ARTICLE

Sighted Assumptions to Blind Imaginings: De-Centring Vision as Unexpected Dramaturgy

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> I dedicate this article to my friend, the late great Disabled Lesbian playwright and activist Lina Chartrand (1948–1992).[1]

When, at age twenty-one, I was diagnosed with retinitis pigmentosa, I told my doctor I wanted to pursue a career in theatre. She sighed and advised that I consider the two careers available to Blind people: social work and counselling. Both are respectable professions, but I had other ambitions. When I went for a follow-up eye appointment, I sat in the waiting room reading Shakespeare monologues in preparation for upcoming auditions for the National Theatre School of Canada, the Vancouver Playhouse, and TMU (then Ryerson) Theatre School. My doctor arrived and, without warning, pulled the book from my hand. Her next words were: "Nobody wants to see a Blind woman tripping across the stage."

She clearly had no imagination beyond the assumed. And me? I am pretty certain I had no ability to imagine beyond my known sighted reality.

I recall that, for a brief moment, I imagined myself tripping forward, seeing a stage floor, making a full recovery, and likely turning it into a Lucille Ball moment. Didn't she make a career out of tripping? I am absolutely certain that I was not able to actually imagine blind.

[1] Footnote: As my article speaks to the need for history within Disabled-led theatre, I make this dedication and encourage others to consider honouring Disabled artists from the past. Many created work of influence and were often ignored or perceived as "lesser." These artists must be remembered.

I was able, however, to ignore my doctor and move on to have a thirty-five-year career as a voice teacher, playwright, actor, screenwriter, and dramaturg.

Within this article, I will be reflecting upon past and current work, asking questions, and exploring themes of imagination, embodiment, disruption, discovery, interdependence, and blindness, and the opportunities gifted when performance de-centres vision from imagination to creation.

My practice has evolved and has been informed by Disabled Artists in Canada and the UK.[2] In 2004, after thirteen years of professional practice in Canada, I was awarded a highly skilled migrant visa from the UK government. The visa invited me to live and work across the pond with a commitment to develop disability arts in the United Kingdom.

At that time, my sight had deteriorated and my ability to continue working well in Canada was under threat. Although I advocated where I could for access or support, the word *access* was mostly unfamiliar, and resources for support were very limited. The UK, in contrast, at that time, offered working Disabled people a government-funded access program, called Access to Work, which covers the costs of travel to work, support workers, interpreters, or equipment needs within any kind of employment. This program still exists in the UK but is under threat by the current Labour government. I have spoken with members of provincial and federal parliament in Canada about bringing such a game-changing program into our political discourse. It concerns me that without a full government commitment to fund access solutions (especially human resource–based ones such as ASL interpreters, sighted guides, and audio describers), our arts community runs the risk of only involving those with typical or "affordable" needs.

My time in England ran from 2004 to 2017 and exposed me to a whole wide world of Disabled-led theatre. My return to Canada has included meaningful and positive experiences, and often frustrating barriers. But, at age fifty-eight, I continue to seek a cultural appreciation for human vulnerability, a trashing of the body beautiful, an intolerance to "cripping up" casting, a

[2] Footnote: In particular, Maria O'Shodi from Extant Theatre, Jenny Sealey from Graeae Theatre, Jess Thom from Tourettes Hero, Lina Chartrand, Amy Amantea from Vocal Eye, Karina Jones and Jack Thorne.

genuine commitment from venues to give audiences access to their local theatre, and within a scholarly context, an examination that the academic environment drives scholars to claim ideas, where the artistic sensibility is to share them. Those who continue to share drive the fact that there is a public history to our work.

Recognizing our history brings context and foundation to our present: We are not a flash in time, not born yesterday, and not going away.

I will, therefore, begin with a step back in my time, to explore a few significant experiences that shaped and developed my dramaturgical practice, bringing me to my current thinking.

