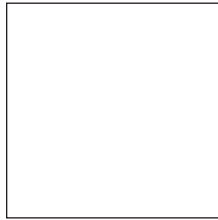


The Santa Clara Lectures



“Life’s Bread”

Br. Rick Curry, S.J.

Founder and Artistic Director,

The National Theatre Workshop of the Handicapped

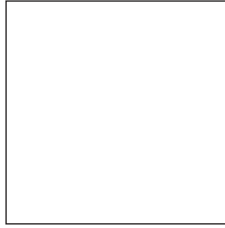
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TOPIC: LIFE'S BREAD
SPEAKER: RICK CURRY, S.J.
Date: April 8, 2001

Persons with disabilities are often thought of as unique or extraordinary. However, after you work with them long enough, their uniqueness and their extraordinariness disappear. What is left are talented or not so talented students who are waiting in the wings for the public to appreciate their theater skills.

It probably comes as no surprise to many that a Jesuit would work with persons with disabilities; that is to say, persons who are marginalized. Certainly the Jesuits' preferential option for the poor applies to those who are considered physically disabled and also therefore, marginalized. This only exemplifies the Gospel that we are very anxious to try to be inclusive in our ministry rather than be exclusive. Those who understand our religious order realize that we are called to be men for others, and that would include persons with disabilities.

What really surprises an awful lot of my non-Catholic colleagues in New York City is that I work in theater. They often ask me the question, "How did you ever convince the Jesuits to let you work in theater?" I'm asked that question about as often as I'm asked, "*What happened to your arm?*"

The Society of Jesus is a Roman Catholic religious order, which grew out of the activity of its founder, Ignatius of Loyola (1491—1556), a Spaniard who established the Jesuit Order in 1534. The purpose of the order, which is the purpose of almost any religious order in the Roman Catholic Church, is the salvation of its own membership and the salvation of their fellow men and women.

Ignatius founded the Jesuits also to be a counterreformation force. He wanted to combat the articulate and effective Protestant advance. What he needed was an army of equally articulate and effective ministers. Good will and enthusiasm, he thought, were really not enough. What he needed was organization. For organization, training was necessary. The more appropriate and thorough the training, he believed, the more successful the achievement would be.

Almost from the start, education was the work of the Society of Jesus. Uniform norms of organization, methods, and subjects in all the Jesuit schools were set forth in a document called the *Ratio Studiorum*. Great store was put on humanistic subjects. From the very beginning, Jesuit schools emphasized dramatic compositions. Eventually, this grew into professional theater. The most lasting effect of Jesuit education is the students themselves. So early on, we boasted students with a success record of Moliere, the Corneille brothers, and Lupe de Vega.

The key document of Jesuit education, the *Ratio Studiorum*, specifically relates to theater education. It talks about both the written and the spoken word, in Latin, *rhetorica*, which is the core end result of Jesuit education. The perfection of eloquence is what all Jesuit education was supposed to be about.

Jesuit education and Jesuit spirituality are inextricably linked. Jesuit pedagogy is really nothing more than the embodiment of an educational situation that grew out of the life of Ignatius Loyola. What Ignatius saw as the power of theater is what theater students have always wished for themselves; namely, a large audience.

Once he saw the power to convert the masses that can happen in the theater, Ignatius was wholeheartedly behind theater. What he expected Jesuit theater to do was to convert the audience to a better way of life. He also wanted the student actors to be converted to a better way of life, because they would learn to act through the celebration of their five senses.

This didn't come out of nowhere. This grew out of Ignatius' love of spirituality and one of the ways he instructed his men in meditation. What he invited his men to do was to look at the Old and New Testament, the Hebrew and the Christian testaments, and he asked the men to enter into the scriptures stories and to place themselves into those scripture stories as if they were participants.

For instance, he recommended that we might become the stable boy or the stable girl at Bethlehem and witness the Incarnation by listening, and seeing, and tasting, and feeling, and experiencing all that went on in the stable.

It doesn't take much for you to understand that you would leap from that kind of meditation to specific acting training. The early Jesuits were

asking their students to touch, to see, to hear, to listen, to taste, and to feel all those sensory experiences that one learns in theater education.

It was through the five senses that Ignatius believed everyone learned how to learn and how to pray. Therefore, the spiritual exercises provided a natural stepping stone to begin Jesuit theater.

