us, casting decisions have economic repercussions, reflect social inequality, and appear to echo a history of privilege.

While it is true that the isolation and rejection of the SISTER turns into fierce independence, mental autonomy and critical vision, it is also clear that *La extinta poética* both strives for a mode of representation that allows for agency and power in disability, whilst at the same time allegorizing and stylizing it. The reception of the play, which has been widely acclaimed in Spain and abroad for over three years, speaks towards the current state of the discourse on disability in Spain. Blogs as well as professional reviews praise it as “nearing perfection” and “brave, unconventional,” and single out the intervention of the actress-ballerina playing the SISTER as “generous and sincere” (Miñana 2016). To return to Burton and Turbine, if radical kindness is “the core of articulating, recognizing, and valuing the complexity and beauty of the human condition, and putting this into practice in order to dismantle harmful systems of oppression and subjugation,” (2019) and theatre aims to create radical change, it must identify precisely what “subjugation” entails in dramatic representation. In this context, it is not enough to “recognize” and “value” the beauty and complexity of the disabled experience without identifying the systemic subjugation the disabled community faces when deprived of cultural self-representation. In the context of theatre and disability, radical kindness implies restitution to the disabled community control over their representation and eliminating discriminatory

practices that bar them from the professional stage. And it is to this issue in relation to the Spanish context that I now want to turn.

Casting and Disability in Spain

In Spain, like many other nations, actors with diverse functionalities have been kept from professionalization by being deprived of equal resources and educational environments. Though Spain has seen since the 1970s a growth of movements and associations for disability, these have had discontinuous and localized effects due to the relative lack of governmental support.³ In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the state instituted a number of centres for early intervention that combined medical and social services for the detection, diagnosis and social development of children with disabilities, however it was not until decades later that these interventions took into consideration the disabled person as agent of development and as a totality whose needs were not merely medical but social, interpersonal, educational and professional (Gutierrez Cuevas and Ruiz Veerman 2012, 119). Furthermore, institutional support was as insufficient as the judicial framework dedicated to disability. Though Spain passed important social integration and anti-discrimination laws for disability in 1982, it has not to this day successfully implemented them in full. In fact, in the area of disability, there was no law that included relevant measures against labour discrimination until 2015. The disjunction between medical awareness of disability and the lack of legislation to ensure non-discriminatory educational and labour legislation has effectively hindered social integration. Not surprisingly, this lack of support has also impacted the overall creative production and visibility of the disabled community on stage. Despite the number of companies and associations that promote the artistic and creative expression of individuals with disability through workshops and labs, these have been regarded mostly as forms of therapy or recreation (Checa 2018, 76). David Ojeda,⁴ theatrical director and scholar of the theatre of disability, explains the lack of presence of Spanish disabled theatre practitioners on international stages and forums:

Spain has seen similar processes and pioneering initiatives to those of the rest of Europe, companies like Candoco in UK or L'Oiseau Mouche in France for instance. However, the existence of economic and social support in other countries has allowed for a consolidation of the inclusive arts elsewhere that belittles our achievements and makes them appear derivative by comparison. Our productions have not emerged from the same circumstances but rather from the lack of administrative leadership, and from excessive focus on the psychosocial benefits of this type of theatre, which often were privileged over artistic value and intentions. (Ojeda 2018, 49)

After observing that Spanish theatre of disability has achieved artistic excellence and has undergone development comparable to the rest of Europe, Ojeda goes on to lament the lack of recognition of its companies, noting as the main cause the lack of continuity, resources, venues, and spaces dedicated to diverse initiatives (Ojeda 2018, 50). While it is necessary to establish means to make these initiatives stable and sustainable, it is also important to recognize the significance of current efforts such as the relatively recent emergence of inclusive festivals, symposiums, laboratories, companies and productions, and it is to one of these examples that I

now turn. *Deseos* is one of the few cases in which an inclusive cast has undertaken a full textual script for professional production. This production, though guided by established theatre professionals, is built on the strengths, images and interests provided by the disabled actors themselves, thus in the theatrical context more closely modelling the kind of empowering, radical practice that Burton and Turbine evoke.⁵