How Teaching Voice Informed My Understanding of Dramaturgy

In 2004, I was asked to lead a voice workshop with Graeae, the UK's flagship Disabled-led theatre company. Without a doubt, the company's success and accomplishment are intrinsically linked to the access-to-work program. The workshop focused on voice for three actors who had particular vocal "impairments." Two identified as Disabled with cerebral palsy, and one as surviving a military accident leading to severe brain damage. I faced my first challenge, which was around language to define their unique vocality. I was not comfortable with the familiar terminology "speech impediment" or "speech impairment." It was negative and ableist. Together, with the participants, we coined the term "differing speech pattern," which set the exciting, disruptive, and enabling tone for the entire workshop. As a voice teacher, I had been trained with the expectation that all actors needed to develop physical control of their body and the ability to manipulate the tongue, rib cage, soft palate, and jaw, all toward having the "healthy, free, natural voice." These participants shook, wobbled, dribbled, and spoke out with unruly tongues. Did this mean they were disqualified from performance, from being an actor? NO. But this question at that time gave me pause to seriously think deeply about the meaning of voice in performance, and the intention of theatre. One word focused me: *communicate*.

So, my three participants with differing speech patterns and I learned how to adapt and reimagine voice, within their unique physical instruments, their unique composition of imagination, body, and breath. I became acutely aware that an actor's voice develops through a collaboration between established practice and body diversity, ultimately resulting in authentic expression. This collaborative methodology went beyond voice and illuminated how bodies can innovate and shape dramaturgical practice. Each participant prepared a short solo performance, using a monologue as the starting point. We created practitioner-led dramaturgies, considering the communication abilities of the actor, and the demands and opportunities of a text. One actor had significant difficulty with the speech movements for the word "rain." We therefore put **RAIN** (and other key words) onto a screen with creative fonts and graphic design. The words first appeared at the top, and as the actor performed, the letters trickled down—each letter rained. Further use of screen imagery and sound design, in collaboration with physical and vocal ability, shaped each performance. Dramaturgy emerged through an awareness of voice and body, revealing how deep embodiment of practice is a foundation for authentic expression—for original theatre.

Blasted: How Stage Directions Evolved Blind Dramaturgy

While working with Graeae Theatre and London Metropolitan University in 2005, I was asked to direct a recorded reading of plays, including Sarah Kane's *Blasted*. These play texts were on the syllabus of a unique course, which delivered practical and academic study for Disabled students seeking a profession in theatre.
University libraries offered nearly no plays in a format accessible for Blind students at the time.[3]

Blasted was a relevant text. Kane's work is often aligned with the plays by Bertolt Brecht: cynical, anti-bourgeois, with a glorification of the social outsider.

[3] Footnote: In Canada this has now changed, but you have to be registered with accessibility services to access the play texts, and it is syllabus based versus interest based, so you must present a course syllabus to access texts.

The play was chosen for its relevance to disability politics, as well as being an essential text within academic study of contemporary English drama.

The recording was initially intended as an accessibility solution.

At the start of the *Blasted* reading, I asked the actors to speak their characters' stage directions as well as dialogue. Kane, in her writer's notes, referred to stage directions as "functioning as lines" and used bracketed text to indicate meaning. Neither the stage directions nor the bracketed text were intended to be spoken out loud. But I was considering access for Blind audiences, so all of Kane's text became potential dialogue. Below is a short excerpt that represents how the playwright's text appears in its original publication:

> **Cate** You all right?
>
> **Ian** It's nothing.
>
> *He pours himself another gin, this time with ice and tonic, and sips it at a more normal pace.*
> *He collects his gun and puts it in his underarm holster.*
> *He smiles at* ***Cate****.*
>
> **Ian** I'm glad you've come. Didn't think you would.
>
> *(He offers her champagne.)*
>
> **Cate** *(Shakes her head.)* I was worried.
>
> **Ian** This? *(He indicates his chest.)* Don't matter.
>
> **Cate** I didn't mean that. You sounded unhappy.
>
> **Ian** *(Pops the champagne. He pours them both a glass.)*
>
> **Cate** What we celebrating?
>
> **Ian** *(Doesn't answer. He goes to the window and looks out.)*
> Hate this city. Stinks.

The reading revealed how active and relevant the stage directions were to the story, and their potential to give access to Blind audiences.

We discussed how the spoken stage directions added a "distancing effect," which, for those who know their Brecht, is a well-known technique used by the German director to encourage the audience to be less empathetic and more a distanced observer. I'll note the irony that speaking stage directions might distance some and give others access.

A year later, I was invited by Graeae artistic director Jenny Sealey to adapt the text using stage directions within dialogue and to dramaturg a new production of *Blasted*. The process was fascinating. Using existing stage directions was both an opportunity for access as well as a dramaturgical technique to lean into the Brechtian style of the play. It offered an artful step beyond description with the sole intention of accessibility. A dramaturgical choice was made to give each character a precise and first-person articulation of action, avoiding pronouns as and where possible so as not to put the characters into a third person with their actions.