Those early Jesuits delighted in large audiences. The opportunity to reach so many people and to convert so many people is what really propelled them to get into Jesuit theater.

It became the first multinational form of theater. The German Jesuits invented and perfected the revolved stage and the back lighted scrim. The Italian Jesuits were very much into dance and music. The Germans would go down and look to see what the Jesuits were doing in Italy. The Italian Jesuits would go up to look at what they were doing in Germany and start to borrow the different forms of theatric enterprises.

Like any other enterprise, Jesuit motivations were complex. Although they found theater to be an invaluable educational tool, they also began to realize the theater had its pragmatic side.

One of the reasons that the Jesuits found the theater to be so helpful is that when the wealthy patrons came to see Jesuit theater, they were so moved that they offered scholarships to the poor students. They also wanted to support the institutions. The clever acting of poor students moved these men and women to give their rings to the actors to support their education.

If a play was good, it really credited the school and the masters with great renown. Jesuits were always pedagogues, and they discovered that a theater education enhanced their students' memories and also gave them a greater facility for language. There was always that hook that theater also enhanced the student actor's love for virtue.

The Jesuits were not the only ones to see theater as a valuable tool. But, we were the first organization to systematize it into a form of an educational policy, which we embodied in the document called the *Ratio Studiorum*. I wish that I could report to you that these lofty ideals propelled me to immediately found the National Theater Workshop of the Handicapped.

Actually, I started this school after a great disappointment. I started the school because I lost my temper.

When I was in doctoral studies at NYU thirty years ago, I was surprised to see that some of my fellow students in acting class were getting television commercials. In those days you didn't have to be a major celebrity to be on a TV commercial. You could be just an ordinary Joe or Jane to brush your teeth on national television.

My acting partner, a wonderful young actress, surprised me one day by letting me know that she spent a day at work on a National TV commercial and made \$6,000 for one day's work. I was living on such a limited income in New York City that this looked like heaven to me. I called my provincial superior and asked if I could have his permission to try out for some of these TV commercials. He thought that it was a good idea, but he cautioned me that I should try to audition for appropriate commercials for a Jesuit.

I went to my fellow students and said, "How do I do this?" They gave me the dailies, they showed me which auditions were coming up, they told me I had to get a head shot, get my resume together, start calling all the casting agents to let them know that I was available. I did all that. We decided that we would meet weekly to support each other, and to report to one another how well we were doing in this quest to be on television commercials.

When I got together with my fellow students on Friday afternoons, they would often mention that they had two, three, four, or five auditions in that week's time. One student announced joyfully that he even had a call back. I, unfortunately, didn't even have one audition. And I kept thinking that I was doing something wrong. I thought, I know, what I really need to do is focus. Let me look at all of the auditions that are coming up in the following week, and I will choose one and focus in on that one, and one only. I was determined to get an audition for that piece.

I discovered that there was a mouthwash commercial available. I thought that I would be wonderful gargling nationally. I also thought I had some credentials, because my father was a dentist. I called the agency. I sent my head shot. I sent my resume. I called again to confirm that I had an appointment.

I awakened very early to be certain that all was ready for this great commercial, and I got up to 55th and 6th Avenue to a great steel building. I walked onto the 23rd floor, and I walked up to the receptionist and she looked up and she said to me, “May I help you?” I said, “Yes. I’m here for the mouthwash commercial.”

She was stunned. And with that, she burst into laughter. The more I looked perplexed, the greater her laughter became. And she started pounding the desk, and she said, “Jimmy put you up to this didn’t he?” And I said, “No. Who’s Jimmy?”

“Oh, come on,” she said. “This is too rich.” And she laughed and laughed even louder. Finally, when she realized that I was not laughing, she said to me, “Really. Who put you up this?”

And I said, “No. I’m serious. My name is Rick Curry. You’ll see my name on the list. I have an audition.”

And with that, she turned and her face became craven. And she said, “I can’t send you upstairs. I would lose my job.” And she pointed to my empty sleeve.

I can remember feeling so hurt and so angry (two emotions, by the way, that Irish men cannot handle, and certainly not before noon). I turned on my heels and left. I had not experienced such blatant prejudice in my entire life. If I had been rejected like that previously, I was either in denial or had missed it completely.

