

Performing Difference: Disability Aesthetics, Drama Pedagogy, and the Reimagining of Literature in Performance

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogic and aesthetic possibilities of re-staging Mahesh Dattani's *Tara* with children with disabilities, through the lenses of disability aesthetics, performance theory, and inclusive pedagogy. Drawing on Bakhtin's dialogic imagination, Barthes' semiotics, Schechner's performance studies, and Siebers' disability aesthetics, this study investigates how the disabled body on stage can challenge conventional ideas of character, coherence, and stagecraft. By considering the play's portrayal of bodily difference and its fragmented narrative structure, the paper argues that when children with disabilities perform *Tara*, the production moves beyond tragedy, reasserting presence, agency, and alternative aesthetics. Using an interview with a special educator, the paper highlights the potential of drama as an embodied, collaborative learning tool for fostering critical engagement and understanding of disability and advocates for a shift in drama education towards inclusive, participatory models that centre embodied experience in both performance and interpretation, challenging traditional conceptions of disability in theatre and offering new ways of reading and performing difference.

Keywords: Disability aesthetics, inclusive pedagogy, performance theory, *Tara*, embodied theatre, disability, identity

Introduction

Drama, though central to the literature curricula, is often treated solely as text, to be read and analysed, rarely as performance. This

disconnect reflects a broader pedagogical bias that privileges written over spoken word, and intellectual over embodied knowledge. As a result, the dynamic, performative potential of drama—its capacity to animate language through gesture, movement, and presence—remains largely neglected in education. This disembodiment is even more pronounced for children with disabilities, who are often excluded from performance spaces altogether. Mainstream pedagogy tends to frame their participation in therapeutic rather than artistic terms, marginalising them both as learners and creators. Drama becomes mere reading, while disabled students are positioned as passive recipients, removed from the interpretive and expressive core of literary education.

Understanding Disability

Much of this was brought home to me through my interaction with Prem Kumari, a retired special educator with 25 years of experience at the Red Cross Society and OP Jindal Modern School. While working with children with disabilities, she integrated drama into her teaching, drawing on performance theory (Schechner) and disability aesthetics (Siebers). This created a safe space for self-expression and helped children overcome marginalisation. Explaining her methodology Prem Kumari states:

I start with mirror exercises. Children make faces at each other, copying expressions. For non-verbal children, this is often their first experience of deliberate communication through performance. One girl with selective mutism began participating through exaggerated facial expressions. Eventually, she started making sounds, then words.

Children develop performance skills on their own terms. Their particular abilities become starting points and are not obstacles to overcome. The goal is artistic expression, not remediation.

She describes working with a student with autism, “a boy who would repeat certain phrases. Instead of trying to stop this, we incorporated it into the performance. His repetitions became a kind of chorus, emphasising key themes. What seemed like disruption became enhancement.” Medical contexts would label this as perseveration. However, performance transformed it into a formal device. The alternative temporal experience of autism generated new rhythms, created new patterns. The performance did not accommodate disability, instead it was transformed by it. A child with cerebral palsy who

delivers lines haltingly or moves with difficulty does not diminish the performance; instead, they redefine its emotional and aesthetic registers. The performance becomes richer, not despite, but because of the expressive authenticity and vulnerability that disability brings to the stage.

Inclusive drama performance transforms audiences beyond individual participants. Parents witness their children as expressive artists. Teachers see students differently. Peers recognise new possibilities. Prem Kumari describes the impact of school performances.

After our annual drama presentation, parents would approach me with tears. Not sad tears but tears of recognition. They saw their children differently, as capable of beauty and expression. Teachers requested more drama activities in regular classrooms. The performances changed how the entire school community understood disability.

Applied to drama pedagogy, this approach demands a reconsideration of what counts as performative success.