Below is an excerpt from the adapted text, using the same scene as above:

> **Cate** You all right?
>
> **Ian** It's nothing. Pours another gin. Sips. Collects his gun.
>
> **Ian** I'm glad you've come. Didn't think you would. Offers champagne.
>
> **Cate** Shakes her head. I was worried.
>
> **Ian** This? Indicates his chest. Don't matter.
>
> **Cate** I didn't mean that. You sounded unhappy.
>
> **Ian** Pops champagne.
>
> **Cate** What we celebrating?

> **Ian** Doesn't answer. Goes to the window. Looks. Hate this city. Stinks.

Our decision to adapt the script in this way impacted the full production, including its design. The design included no actual props or objects handled by the actors. The set was bare aside from a bed and a vase of flowers. A large screen appeared as a news feed featuring Deaf actors in character costumes, delivering sign language.

There were no glasses to drink from, no bottle of Gin, no gun, or strips of bacon. Instead, the actors made minimal gestures and relied only on words to bring material objects into the imagination of the audience. Whether sighted or Blind, we shared a similar engagement with the production. Integrating stage directions or character action within dialogue was not groundbreaking. Artists including Lynne Manning in the USA and Maria O'Shodi in the UK had been exploring Blind-led dramaturgy and accessibility within their work. I reflect upon *Blasted* as my deep dive and inauguration into this practice, finding intentionality within accessibility choices that co-exist with elements of theme and design.

I'm forever reminded that this widely acclaimed production, and its significance to my evolving practice, came about due to the presence and needs of a Blind student who demanded their university imagine them as nonvisual "readers."

The production inspired me to design a new work and new writing program with Graeae to support Disabled-led plays and to encourage Deaf and Disabled theatre artists to consider access within the writing and play development process.

How Blind Children Taught Me the Importance of Imagination and Tactility

In 2014, I was commissioned by Yorkville Playhouse and Polka Theatre to write for a Theatre in Education (TIE) series. It was an opportunity to write multiple characters and focus on sound and voice, as the pieces needed to be performed by classrooms—thirty-something students, with hardly any set, no

lighting, and minimal costumes. My starting point was to creatively think about sound—the sound of a piano, and an invisible rock band. I wanted to write from the perspective of a Blind child. I asked myself what superpower I would have if I was eight years old and couldn't see. The answer: to have portable ears. I used a storytelling structure to integrate description into the text. Although there were only a few Blind children involved out of approximately 120 kids, it was important for me to commit to and continue to develop Blind dramaturgy.

The TIE project went well. I sought and was awarded funding to develop the play with schools for Blind children across England, to create a production developed with input from the young Blind community.

With my creative team, part of a new company I co-founded called Invisible Flash, we learned to better understand the relationship between imagination and tactility. For example, to enact the seaside, one student poured water into a glass and put the glass on top of their head. To enact flying, a group took hold of a small parachute and flapped it in the air, providing stable tactility, meaningful sound, and the perception of wind.

We read sections of the play to give the students an understanding of the story and invited all to create props for the future touring production.

This was both to provide a deeper sense of participation and to create an access initiative.

When a young person's object, or an object made by their school, emerged during the production, the audience cheered and erupted with "we made that!"

I directed the actors to move through the audience, enabling touch at various times within the performance—a kind of in-the-moment "touch tour."

Prior to the start of the play, we referred to the set as a tactile playground and invited all Blind children to "play" on the set with actors in costume supporting them. It set a tone of belonging rather than being served. I can't stress enough the impact and distinction between these two intentions.

Giving young people the idea that a creative future—a life in theatre—can be a Blind ambition remains a priority in my current practice. The performing arts are too frequently waived off as an option for this community. International work is being done to address this by companies including the UK's Extant Theatre and Croatia's Novi Zivot.

Informing dramaturgy with tactility had previously eluded me. I was unable to make solid dramaturgical sense of it. Working with these Blind children opened my mind; a theatrical potential emerged through nonvisual and unexpected imagery. The tactility of a kitchen sieve over an actor's face is, for a Blind child, a long, single-toothed sewer creature (called a Ratwell in the play); a soft hair brush across an arm is blowing sand. The mention of a made object is remembered in the hands of the Blind maker and thus ignites deeper sensory connection. Visuality is so dominant in culture and dramaturgies. This work rooted its process and practice in the other senses, which I propose reflects a radical cultural dramaturgy: Blind dramaturgy.