Neither my parents nor the Jesuits had ever treated me like that. The excitement for me about Jesuit education was that, when there was an obstacle, it created options. And this woman was giving me no options. What was she saying? She was saying: “Because you do not have a right forearm, you cannot audition for a mouthwash commercial.” The absurdity of that thought rankled me badly. And, I took it personally.

I can remember walking out onto 6th Avenue, not knowing where to go. I started looking at people looking at me, and I thought to myself, “Oh, my God, they’re looking at me like I’m crippled. They’re looking at me like I’m less than they are. They’re looking at me like I’m handicapped.”

I walked from 55th and 6th to 16th and 6th, where I was living at the time. And in that long walk home, I began to realize that I wasn’t going

to put up with this. I thought to myself, what do people do, people with greater disabilities than I, who want to study theater, who want to be in show business, who want to gargle nationally? Where were we on those commercials?

It was also curious for me because I was reflecting on the series, "Roots," which had just come out. I saw all these American families in these large bathrooms, shampooing, brushing their teeth, and gargling. They were all white people before, and now with the series "Roots," they were all black people.

The thing that stunned me more than anything else was not that the clientele had changed in the commercials, but I wanted to know where were those bathrooms? They were the largest, most well appointed rooms I'd ever seen. I had been using bathrooms all my life, and I had never seen those ideal bathrooms. And I thought, there it is, the Americans are looking for the ideal, and we disabled folk are not the ideal. How dare they?

It was then and there that I decided to start a school for the disabled. I don't deserve a lot of credit. I was angry. And out of anger and disappointment comes some wonderful things. It was a '60s model.

I decided that I was going to give something to a group that had been denied something. That's what we did in the '60s. So I decided to offer an acting course, Course 101, for everyone who wanted to come who was physically disabled.

The trick was, I knew about Acting 101; I didn't know any disabled people. So I went to the phone book and looked under "h" for handicapped. And started calling organizations, asking, "Would they like to come and study a course in acting?" Many of the administrators of these organizations felt very threatened and told me that there would be no interest whatsoever in it. It took me almost six months before I even found a group of students who were courageous enough to want to try this.

I got a telephone call from a woman from Barnard College who was working with a group of disabled students and she said, "You're looking for students in all the wrong places. Look to wheelchair sports. Look to disabled students who are doing other things in their life. They're the people that you want to get to."

That was 25 years ago and up to this day, we have educated more than 5,000 students in the theater arts.

I wasn't ready for the fact that the students who were coming to us were so talented. I was stunned. I thought, how pathetic it is, that we have this great resource, and we're not tapping into it. We've totally just chosen to ignore this extraordinary resource of disabled students. The imagination has no physical boundaries. What we should be doing with the disabled is training their imagination.

After about two semesters of teaching Acting 101, one of the students came to me and said, "Do you think we could ever put on a show?" And I said, "Sure."

"Do you think anybody would ever come and see us?"

And I said, "Absolutely."

"Do you think we can find appropriate material?"

I said, "No question about it."

I was lying on all three counts.

Together with some wonderful actors and actresses who were then in the original production of *Greece on Broadway*—Mimi Kennedy, who is presently playing the mother of Dharma, in "Dharma and Greg", and Ray Dematteis, an extraordinary East Coast actor—we devised a curriculum and started to see what we could present to an audience.

Bruce Pomohac, who's a wonderful song writer in Manhattan, chiefly known because he's written a theme for Martha Stewart's show, wrote some musical numbers for us and we put on a musical review. We did a kick line of seven wheelchairs. Getting prepared for this great night of our first cabaret we had blue rooms and green rooms; blue rooms were for our guide dogs, green rooms were for our students.

I said to Bruce Pomohac, "Bruce, I have two tickets waiting for you and your wife. I'm hoping that you're going to come." Bruce said, "Rick, I'll write any amount of songs for you, but please don't ask me to come. Please, I really would be so uncomfortable watching them." He said, "I cry at 'Bowling for Dollars'."

I said, "I understand. I'll give you the two seats. Sit by the door. If you feel uncomfortable, leave and I won't be offended." He came with his wife. He stayed for the show. At the end of the evening, he came up and he said, "You bastard, another night of theater, good for you."

