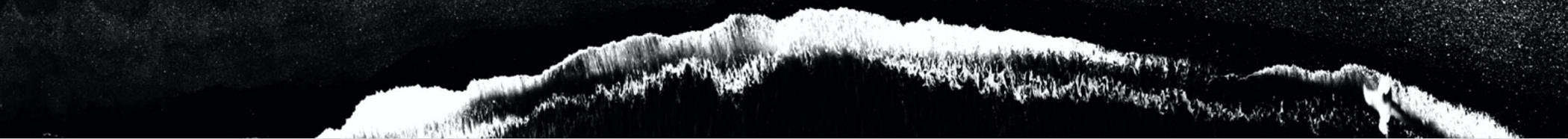


Personal Essay on being a Disabled Artist



Saskatchewan
Arts Alliance

by **JOHN LOEPPKY**



TW: Suicidal thoughts, anxiety, depression.

Working as an emerging disabled artist in Saskatchewan gave me a nervous breakdown. I have cerebral palsy (CP), but it is safe to say I have never been in the business of collecting as many diagnoses as I can.

And yet, three years ago, I was sitting across from my doctor and cracking jokes about having passed the test. I got 28 out of 30 on the generalized anxiety screening tool. It was the first stage for many in acknowledging that I maybe, just maybe, have an anxiety or panic disorder. The only reason I didn't get a perfect score was that I didn't have a plan to kill myself yet.

“People usually don't laugh when I tell them they have a disorder.”

“Yeah, well, I've never been known to do things the easy way.”

I am no stranger to tests. When my doctor takes a little rubber hammer and smacks it into my knee to see what magic trick my spasms will pull next, I don't bat an eye. When a physiatrist says that I have the back muscles of an 85-year-old I say fuck it and put it in a script. When a pain specialist at the hospital asks me my pain level on a scale of 1-10, I ask them for some parameters and remind them that one of my brain damage's few redeeming qualities is that it has given me an absurd pain tolerance and a short fuse for medical bullshit.

A mental health disability was a new world for me. My previous life as an athlete had taught me to compartmentalize, process this later, delay, delay, delay. The work with Listen to Dis' had instilled

in me the need to feel those feelings. I was stuck in between — not quite sure which way to move, but knowing I couldn't stay still. This is complicated by the fact that my body is never still. My particular edition of CP is like having little strings pulling your limbs at inopportune moments. There is rarely a good time for a spasm. Even as I sit and write this, my toes are curling underneath themselves. It doesn't matter that I'm telling them to calm, to play nice. All they want to do is dig into the bottom of my feet.

Slowing down is not something I understood. I did not take a day off for five years before the doctor's appointment. Burn-out and I are well acquainted. This anxiety was much more sinister than that. I would tell everyone who cared, “I can deal when my brain is fucked, I can deal when my body is fucked, but what am I supposed to do when both are happening at once?”

I had support at work, my team was what pulled me through. And, after a brief hiatus, I still work there — an opportunity often not afforded in many other workplaces in this industry. At the time, while I was going to every meeting I was expecting that my humanity as a disabled person would be challenged, dismissed, and ignored by those who called themselves partners. To this day, none of the major arts funders in this province acknowledge disability as a culture, despite disabled people accounting for approximately 20% of the population. I was being told over and over that disability culture's contributions mattered, but only if they were free, only if we checked a box, only if the work of my community was there to fill some arbitrary criteria. It felt like our contributions were destined for the inaccessible fine print of some prestigious grant on some equally inaccessible website portal. We were shamed for



bringing forward our access needs, strung along about the possibility of financial stability, told lies laced with ableism.

I could not leave a room without feeling like I was failing my community. I could not submit a grant without at least two panic attacks. I couldn't function. I took two separate mental health leaves and asked multiple therapists whether I should be committed. They all told me the same thing: "You need to quit your job."

I resisted. I got hopelessly drunk. I took medications that did not work. I begged for a release that wasn't coming.

I stepped away and returned to other work. I wrote articles about disability. I ran a newsroom. I wished I had done a better job of knowing my own boundaries.

At the beginning, I spoke only in stage whispers about my mental health. Then, this year, I declared my mental illness publicly on CBC Radio — see again my inability to do anything the simple way.

My experiences are not universal, I will never claim that they are. However, I am in a space where I feel safe to say that, despite

all the work disabled artists have done in this province, we are not acknowledged in the way we should be. We have the names of projects lifted from our conversations because it sounds good and slapped onto posters that we have no hand in. We are told that we are untrainable, uncastable, the thorn in the side of the non-disabled as they not-so-silently wish that they could make the cripples shut up.

But I'll let you in on an open secret. We are not going anywhere. You can support us, not just by coming to shows, or advocating for funding, but also by challenging your perception of what disability looks like, sounds like, moves like. In a post-pandemic world, we need to think about the art world we are building to return to. That means we must ensure that disabled people are allowed not only in the room but in leadership roles. We shouldn't want to return to the status quo. The status quo is a danger to my community and I won't stand (or sit) for it.

If Saskatchewan can't challenge its own assumptions about what disability looks, sounds, and feels like, many of us may have

to leave this industry permanently. If that happens, you will have been told. We can only take so much.



John Loepky is a Regina-based disabled theatre artist, arts administrator, and freelance journalist. He works with Listen to Dis' Community Arts Organization Inc. and has bylines with outlets like CBC, FiveThirtyEight, Publisher's Weekly, and many others. He can be reached via email at loepkycreative@gmail.com. Photo credit: Jaecy Bells.

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