Blind Imaginings: A Thought Breakthrough, a Workshop, and an Unexpected Practice

My move from Canada to the UK ignited a long-standing curiosity about Blindness and travel. I had earned funding to answer the question "What is it like to travel Blind?" Little did I know how this question would unlock a whole new approach to art making and performance. But it did, following a failed attempt to travel in the footsteps of a nineteenth-century Blind traveller named James Holman. I had chosen to pursue my question as a twenty-first-century traveller, revisiting the route travelled by Holman two hundred years earlier. Why take such a historical approach to this question? Partly to impress the funders. Partly because I hadn't gone deeply enough to embody the question or imagine it.

I set off in Holman's footsteps to travel and become a Blind travel writer. The plan was to journey through Germany, Italy, and France over a period of five weeks. After two weeks of travel, I was profoundly disoriented, freaked out, and gave up. The failure hurt. So much so that I confined myself to a rented AirBnB, away from my usual life, and did nothing other than make muffins and

write. One morning, after eating a pumpkin muffin, I sat on a sofa and wrote the following:

> What was I thinking?
> How could I have imagined that I could possibly travel through eight cities in less than two weeks, while blind, in a country I'd never been to before?

I listened back to the question using my screen reader.

And realized the answer was in the question.

But the question was not, how could I have imagined? but, how did I imagine?

I was imagining with my sighted brain—imagining what travelling to new cities and places would look like, imagining places in pictures, with shapes and faces and colours.

This thought amazed me. I'd moved away from seeing years earlier, but my imagination never left home. My imagination was stuck in my sighted past.

I wrote two more words, *Blind Imagining,* and I started to practise imagining travel through my ears and feet. It started with just a half hour, imagining outside sounds and textures prior to leaving my apartment.

This idea was the artistic earthquake I needed, de-centring vision from my mind. It launched a workshop and a series of performance projects including *May I Take Your Arm* and *Perceptual Archaeology (or How to Travel Blind)*.

Imagining Blind led to the creation of Blind Imaginings—a workshop that first took place in 2018, co-led by myself, Jessica Watkin, Michael Achtman, and Tristan Whiston. All four collaborators had been exploring blindness and performance as theatre artists, bringing skills and expertise in dramaturgy, playwrighting, integrated and traditional audio description, and embodied awareness. Participants in the workshop included Blind and sighted theatre and circus practitioners. We explored how de-centring vision from our practice could open new pathways for creativity. To prepare participants to truly embody this exploration, a series of exercises encouraged movement

and spatial understanding through engagement with the senses of touch, hearing, smell, and taste. These invitations ultimately invited participants to understand a nonvisual dramaturgy—composition that de-centred sight and redirected to foreground the body mind.

Many participants have gone forward to incorporate Blind Imaginings into their work. Playwrights Yolanda Bonnell and Natasha Greenblatt made a bold choice to integrate description into their final draft of a new play, *The Election*. With myself and director Jennifer Brewin, *The Election* brought integrated description to the stage of Theatre Passe Muraille in 2019.

Blind Imaginings is now something I deliver both live and over Zoom, to artists and students, including those at the National Theatre School of Canada.

May I Take Your Arm emerged when I moved into an unfamiliar Toronto neighbourhood in the St. Jamestown area. Knowing nothing of my surroundings, I asked, "How do I turn space into place into home?" It was not enough to simply trace a tactile map of roads and crossings. I wanted to understand the meaning held by buildings and routes, as told by those who call it home. My desire to understand my surroundings provided a dramaturgical inquiry for this performance.

Community arts company ReDefine Arts (formerly Red Dress Productions) joined me to curate a diverse team of walkers who I'd not met.

We walked, and together, I learned space and turned it into place through shared walking, and through an exchange of memories and stories.

The walks were recorded and formed the dramaturgical foundation and structure for a new interdisciplinary performance.

The performance was imagined to be a multisensory experience, for me and for the audience. I wanted to perform listening as my central action, rather than speaking. My primary gesture throughout the performance was touch—the set included small miniature landscapes (designed and created by multidisciplinary artist Anna Camilleri) with people and buildings representing the actual neighbourhood I'd explored with sighted resident guides. The

production gave me the rare opportunity to perform with my ears, my hands, and my feet.