That's precisely what we're about. We are about presenting talent, not presenting disability. The themes of disability that we work through, in regard to our playwriting sessions, are totally authentic, totally wonderful, totally filled with drama, because conflict is the stuff out of which theater is made. Disabled people can produce instant drama just by the entering a room. That is what I discovered more than anything else over the years.

We eventually founded a residential school in Maine where students come from all over the world to study with us. We've also expanded our program to include the fine arts. We teach acting, singing, dancing, playwriting, set design, and lighting design, but also painting, drawing, sculpting, glass blowing, stained glass, and photography.

What we've also discovered is that the students love to talk to each other about how exciting it is to be different. More than anything else they talked about how they wanted to show product. The disabled have a great need to begin something in the morning, and, like all of us, in the evening, be able to go to bed looking at a creative work.

When I was a young Jesuit, they sent me to the bakery where I learned how to bake bread. Over the years, I've been sending to our benefactors loaves of bread I bake at Christmas time. Providentially, our benefactors grew and the need for more bread grew.

About seven years ago, I said to my students, "Listen, I need some help doing our Christmas breads. Would anyone be interested in learning how to bake bread?" To my surprise eleven students volunteered. I looked out over those students who volunteered, and I thought, oh, great. What am I going to do with this crowd? The mix of disabilities challenged even my imagination for how to use them. But, they came and we worked. And we worked very hard. And that year, we made more than 500 loaves of bread with all different disabilities working together.

I wanted to find more recipes because I thought this was such a good thing. Let's do it for Valentines Day. Let's do it for Easter. I had been gathering bread recipes from Jesuit brothers all over the world. I looked at all these recipes and I thought, you know, either I should throw all these

recipes out, or I should write a book. You can imagine the Jesuit response to that dilemma.

I wrote a book. I gathered 80 bread recipes, anecdotes, and prayers from the Jesuit tradition, and Harper-Collins was gracious enough to publish a book. It is titled, *The Secrets of Jesuit Bread Making*.

Because of the notoriety of the book, it captured the attention of a journalist. He was a host on weekend edition for National Public Radio.

He called me up and he said, "I would like to come up and see your theater. I would like to come up and see your bakery." I said, "Come on along."

He arranged to come up on a Saturday about ten days before Christmas. We were baking the St. Peter Canisius Stolon Bread at the time, a name that only exists in my bakery. I was totally surprised to find him there with his two crew members with microphones in hand. He looked very nervous and very uncomfortable. Later, I discovered that he was greeted at the door by one of our blind students carrying a rather large knife. He seemed to show no recovery powers whatsoever. He wouldn't leave my side. And he kept saying to me, "Tell me more about gluten."

At the end of the day, when they left, I had a headache. When I have a headache, I know that I'm angry. I thought to myself, I wonder why I'm so angry. I realized that this great radio journalist had missed the miracle that was happening in that bakery that day. He had missed the 20 differently disabled students who were working together, creating a delicious loaf of bread. And he had the audacity not to introduce himself to our students.

The next day they returned with more audio equipment, because they were going to be audiotaping our cabaret. Now, our cabaret is performed by our seasoned veterans. These are the students that have been with us for many years, and they're rough and tumble. They work with some able-bodied actors and actresses putting on this cabaret. They audiotaped this extraordinary rehearsal.

Finally, the journalist decided to sit down and talk to some of our students. He's a little guy, a little tough New Yorker, bald and feisty. He sat down with us and he said, "What offends you people?" And I said, "I'll tell you what offends we people. Journalists, like yourselves, who are

so impolite that you missed the miracle that was happening here yesterday and didn't even introduce yourself to our students. You ignored the disabled, the very story you were after."

His little bald head snapped back, and he turned to one of our actresses, a beautiful woman of color by the name of Sandy. He said, "Okay, Sandy, you said you wanted to play in a soap opera. What role could you possibly play with those braces on your legs?" And without missing a beat, Sandy said, "The bitch."

And then Bobby, in a wheelchair, said to him, "You know, Sir, you told me that I couldn't be on a Broadway stage, because the Broadway stage isn't ramped. Let me tell you something. If I get a role on a Broadway play, I'll get up on that stage every night and twice on Wednesdays, and twice on Saturdays. Because that's my job, and I'll get there."

