



# REALWHEELS

THEATRE | PIVOTAL PERFORMANCES

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November 29, 2019

Attention: Shane Simpson  
Minister of Social Development and Poverty Reduction  
Government of British Columbia  
engageaccessibility@gov.bc.ca  
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Victoria, BC V8W 9R2

## **Subject: FEEDBACK to BC Framework for Accessibility Legislation**

Dear Government of BC,

I'm pleased to be writing on behalf of the board and staff of Realwheels Society.

Realwheels is an award-winning professional theatre company — the only theatre company in BC creating and producing performances that deepen understanding of the disability experience. Our professional productions and community engagement projects are also inspiring a new generation of individuals with disabilities to participate in the arts.

Persons with disabilities (PWD) need accessible avenues to vigorously engage in theatre as an expressive means to share their histories and cultural experiences. Survey feedback from our community projects confirms this, eg.: *"Wheel Voices projects give people with disabilities a voice, a conduit through which we can share our stories"* and *"The artist in me craves to stand on a stage and shout to the world, 'Look at me!...' Realwheels provides this opportunity!!"*

We are well aware of the challenges experienced by individuals with disability, and have undertaken several initiatives to support this equity-seeking community, the lessons of which we hope you will apply to new legislation.

Two examples:

1) Our **Cultural Infrastructure Project** (2015-2018) united individuals with a range of disabilities with architects and theatre designers to develop a Needs Assessment and Accessibility Audit of Vancouver theatre venues. One of the characteristics that set this project apart from other audits was that we considered accessibility not just from the perspective of *patrons* with disabilities, but also *performing artists and backstage workers*. This project resulted in an audit tool that's not only influencing theatre venues to prioritize accessibility, but provided them with valuable tools. Venue operators across Canada (plus the City of Vancouver Facilities department) are currently using our audit tool to conduct their own accessibility audits.

A key lesson of the project is that despite venues conforming to current building bylaws, we discovered accessibility flaws with every facility we audited. Our "nothing about us without

us” approach was fundamental to these discoveries, as it was only by harnessing the power and insight of people with lived experience of disability that were we able to surface serious flaws in accessibility, affecting not only basic access, but also safety.

2) We designed a curriculum and are now preparing to launch an **Actor Training Program, Customized to Train Persons with Disabilities.**

As you’re aware, close to 25% of British Columbians self-identify as living with disability, yet only a fraction of that demographic is reflected on our cultural platforms. The exclusion and lack of representation on our stages both reflects and contributes to the systemic exclusion that takes place for PWD in the public sphere.

PWD are eager for training that levels the playing field, but systemic barriers prevent PWD from accessing careers as performing artists, and likewise prevent authentic representation of disability in the performing arts.

Artistic directors are eager to diversify casting to include actors with disabilities but they are stymied by the scarcity of trained PWD actors, and insecure about how to accommodate them. There's demand but no supply.

Looking to mainstream training institutions, one discovers they are not conducting outreach to prospective PWD students nor do the majority know how to customize class content to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Frequently inaccessible training facilities, and curricula that are inflexible and/or inappropriate to PWD needs (e.g. stamina or physical accommodations) further contribute to the gap.

Our project is bypassing the gaps in traditional actor training programs by launching a purpose-built, customized “modular” training program. A modular structure will be responsive to the needs of students (logistical, travel, fatigue, workload, personal care), allowing them to receive training in one-discipline blocks of concentrated time, rather than through longer days of traditional programs.

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Disability is part of the range of the human condition; it is complex, diverse, and a significant part of Canadian culture, history and identity – one that demands to be reflected and integrated across all forms of cultural expression. We encourage you to engage persons with disabilities to inform and guide new legislation that will level the playing field for all British Columbians.

Thank you for this opportunity.



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