Perceptual Archaeology (or How to Travel Blind) is a play text that evolved from my travel writing.

The writing became a theatre project, developed over three years, that brought together so many of the lessons and learnings referred to within this article. It was directed by physical theatre artist Leah Cherniak, and produced by Laura Phillips as a co-production with Crows Theatre in Toronto. My access needs informed the aesthetics of the work.

The design elements involved repeated discussions around aesthetics and accessibility, especially set and costume designs. These discussions explored how tactile flooring, sensory-abled footwear, strategically placed furniture, and small hand-felt tactility on the set could enable my orientation and direction while performing.

Sound was a big part of the development process. The piece initially explored the use of binaural recordings and both bone-conductive and regular headphones. However, we concluded during a sound workshop that the binaural experience pushed the play too far toward seeming to simulate blindness, which I didn't want.

The binaural listening experience overwhelmed the story and potentially compromised my performance—it seemed earnest in tone while I wanted a playful, unpredictable energy. We therefore decided against headphones or binaural technology. This moment allowed the dramaturgy of the piece to inform the design.

The choice to hold a microphone to amplify my voice raised questions around aesthetics and access. We did not want my voice to be second to or below the designed soundscapes. This presented a tracking barrier for Blind audiences. We invested in technology designed to shift sound directionally and in sync with my movement; but for reasons of technology and space limitations, this solution was not as successful as we had wanted.

I worked with an onstage line feeder and space describer who spoke through a microphone into my ear. This liberated me from feeling anxious about lines or disoriented in front of an audience. My line feeder, Enzo Campo, also occasionally added live descriptions for the audience. He gradually and playfully became more and more of a second character within the play. Why is this dramaturgically significant? We were playing with the dynamic of support workers sometimes getting bored or enthused and taking over. This is another example of how access informed the dramaturgy of the piece: Enzo as line feeder was also integrated into the script and overall presence of the play.

As the rehearsal room was mostly populated by sighted artists, it was essential to have Blind dramaturge Dr. Jessica Watkin in the room. Although I had written the script with a Blind audience in mind, the play's developing physicality and evolving design needed expertise from a nonvisual perspective. Dramaturgical choices needed to prioritize audiences with no visual perception. This did not mean a lack of visuality or visual aesthetics, but it did ask that seeing be secondary to listening.

The script called on all audiences to use their imagination.

A ladder became a hill, through my saying so. A chest became a bed, which became a hill because I said so. And, when I needed help to find my way to a particular object or location, I asked the audience to guide me by yelling a "boo" or "yeah" according to how close I was to the desired target. It was an opportunity to create a fun interdependence with the audience, similar to the "hot" and "cold" game.

Fire and Rescue: De-centring Vision from Imagination to Creation

The practice of Blind imagining, and the energy created through several workshops, led to the birth of a new collective.

In 2020, together with Leah Cherniak and Laura Phillips, I co-founded Fire and Rescue. We are evolving and now include artistic associates Ophira Calof, Dr. Jessica Watkin, Dr. Becky Gold, Dr. Kelsey Acton, Lorna Craig, and Ingrid Palmer.

We are an inter-abled team, prioritizing de-centring visuality from imagination to creation, with shared values of interdependence, collective creation, and passion for reimagined excellence informed and infused by disability.

Our major accomplishment to date is the 2023 Dora-nominated co-production with Crow's Theatre *Perceptual Archaeology (or How to Travel Blind)*.

Currently, we are collaborating with the W. Ross MacDonald School for Blind students to find new stories and imaginings by Blind children, for a future Blind-led digital art space.

We are engaged in a new initiative called"Theatre for the Ears.

This is a Blind-led play development project featuring Blind writers culminating in a first draft and Disabled-led public reading. During our first set of workshops—a rare gathering of all blind artists—there was a strong sense of connection and shared experience, and exciting exchange while each developed a distinctive dramatic voice.

It's been thirty-four years of disrupting assumptions and discovering blindness and Blind imagination. All has shaped my art and my life and opened creative doors and relationships. I'll conclude with a thought first offered to me by Laura Phillips, as it articulates an excellent guiding principle that I hope will remain with me through the future. In her words, Laura proposes that we best flourish when we work at the speed of trust. So clear and so valuable—to remember to give time to acknowledge each other and honour the place we hold in each other's lives.