The journalist turned to me and he said, "Brother Curry, I have to tell you that I am offended that you referred to disability as a blessing." And I said, "Oh, I don't want you to become disabled. We don't want your children to be disabled. But we believe that, if we haven't chosen disability, then we've been chosen. And, the fact that we have been chosen to be disabled is a cause to celebrate. I'm 56 years old and quite frankly at this stage of my life, I'd much rather have one arm than be bald."

The experience of being disabled can, in fact, be a blessing. The experience of being different is something that we all have to learn to grapple with in our lives. Actors and actresses struggle to be distinctive so that they will never be forgotten. We disabled performers have that gift already given to us. And there are some real gifts in being disabled.

Number one, we bring to the table much greater concentration powers. For us to think of going from here to there, disabled persons have to think how we're going to do that. That's good acting training, because that's what we try to teach actors, to figure out how to get from here to there, and bring your concentration to it.

The disabled understand audiences. We're like barometers walking into a room, and actors have to be barometers for the room that they're in.

More than anything else, an actor has to accept his or her instrument. It is only in getting to know his or her instrument that he or she can celebrate that instrument by using imagination and creativity, and

expressing it in the oral arts. In many respects the disabled actors and actresses are ahead in this area.

Plus, the disabled can understand conflict. The disabled can understand drama. They also understand that you don't understand. And that's what actors always have to be aware of. You have to understand that audiences don't understand. So we have to take it slowly.

It's great being different. It's great that Jesuit theater really celebrates those differences. I hope that you will celebrate your own differences. All we have to do in responding to God's grace is to praise the Creator with the face that God gave us. And that's what we try to do as disabled persons.

QUESTION: What successes have there been? How many more physically handicapped people are now on Broadway?

ANSWER: Any time I see a disabled person on a TV show or in a movie, I pretend they're graduates of our school. Many of them are. But you know success, that's a terrific word you used. Every once in a while, I'll look and I'll see that one of our blind women has had her hair done. It gives me the chills, because I begin to realize that she's now beginning to realize that people are looking at her and that she can enhance her attractiveness.

Success stories include three marriages and four babies. We've had students leave us to go for other job interviews that they never would have before. They have gotten better jobs, or gone back to the boss and said, "No, I can take over that meeting." Or, "I would like to apply for that position within the company." We have three of our students who work regularly in soaps. We're great for soaps because there are so many hospital scenes. We bring our own wheelchairs and crutches, so we're terrific for that.

Two of our students work in the box office for the Schubert Organization. One of our students has become an agent.

Hollywood calls us first. I don't want them to use us just because we're disabled. But a number of years ago, I had a young woman from Paramount call me and she was very embarrassed. And she said, "Excuse me, is this the place where they have crippled actors?" And I said, "Do you have a job?"

And she said, “Yes.” And I said, “We’re the place.”

And she said, “I have a casting call for a male, 30 to 35 years of age, double amputee.” And I said, “Arms or legs?” And she said, “Oh, shit. Could I get back to you on that?”

About five minutes later she called back and said, “That would be legs. That would be legs.” And she said, “I’m so embarrassed.” I said, “Don’t be. We’re thrilled you’re calling us. We understand this world very well.”

A lot of our students have moved back into their communities and have started theater on their own. We have two wonderful blind women in their 80’s from England who went back and started a senior citizens’ blind theater in London. Some really great stuff was happening.

As a theater teacher, of course, I’m looking for my next Streisand. But that hasn’t happened yet. We certainly have the talent for it. We have a young man right now in L.A. who is finishing up his MFA at USC and he’s an amputee above the knee. He’s a very powerful actor and I have great hopes that he’s going to get a little niche in the business.

QUESTION: What’s the age span you deal with, and do you deal with people who might become disabled later on in life?

ANSWER: You are certainly invited. We’re holding a spot for you. Our students are 18 years of age and older. We do have a children’s theater, and a disabled woman runs it. There we have both children who are able-bodied and disabled, because it’s local. In our residential school however, we don’t want to have kids stay there.

It is interesting that when people hear that I work for the disabled they immediately say “children.” It’s as if you should have gotten over needing help with your disability by the time you’re an adult. It’s not fashionable to be a disabled adult. Eighteen years of age, as any theater person can tell you here, is a great age to begin being an actor. You’re old enough that you have some experiential knowledge, and young enough that you’re still pretty open to new experiences.