Discourses on Disability

To fully understand the creative potential of disability in performance, this paper draws on three intersecting theoretical frameworks: First, performance theory, particularly Richard Schechner's notions of "restored behaviour" and liminality, which offer insight into how performance operates as a space of transformation, where identity, memory, and expression can be rehearsed and reimagined. Second, literary theory, especially the post-structuralist turn in the works of Roland Barthes and Mikhail Bakhtin, which enable a reading of dramatic text not as a closed narrative but as an open text whose meanings are reshaped by the body and voice of the performer. Finally, disability aesthetics, as theorised by Tobin Siebers, which challenges the normative assumptions of beauty, unity, and expressivity in art. Siebers argues that disability is not merely a subject for representation but a lens through which we can rethink the very structures of aesthetic judgment and cultural value. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2005) argues,

The complexities of women's identities are not addressed when feminist theory asserts the gender oppression of women but does not recognise the oppression of disabled people, or when disability studies expose the oppression of disabled people without analysing the gendered nature of that oppression. (p. 279)

Bringing these strands together, this paper proposes that inclusive drama pedagogy, rooted in performance theory and disability aesthetics, can radically transform how we read, teach, and perform plays that have differently abled characters. By centring children with disabilities not as therapeutic subjects but as legitimate performers, we not only democratise access to dramatic expression but also alter the aesthetic and ethical terrain of literary interpretation. Performance, in this model, becomes a mode of reading: one that privileges gesture alongside language, silence alongside speech, and difference alongside coherence. Such a pedagogy does not simply accommodate disability; it is transformed by it, rehearsing new ways of seeing, saying, and staging the world.

The reimagining of drama as an inclusive, embodied practice, especially with children with disabilities, demands a radical reframing of both performance and literary theory. Such a rethinking moves beyond traditional interpretations of the dramatic text as fixed, stable, and complete. Instead, it shifts toward an understanding of performance as a site of plurality, transformation, and embodied knowledge. At the core of this reconceptualisation lies Schechner's performance theory, particularly his concepts of "restored behaviour" and liminality. For Schechner, all performance is a form of "twice-behaved behaviour", actions that are rehearsed, repeated, and re-enacted in new contexts. This idea is especially generative when applied to children with disabilities, whose everyday expressions and movements are often medicalised, pathologised, or treated as deviations from the norm. In the space of performance, however, this behaviour acquires new aesthetic and narrative meaning.

Liminality, the in-between space that performance occupies, functions as a zone of possibility, a site where identities are suspended and reconfigured. In this space, disabled performers are not required to "imitate" normative characters; instead, they can present themselves as they are, using the stage to explore and express their embodied realities. Drama, then, becomes not merely a representational tool but a transformational act, a rehearsal for agency, voice, and visibility.

While performance foregrounds the body, literary theory offers tools for understanding how meaning is produced and disrupted in the act of interpretation. Barthes' seminal essay "The Death of the Author" calls for the displacement of authorial authority, privileging instead

the multiplicity of meanings generated by readers and, by extension, performers. In an educational context, this means empowering students, particularly those from marginalised bodies, to become co-authors of the text through performance. When children with disabilities interpret and embody characters, their lived experiences disrupt normative readings and open up new semiotic possibilities. The 'author' or the traditional critic, no longer monopolises meaning.

Similarly, Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, the idea that all texts are constituted by a diversity of voices, further supports a pluralistic approach to dramatic interpretation. Drama is inherently dialogic, not only in its form (dialogue, polyphony) but in its potential for reinterpretation through multiple embodied lenses. In Bakhtin's terms, each performance by children with disabilities becomes a unique utterance in an ongoing cultural dialogue, not merely a reflection of the play, but a continuation and transformation of it. This theoretical framework dissolves the boundary between reader and performer, between interpretation and enactment. It affirms that meaning does not reside in the script alone but is co-constituted in the space between the text and the body, especially when that body is marked by difference.

Where traditional theatre has often sought to correct, conceal, or exclude disabled bodies, either through casting, makeup, or metaphor, disability aesthetics, as articulated by Siebers (2008), challenges such exclusions by repositioning disability as a central and generative aesthetic category. Siebers argues that disabled bodies are not aberrations to be overcome but expressive forms that reshape the criteria of artistic value. Disability aesthetics values asymmetry, fragmentation, slowness, silence, and unpredictability, qualities often viewed as undesirable in conventional performance contexts.