Deseos [Desires]

While theatre in Spain remains perhaps at the margins of the cultural discussion of disability, Antonio Alamo, the scriptwriter and co-director of *Deseos*, has worked towards consolidating a theatre of inclusion in the last two decades.⁶ Not only has he directed several workshops and productions that include members with diverse functionalities, but he immediately introduced inclusive productions in the regular programming of Teatro Lope de Vega in Seville when he assumed artistic direction in 2004. He also helped showcase diversity in dance when he introduced in the 2007 calendar of Teatro Lope de Vega the first edition of the annual international festival Escena Mobile [Mobile Stage]. The festival, now extended, has spread over several venues and is supported by numerous municipal and private entities, reaching this year its 14th edition. Escena Mobile has received recognition, among others, from the Spanish Ministry of Culture and from UNESCO (Dionysos Prize awarded to theatrical projects with a social impact in 2012) and, according to Alamo, was the inspiration for similar international theatrical events such as The Festival Eclectic in Tarragona, the Unity Festival in Cardiff, UK, and the festival *Una Mirada Diferente* " [A Different Gaze] which programmed the premiere of *Deseos* (Alamo, email message to the author, 13 November, 2020).

["Una Mirada Diferente"](#) has been organized annually in Madrid since 2013 by the Centro Dramático Nacional [National Centre for Drama] to increase the presence of artists with diverse functionalities in the regular programming of theatres across the nation. It strives to "stimulate, support, develop and stage inclusive productions and the work of artists with diverse functionalities in order to increase their professionalization and normalization in the national scenic arts" (Martín Lunas 2019). The organizers, not content with merely increasing visibility for diversity, have established year-long research labs to increase the opportunities for creation and the exploration of difference as an artistic element capable of generating aesthetic innovation. A key element of this approach is the deliberate dissociation between these laboratories and applied theatre. Artistic expression is not construed here as a form of therapy for the well-being of the performer, but rather as source of cultural innovation and exchange. Reciprocity from the point of view of artists of diverse functionalities is conceived significantly "not as a contribution from society to the individual but as contribution of the individual (as artist and creator) to society" (Martín Lunas 2019). And as such, inclusive theatre functions as a transformative experience that helps redefine kindness not so much as interdependence, but as a means to resist and shape existing power relations and societal presuppositions about what is normal in the profession. Neuro- as well as physical diversity in these productions provides enriched aesthetic and artistic perspectives that shape and inform the creative process.

The production of *Deseos* with the [Centro Dramático Nacional](#) was realized under the co-direction of Alamo with María Parrato and based on work generated in 2018 in an inclusive

workshop for the [Teatro Español](#) with diverse actors from [Paladio Arte](#). As Alamo himself notes, the creative process emphasized agency and inclusion:

I make no distinction among actors with or without functional diversity (as it is called now). Every actor has different capacities and incapacities (as any human being would), and all diversity is enriching. Each way of moving, perceiving, feeling is unique, and it is beautiful to see them all blend on stage. Unluckily, when the actor on stage is disabled, a veiled prejudice appears that prevents people from considering them creators or artists, that is the reason for the lack of professional reviews of diverse productions [...]. The literature about them tends to be, without intent, paternalistic. (Alamo, email message to the author, 13 November, 2020).

The production of *Deseos* brought together actors with and without diverse sensorial and intellectual functionalities and became a touring production that opened in some of the most prestigious theatres in Spain. The poetics of the script for *Deseos* as well as the staging of the play were shaped by the collaborative work of actors and directors generated in the lab. The experience immersed all actors in situational dynamics of body movement and object manipulation that structured and guided the final dramaturgy (Dossier 2018). Creative activities focused on issues of desire in relation to character, and the value and communicative power of familiar objects.