Most of our students are college age, that is to say, they’re 25 to 27 years of age, because, sad to say, many of our students are victims of highway accidents during their teenage years. Because of that they lose, two, three, four years of their life in rehabilitation. And when they get back, we’re

often the first group that they come to, trying to work their way back into society.

It is curious that during their rehabilitation years, it's almost as if maturity stopped, because dating stops and all those other adolescent things. So the bulk of our students are between 25 and 30, but they're very youthful emotionally.

There's quite a difference between those who were born disabled and those who become disabled later. And there's a hierarchy, of course, amongst the disabled. You know.

QUESTION: What's the hierarchy?

ANSWER: Among the disabled, persons with incontinence are low in the hierarchy, and persons with mobility are high. Mental disability is difficult. The disabled don't like to be clumped together in a group either. They especially don't want to be all thought of as developmentally disabled.

I've noticed something interesting when people first meet me and they realize I have one arm. If they are not ready for it, they'll talk louder to me. I never know what to do with it. It's so embarrassing.

A man stopped me once as I was walking down 6th Avenue. I was with his friend. There seemed to be some awkwardness between them. They decided to stop and say hello. And my friend David said, "I'd like you to meet my friend, Rick." And with that the guy shot out his right hand for me to shake it. And I did what I always do when somebody's that aggressive, I turn my hand to accommodate it. When he saw me turn my hand, he realized why, and he just freaked. He was sort of pounding my chest. It was very strange.

And then he turned to my friend, David, and he said, "Have you heard from Marilyn?" And David said, "No. Why should I hear from Marilyn?" And he says, "Well, I was on the phone with her last night for a long time. She's very depressed. I tried to snap her out of it. I tried to tell her that her life was not so bad. I asked if she had any idea how many people right now are in hospitals dying of one arm?"

He was so fixated that he couldn't get over it. Fortunately, as an actor you learn to look right at people's foreheads and just kind of pretend it's not

happening. That kind of pulling back from reality, also helps, you know, by being Irish.

QUESTION: What kinds of dramatic presentations do your students perform at the school?

ANSWER: In our school we do everything from Shaw, to Ibsen, to Shakespeare, to Aeschylus. That's just open turf. For public presentations, we write our own material, because I think we have something to say.

Fifteen years ago, we started a one-act play series. The struggle there is that it takes a long time to culturally develop playwrights from a culture. And the disability culture is such a fluctuating type of culture that even if the playwright is disabled himself or herself, he or she may not reflect the disabled community, whatever that reflection is.

It is like what happened among African-Americans. When the African-Americans were Negroes, they decided that they would stop having white people write about their experience. So the Negro Ensemble Company started writing about being black. They were all men, so they started writing about being black men. It took forever to get up to "For Colored Girls...." And when "For Colored Girls..." came out, because it was a female playwright, the people who were shocked the most were black men. I mean, they were scared, and should have been.

So it takes a long time to develop a kind of a culturally biased type of literature. The point I am making is that, similarly, there is a disabled point of view.

I didn't know where to go. So, I thought okay, let me go to professional playwrights and say, "Help us out. Come and work with us." I sent out a hundred letters to one hundred playwrights. And I said, "Would you write a scene for us in a kitchen?" I wanted a room of normalcy. I didn't want a hospital, or an independent living center, or a rehab.

I said, "Write me a scene in a kitchen and use a disabled character or a disabled theme. I promise you that I will produce it." That's what you have to say to a playwright.

I got a telephone call from Paris, and the guy said to me, "Brother, this is Edward Albee, am I too late?" I said, "Well, with a note from your mother, Edward, we will let you come in."

I got an amazing response to this request. Out of the hundred that I invited to write a play, thirty-two said that they would, and twenty-three delivered. They were really astonishing plays. Out of the twenty-three, twenty-two were on the theme of sexuality.

Because it was their series, I tried to get as many playwrights together as I could. It was amazing. Playwrights don't meet each other, so I had to practically hemorrhage to get their attention. I asked them, "Why did you all write about sexuality?" Albee, I think put it well. He said, "Once you raise the taboo of inviting us into disability, all the other taboos went too." And some really interesting stuff came out.