Carrie Sandahl adds that "Disabled people's bodies and movement repertoires force us to reconsider what it means to "act like a man" or "act like a woman" (p. 623), which challenges basic categories of identity and expression. Furthermore,

small details of each performer's presence: what they do with their hands (some clasped in front of them, others straight at their sides); their calm stillness or evident impatience; the flicker of a smile or an eye roll. A few avoid eye contact entirely, looking instead at the floor or a point just above our heads; others stare at us intently, blinking in the face of

the audience's uncomfortable silence. Freed from theatrical pretense or distraction, the work's first 15 or so minutes—dominated by the silent parade of performers doing nothing but standing before us, returning our gaze—give us no other choice but to stare at the performer's bodies. (Hilton, 2014, p. 158)

Dattani's *Tara*

Within this context, Dattani's play *Tara* emerges as a particularly potent text, both literarily and performatively. A modern Indian play that grapples with disability, gender discrimination, and familial complicity, it reflects a deep ideological rift enforced by a society that privileges male bodies and marginalises female and disabled identities. Dattani's fragmented, nonlinear structure mirrors the psychic dislocation of his characters and offers a compelling opportunity to reflect on how narrative form itself can embody disability. As such, *Tara* is not merely a story about disability; it is a work that demands re-reading and re-performing through the very lenses it evokes, of embodiment, fragmentation, and resistance.

Tara raises multiple questions of contemporary times: sex, gender, identity, hypocrisy, patriarchy, disability, man-woman relationships, guiles, and façades, to name a few. In a vast cauldron of intermingling issues, those of sex and gender become the epicentre of enquiry.... (Gatt, 2023, pp. 115-116)

A profoundly layered play, *Tara* tells the story of conjoined twins, Tara and Chandan, and their eventual separation, an event that becomes both a literal and metaphorical rupture. Tara, the female twin, is disadvantaged not only by her conjoined state but by the patriarchal social structure that favours the male body, further deepening her marginalisation. In examining *Tara*, we must critically explore how Dattani constructs her character, particularly her silence, invisibility, and the burden of familial shame. Symbolising what is hidden or repressed in society, her silence defines her and the marginalisation of disabled bodies, which are "frequently rendered as childlike and asexual, seen as helpless and in need of care" (Puar, p. 102). Unlike Chandan, who is granted agency, Tara is pushed to the background, and her silence is compounded by the shame her disability generates in her family, particularly her father, who hides it to make it appear "normal". This silence and her invisibility are imposed, not due to incapacity, but because her body is deemed

unacceptable in a dominant ableist society for “Ableism produces a mentality of ‘it’s better to be dead than disabled,’” constructing disability as a form of social death (Campbell, p. 159). Tara and Chandan’s surgical separation advantages Chandan as he receives three legs to Tara’s one. This seemingly medical decision hides within it social preferences as male bodies are valued over female bodies: “Both can be called disabled, but society conspires to make one normal at the cost of the other” (Gatt, 2023, pp. 115-116).

Despite her marginalisation, Tara occupies a central role in the play’s structure. Her body, both visible and invisible, speaks to the intersection of disability, gender, and power. Overboe calls it “the medical erasure of disabled subjectivity” (p. 227), adding that “Disabled men may be emasculated by doctors, but disabled women experience this erasure in specifically gendered ways” (p. 228).

Staging *Tara* with Children with Disabilities

Keeping in mind these issues this paper asks: What happens when children with disabilities perform a play like *Tara*? How do such performances challenge the conventions of character, coherence, and stagecraft? How might the disabled body on stage reconfigure our understanding of *Tara*, not as a tragedy of loss, but as a reassertion of presence, agency, and alternative aesthetics?

In staging *Tara* with children with disabilities, the narrative of the play moves from symbolic representation to embodied presence: disability is not a theme to be explored but a lens through which the entire performance is reshaped. The September 2019 production of *Tara* at the India Habitat Centre demonstrated the artistic power of authentic representation and showcased how disabled performers transform theatrical meaning. Divya Arora played the titular role while co-directing with Sohaila Kapur. Critics praised this ground-breaking casting. The production demonstrated authentic representation’s artistic power and showcased how disabled performers transform theatrical meaning.

Embodied by a person with a disability, Tara’s presence reclaimed her voice and body. The silences in the play became sites of interpretation and resistance, challenging assumptions about visibility and value. Employing a deliberately fragmented narrative structure which mirrors Tara’s physical and emotional fragmentation, the play reflected the ruptures in her life. The disabled body on stage, whether mimicing

Tara's conjoined form or symbolising a more abstract embodiment of her emotional fragmentation, became a site of connection between text and lived experience. Performance offered the possibility of literalising the fragmentation of Tara's character, giving it form and voice through the body, through gesture, and through the dynamic, embodied nature of performance itself:

Physical weakness limits Tara and more importantly, social marginalisation pushes her aside. Ultimately, death removes her completely. Traditional productions emphasise this trajectory toward absence. The 2019 production with Divya Arora changed this dynamic fundamentally. Arora brought experiential knowledge to the role, presenting disabled female experience as complex and multifaceted. She understood physical limitation and medical intervention. Her performance did not require imagining disability, it emerged from lived experience. Critics noted how her presence asserted itself against the text's drive toward absence. Disability aesthetics resists the tendency to sentimentalise or make difference tragic. Instead, it opens up a space for new modes of spectatorship, where audiences are invited to see and feel differently, not simply to empathise but to reckon with their own assumptions about what performance "should" look like. This reorientation fosters a deeper, more critical engagement with both the text and the body performing it.

In Divya's production, the play's tragic arc was bent by disabled children performing the play. The narrative still included loss and discrimination, but the performers' presence asserted life against death, presence against absence. This was not about changing the script, nor about imposing false optimism. Embodied performance generates meanings that exceed textual limitation. Reviews praised how Divya's presence transformed the play's meaning. Her embodied performance created what critics called "a celebration of resilience". The production maintained the script's critique of discrimination but simultaneously asserted disabled presence and agency.

Garland-Thomson (2005) addressing intersectional complexity argues that disability studies must recognise that "feminist disability conversation bristles about the dynamics of caregiving and care getting and the power relations between the givers and receivers of care" (p. 1578). The inclusive performance of *Tara* addressd this intersection. The staging of *Tara* with disabled performers was not mere inclusion

or simple adaptation. It was fundamentally reimagining the play's possibilities where the text tends toward absence, and performance asserts presence. Where narrative fragments, bodies create coherence and where characters face limitation, performers demonstrate capability. This is not to suggest that disability performance is always triumphant. However, it should not have to bear the burden of inspiration.

When applied to 'Tara', these insights allow us to move beyond questions of representation toward questions of participation, interpretation, and transformation. Children with disabilities become co-performers, co-interpreters, and co-creators of literary meaning. In this integrated theoretical landscape, performance becomes pedagogy, interpretation becomes embodiment, and difference becomes aesthetic power. This framework not only supports the inclusion of disabled children in drama education, it necessitates it, insisting that their presence enriches and expands the very foundations of how we understand literature, performance, and learning. Dharwadker (2009) observes that Rohan "aestheticises Tara's disability and derives from it a poetics of beauty, even as he is unable to respond to her as a person" (p. 143).

Tara is a play that fundamentally engages with the tension between visibility and invisibility, between silence and voice, and between the marginalised and the centre. Through a careful examination of Tara's constructed silence, her fragmented narrative, and her silenced body, we see how Dattani's work both critiques and reflects the ways in which disability, gender, and familial shame intersect. Yet, when *Tara* is re-staged with children with disabilities, the play transforms from a tragedy of absence into a celebration of embodiment, agency, and resistance. In performance, Tara's voice and body are reclaimed, not only as a representation of disability but as a powerful reminder of the ways in which performance can disrupt traditional readings and create new spaces for understanding. Langan notes, "Disabled characters are rarely granted a complex subjectivity" in literature, but Tara portrays its heroine "as a fully realised character with a range of emotions and desires" (p. 165).

Conclusion

This paper highlights the creative potential of disability in performance, not as a limitation but as an expansion. The integration of non-normative bodies into the dramatic space challenges established theatrical norms

and demonstrates the power of disability to reshape narrative and aesthetic practices. Through adaptive techniques and inclusive practices, *Tara* becomes a space where disability is not a hindrance but a profound form of creative expression, transforming both performers and audiences in the process. As Siebers et al. (2017) explain in “Disability, Pain, and the Politics of Minority Identity”, “It may appear as if disability identity is based on natural or biological categories, but it is based in reality on an epistemology—a new knowledge about, and understanding of, what it means to be disabled” (p. 120).

Pedagogic practices confirm that drama can build self-expression, confidence, and communication in children with disabilities. This shifts the focus from disability as limitation to an empowered form of expression. By challenging conventional drama pedagogy, this paper argues that inclusive practices do more than accommodate; they transform theatre. Through inclusive casting and adaptive staging, *Tara* becomes a space for celebrating diverse voices. This intervention model offers a powerful tool for reinterpreting both literary works and the concept of performance, fostering reclamation and collaboration for all.

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