The performance text itself was inspired by a short horror story by W.W. Jacobs, “The Monkey’s Paw” and tells the story of a family, Claudio (father), Nina (mother), and Edu (son), that receives a long-lost and somewhat unstable cousin, Lucy, accompanied by the ghost of her monkey, Bruno. Lucy comes to visit from India hiding a secret magic charm, a monkey’s paw that the family quickly discovers. The actor playing the part of Bruno, the spirit of the mutilated monkey invisible to all but Lucy, haunts the stage. When Lucy warns them of the terrible consequences of using the trinket and of formulating the three desires she is met with disbelief. In response she tries to destroy the paw by flinging it into the fire, but the father later recovers it and agrees with his wife to ask for something reasonable to avert the danger: they merely wish for the £200 needed to pay the mortgage. They later realize with horror that their son’s accidental death at the factory the following day is their doing when an employee delivers them an insurance check for £200. The remaining two wishes are spent wishing their son back, and then begging that he be returned to his grave when they realize that the horribly disfigured cadaver knocking at the door is no longer their son.

Though the specific disabilities of each member were not disclosed by the director in order to respect the confidentiality of the actors, the final cast included four members with varying degrees of cognitive disability and one with sensorial impairment. For the production, Alamo worked through a series of actor improvisations generated from the main situations in the original short story, which shaped the final textual and stage scripts. The actors worked scene by scene without ever knowing what would happen next in order to lend uncertainty and effect to their acting (Alamo, email message to the author, 13 November, 2020). The tale, which revolves around the topics of desire and self-knowledge, develops the traditional theme of a

protagonist who is unexpectedly and supernaturally granted three desires. Yet this version adds a gothic twist to the well-known plot of the *One Thousand and One Nights* by turning it into a cautionary tale against excessive and unreasonable desires: “careful with what you wish for...” According to Alamo’s playbill, the play directs the spectators towards a nightmarish, metaphysical abyss that makes them wonder: “what exactly makes us human?” The shocking and dark ending seems to indicate that the only way to be free from greed and despair is to appreciate our present circumstances as we live with the certainty and finality of death.

The supernatural and hallucinatory aesthetic of the gothic tale works at the service of normalizing diversity. In a world where the rules of what is normal become suspended by magic, and where the living and the dead coexist, it is easy to propose diversity as the new norm. The play is framed by dimly lit scenes in which the complete cast move as monkeys while setting props on stage. The motion on stage reproduces elements of the rhizomatic, haptic space as actors drag their limbs, bounce, and limp, averting symmetry and circulating in semi-circular directions. Oscillatory movement and lack of symmetry and linearity are used again to shift the aesthetics of representation, challenging normalcy as the plot unfolds. Simian images have double significance representing both the victimization of the mutilated animal whose paw they are using to satisfy their desires, and the source of terrible supernatural powers. Throughout the play, reverting to animal movements implies both losing one’s reason to give way to emotions, and allowing the power of the supernatural to shape one’s destiny. As is often the case in gothic literature, power becomes entangled with death and the subconscious. The plot seems to complicate rather than answer the question about the essence of humanity. Non-verbal communication is decisive in a production where all bodies, normative and not, participate in the same symbolic kinetic language to redefine, or rather do away with, the idea of normalcy.

The opening scene presents us with a chess game between father and son that becomes defamiliarized by emphasizing atypical perspectives and forms of knowing generated by the actors’ competitiveness. It begins with a focus on spatial decentring, as the players argue briskly about the position of the board on the table, which contrasts with the ordered haptic space suggested by the chess board itself. As the players try to gain advantage by pulling the board closer to themselves, they favour quick, tactical spatial movement over strategic planning. The frantic manoeuvring of board and chess pieces is further offset by the unrelated conversation. Edu continues to use distraction as strategy:

CLAUDIO: (dragging the board towards himself) Please! It does not need to be in the exact middle, you are just trying to distract me! It is late already.