We had some phenomenal performers. Denzel Washington played one of the first roles in a reading. The scene that he did was called "I didn't know you could cook." It was about a kid in a wheelchair entertaining his older brother who is an attorney. And Denzel read for that part. And the older brother, who has never accepted the younger brother's disability from an accident, kept saying throughout "I didn't know you could cook. I didn't know you could cook. I didn't know you could cook." And during the dinner, the young man in the wheelchair said, "There's a lot you don't know about me. One of the things you don't know about me is that I'm gay." And Denzel Washington says, "Absolutely not. You can't be."

He said, "You can be disabled or gay, but you can't be both." Which is very interesting. It was not about his being gay, but about his being sexual. So many people think that once you're disabled, you're no longer sexual or that you won't talk about it, anyway. So, that's what developed out of these scenes.

Once we did those scenes, we couldn't go back. I felt that more and more the students were involved into how to develop the scenes themselves. Now, we have an annual playwrights' workshop where you pick out a theme and then develop it. This year we are doing a play about athletes in a locker room. One of our brilliant actors from London is a 6'3" guy who plays soccer and is a brilliant actor. He has no arms. I thought what a great character it would be to get him in the locker room with able-bodied dudes and see how that flies. So, we're doing that play.

QUESTION: Are the plays ever filmed and available on video?

ANSWER: No. Come to New York. Or invite us here. We travel.

Video is such a bad medium for live theater. We actually went to L.A. and they videotaped the production and it's fine. It's okay for what it is, but it's not the play. We have scripts if any of you want to read the scripts. A lot of them are very good.

QUESTION: You had mentioned that there are differences between those that are born with a handicap and those who acquire it. I'm curious as to what those differences are.

ANSWER: We were developing a play two years ago with a kid who lost his leg from the knee down. He was an athlete, a runner. So this was a big blow to him. He actually learned how to run and got a gold medal in the para-Olympics. That's how fierce his rehabilitation was.

As we were writing his story, two things happened while he was working with me. One was that he started having dreams about his mother, who died when he was twelve. He began to realize that what he was really writing about was loss. And there's a reason that his mother was visiting him in his dreams. I thought, this is great because now, we're really writing about theater, because it's larger than losing a leg, it's a universal. We can all relate to loss in some way or another.

He went through his teenage years, his adolescent years, his dating years with two legs. Now, at the age of 26, he was adjusting to having one leg. I went through my adolescent years with one arm. It was a totally different experience than he went through. I found myself a little jealous of him, because he was where I was now, but he didn't have to go through what I went through. It was a great point of discussion. It was a great blessing for me, because I would have never had that discussion if we had not been writing about our own experiences.

It's tough growing up with a disability. I was never mocked. I was in an environment where mocking would not have been allowed. If any kid had mocked me, the Nuns would have killed them at dawn. But, a lot of my students were mocked. I was stunned by that, because I wasn't raised to allow anyone to mock me. Nobody who lost a limb later in life or became disabled later in life had that experience. There is insecurity in growing up with a disability and it can be quite monumental.

QUESTION: Talk a little about the fear of becoming disabled. Is it scary because it is something that can happen to anyone of us at anytime?

ANSWER: It's a scary topic. I'm not making light of it, nor do I really want to posture myself up here as an expert at all because I'm really not—I'm an observer of it. I'm a participant in it, but I'm not an expert. The reason I'm not an expert is because it is such a personal issue with every different disabled person.

The reason that it's scary is, we are a minority that, at any time, the chances of any of you joining are strong. As to your question about old age, you know, that wheelchair may well be waiting for all of us. And so, it can be a very scary type of thing.

When I was interviewed for a documentary on "60 Minutes" I told them, "When people used to ask me what happened to my arm, I used to be flattered. I thought they were talking about me. The fact was they were saying, tell me how to avoid it. When I would tell them I was born this way, they'd be relieved, because they felt, well, at least I got through that."

One of my blind students, who's brilliant and a troublemaker, has these kinds of experiences every day of his life in Manhattan. One time he was on the street corner and a guy came up to him, grabbed his elbow and said, "I'll take you there." He said, "where?" If you're blind and if you are within a sixty-block radius of the lighthouse for the blind, people think that's where you're going. Another time a guy went up to him and said to him, "Wh-wh-when did you go blind?" And he replied, "Surely after I stopped stuttering."



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