EDU: Yes, but Lucy comes from so far away, all the way from India.... No wonder it is taking her so long.

CLAUDIO: Yes, and because we are so isolated here...

EDU: Dad, move already! What is that?? You may move twice if you like, but it is no use. Look! (slams the piece) Check!!!

Rules are broken and reinterpreted and the game is literally decentred to show the perseverance, self-confidence, concentration and strategic sense of the players. The characters

argue without losing sight of the game and in quick succession alternate between pleasant thoughts about the visitor and competitive outbursts of emotion. Far from representing characters with diverse functionalities according to the stereotypes of “inspiration porn,” they are portrayed as unique individuals with personal preferences and temperaments (Young 2012). Edu is characterized by his dark humour, irreverence and a brazen and competitive personality that marks him on and off stage. When interviewed on a television newscast that included a [brief promotion of Deseos](#), Edu’s comments were similarly confident: “Everybody needs to come to see this, especially politicians and those in charge. They need to see that we are not nobodies, but serious hard-working people with a lot to offer.” The actor’s refusal to be defined by disability and his denunciation of the invisibility of disabled professionals in dominant society points towards the demands of radical kindness in cultural production. The systemic oppression of disabled professionals cannot be dismantled until they have equal access to resources, education, funding and media.

The assumption that the individual is “dis-abled” by diverse functionality privileges the (neural, cognitive and physical) capacities of typical individuals. *Deseos*, by contrast, presents us with individualized characters exhibiting the strength in diverse functionalities. Despite the actors’ refusal to be identified by their disabilities or marked by clinical terminology, the performers evidence their diversity on stage: Bruno lacks speech but is capable of stylized and complex kinetic communication as becomes evident in his dance, Claudio and Edu exhibit an entirely different sense of verbal and kinetic tempo, pace and rhythm. Both are qualified by their playfulness, though Edu also has a distinctive sharp satirical stance, a quick temper and a keen consciousness of diverse functionalities. His awareness becomes apparent in the scene where they hear someone approach and Edu gets his eyes wrapped in a half-knitted scarf to pretend to be blind. He receives Lucy warmly and touches her face in order to “see” her. He observes that her cousin is a pretty girl though, after hearing her stories, concludes that she has a “screw loose” and alcoholic tendencies. Other senses are relativized as well to emphasize the weight of subjectivity on our interpretation of reality. Time, which is embodied in an oversized antique clock, is perceived through emotion and desire. Claudio observes how time flies when they are having fun but how Edu might not be back yet, despite the clock marking 7pm, since time goes so much slower in the factory. While we might take the observation metaphorically or half in jest, the character earnestly reiterates the mystery: “I have watched the clock there to see how hours and even minutes drag on, 7pm here may be less than midday there!!”

Diverse perceptions of the same reality are explained through experience rather than neurodiversity. Lucy must be humoured because she has had a nervous breakdown [“*está malita de los nervios*”] and Claudio believes in the magical paw and its power to self-propel because he has had too much liquor. The other two characters, Edu and Nina, refuse to suspend judgment and brashly chide Lucy and Claudio on different occasions for their gullibility:

NINA: Claudio, from now on I prohibit you from touching whiskey again. You seem deranged!

EDU: Dad you also have a screw loose, just like Lucy. You are getting senile!

In Alamo's script, disability is far from thematized and actors with diverse neuro-functionalities perform text-heavy roles to which they generally have no access. The play's message refrains from commenting on difference and rather unveils the vacuity and intellectual poverty of the "norm," exposed here by death and marred by destructive fears and desires. The actors portray self-shaped, individualized characters that elude stereotyping. The plot avoids appeals to emotionality or ableist attitudes. Instead, we find an engrossing gothic tale with a universal theme that warns us about human frailty and our fear of death: "you must accept that death has a purpose and gives meaning to life; that lives lost are lives born...our consciousness of death is what makes us compassionate, and human" (Alamo, email message to the author, 13 November, 2020). *Deseos* evokes empathy for human frailty and our fear of death and warns about treating our gifts with disdain. At the same time, the play represents the experience of diverse functionalities as a generative source of knowledge, aesthetics and creativity.

Conclusion

In the plays under consideration, true social commitment takes the form of struggle against invisibility by foregrounding the perceptions of bodies that are doubly able to treat and be treated "with kindness." In effect, both of the works considered here contribute to challenging common perceptions about normalcy, providing examples of the potential of theatre to perform "radical kindness," defined by Burton and Turbine for its capacity to "articulat[e], recognis[e], and valu[e] the complexity and beauty of the human condition" (Burton and Turbine 2019). *La extinta poética* portrays imaginative identifications with disability that, going beyond narratives of overcoming, portray power in diversity and render knowledge about the social matrices that restrict and oppress people with diverse functionalities. Yet, the radicality of this production is diminished because of its casting of an abled-bodied professional ballerina to play the paraplegic SISTER, denying self-representation for disabled performers and defaulting to allegorical stylization of their experience. *Deseos* in contrast, contributes to the expression, creativity and identity politics of the very community it represents. Furthermore, this production of *Deseos* allows for the inclusion of actors with disability in the professional arena by providing them with what actors need: opportunities for professional development and employment. As one of the actors proudly observed on national TV, the results speak for themselves; they meet the expectations of the most discerning audiences and are no more and no less than the product of hard work. (<https://www.rtve.es/alacarta/videos/la-2-noticias/2-noticias-07-06-18/4627478/>) If we unmask disempowering acts of kindness as demeaning even when grounded in self-described altruistic aims, we see that true kindness demands societal changes in perspective and in the power structure. In this light, and particularly in the context of diversity, radical kindness is tantamount to a demand for justice. In the context of theatre, the concept and practice of kindness needs to focus on the visibility and integration of the disabled community on and off stage as agents of change and creators of their own image. Off-stage, the theatre establishment needs to take heed of disabled activists' demands for legislation to ensure non-discriminatory educational and labour policies. On-stage, there needs to be awareness of the need for disabled theatre practitioners to be writers, directors and protagonists in their own stories and take control over their own image and representation.

Notes

¹ In the context of disability, overcoming narratives reinforce the idea that someone must *overcome* the disability in order to achieve “success” as a normative body. This ableist perception implies that the only possible type of positive recognition of disability is conditioned by the individual’s capacity to suffer and control it. Positive cultural portrayals of diversity in fact consider atypical functionalities as enriching and empowering.

² The antithetical aesthetics of the play can be appreciated in the brief promotional video published by the company <https://vimeo.com/189755252>.

³ Spain has come under attack for not enforcing accessibility for disabled people having ratified relevant legislation in 2007 the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](https://www.un.org/development/desa/enable/2006/convention) (CRPD). For more complete information on legal aspects see <https://www.disability-europe.net/dotcom/text/spain/b1-anti-discrimination-legislation>.

⁴ David Ojeda is Professor of Stage Direction in the RESAD (Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático) and wrote his dissertation on stage arts and disability. He is also the director of the inclusive theatre company El Tinglao, and the coordinator of an annual symposium on education and inclusion in the stage arts.

⁵ Another production to follow a similar model is *Cáscaras Vacías*, by Magda Labarga and Laila Ripoll though, in this case, the cabaret format allowed the cast to downplay or minimize the text in favour of choreography.

⁶ Alongside his work as playwright and novelist, Alamo has developed a solid contribution to the theatre for diversity. He has coordinated the Theatre Workshop for the National Congress for Art and Disability, has conducted workshops and has intervened as director or dramaturge in half a dozen productions with diverse casts, two of which “El retablo de las maravillas” and “Tres deseos” included over 40 actors with diverse functionalities from six and seven countries respectively.

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