

MUCH LIKE YOU

A Play about Disability Awareness

Theatre Seminar/Production
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Spring 2008

I Don't Suppose You've Seen

I don't suppose you've seen

My friend

He has black hair, blue eyes and wears a Yankees cap.

No?

He probably went by too fast in his wheelchair.

What's that? Did you say 'that guy'?

'That guy in the wheelchair'?

Yeah, that's him.

You saw his wheelchair.

Did you see him?

(Guy is sitting at a table. Across from him is a table with two girls. They are staring and looking at him. Before and during the piece, he jerks his head continually.)

See those girls over there? The ones that keep looking over and then pretending that they aren't staring? I'd like to believe that all the attention was because they think I'm cute or something. But I know what's it's about. It's my tics. You see when you have Tourettes, your brain tells your body to do something, and it's like you don't have a choice. I have these jerks that I can't control. My medication helps, but sometimes it's not enough. It's a lot to deal with, but I'm handling it alright. What I can't handle is that (looking at the girls) I can tell you how this will play out. They'll keep staring, and eventually they'll start talking about me—as if I can't hear them. Like I'm some monster or caged animal in a zoo put on display—interesting, but dangerous. And sometimes one of them will come up to me and she'll say

(girl has walked up to him) Girl: What's wrong with you?

And then she'll stand there looking scared and uncertain. And inside I'm seething, boiling mad. I want to tell her, "There's nothing WRONG with me. I want to shout at her and make her feel bad. I want to say, "How would you like it if I came over to your table and asked what was wrong with you because of the obnoxious way I heard you laugh or because your hair is all nappy. Implied that you were defective and imperfect? And wrong. There's nothing wrong with me. I have a tic that I can't control and you sound like a wounded seal when you laugh. So what—neither thing makes us weird or dangerous." But I don't say it—I push down my anger and just say—I got Tourettes. It's no big deal." Then she'll say,

Girl: I'm so sorry.

And though she doesn't know it, that's even worse. Why should she be sorry? I'm not. My disability is part of me. Without it, I wouldn't be who I am. And I like who I am. It would be like walking up to someone and saying—"I'm sorry you're black or tall or blonde. It must really suck to be you. And again I want to lash out at her, send her back to her friend in tears. But I don't. It's not that I don't want her to ask me about why I'm jerking my head—I'd much rather get asked than stared at. But instead of asking what's wrong with me or feeling sorry for me, she could just say

Girl: Excuse me, but I noticed you were jerking your head a lot and my friend and I were curious, I feel a little weird asking, but would you mind telling me why you do that? Then I would tell her. "Sure, I'd be glad to." And then, maybe we could talk about other stuff. And I wouldn't really mind the way she laughed, because she was really funny and cute and she wouldn't mind my tics, because well, I'm pretty cool too. And neither one of us has to feel uncomfortable or angry. So next time you find yourself staring at someone like me—remember I'm not wrong or defective. My tics are annoying sure, but that's all they are, an annoyance. I bet you could name some things about yourself that annoy you. If you want to know about me, come and ask. Don't be afraid or feel sorry. If I'm OK with who I am, why can't you be?

Awakening

I grew weary of apologizing
To the world
And to myself,
For myself.

My parents said,
"We never had any luck."
That apology.

He said,
"You have a nice face, it's too bad you're . . ."
That apology.

My children said,
"Mommy, why are you different?"
That apology.

I said,
"I'm a cripple."
That apology.

I declare now to hell with apologies!
I am God's own,
Life's own,
My own.
No apologies.

(SCENE BEGINS WITH ACTOR SIGNING TO AUDIENCE IN SILENCE: Hi—I heard the funniest thing earlier on the way to school. What’s the matter? Why are you looking at me like that? Can’t you understand what I’m saying? What’s wrong with you? I’m talking right at you. Listen! Listen!) (INTERPRETER BEGINS SPEAKING WHILE ACTOR IS SIGNING)

How did that make you feel? Lost? Confused? Maybe even a little angry? All I was doing was trying to talk to you—to communicate, but you couldn’t hear me. What if every moment of every day was like that? Surrounded by a sea of silence. Always trying not to drown. That’s what it’s like to be deaf in a hearing world. But just because I can’t hear you, doesn’t mean we can’t talk. I can read your lips, I can use my interpreter, I can even speak—though I might be hard to understand, at first. And if you haven’t noticed, I’ve learned to talk with my hands. I’ve worked really hard to be able to reach out to you. So why aren’t you reaching back? Do I scare you? Do I make you feel guilty because your ears work and mine don’t? Would you feel that way if you met someone from another country who didn’t speak English? Then why feel that way with me? I just speak a different language than you, that’s all.

Sometimes I get angry. I mean, I think about all the years of schooling and work I went through to be able to talk with you, and how few of you even try to make an effort to talk with me. And unless we can talk to each other, how do we know whether we would like each other or not? You don’t have to learn sign language—though I’d be happy to teach you. You don’t have to be an expert on the deaf. You don’t have to be anything. Except yourself. You just have to be willing to say ‘Hi.’ Is that so hard? And if you do that, I’ll do this (DOES SIGN FOR “HELLO”) Then.... We can both take it from there.

When Mike and I found out we couldn't have kids, we decided to adopt. The agency told us right from the start that the baby was going to have some health and possible mental problems.

But Mike and I were okay with that, we were just happy to finally have a child. And then Beth came into our lives, she was just one month old. She was beautiful. She had big brown eyes, and dark long lashes, and had our love in a heartbeat. We were told that the day after she was born she had to have surgery to fix her intestine and liver. She had been in the hospital for two weeks. They told us to watch her health, and make sure she ate right. But she was just like any other baby so we didn't worry much, that is until she was about eight months old we noticed she wasn't sitting up, like most children her age. We took her into the doctors and they ended up giving her an MRI, that's when we found out she had cerebral palsy. The doctor explained that she would have major problems with motor skills. As she got older, she would have trouble walking, using her hand, and probably talking. After we brought her home, there were nights when she would cry for hours because her leg muscles were so tight. Luckily there are treatments to help relax her muscles and ease her pain. But health care is so expensive. (Looks down and sighs) We always have a ton of red tape at the insurance company to get them to pay for any treatments and therapy. (Gets caught up in thoughts of bills, and then realizes she's stop talking and smiles and moves on.)

A lot of my friends ask how I handle it. You just do. She's my daughter. Still, as a mother, I worry, (laughs) I worry a lot, especially things like will she ever be independent? Will she ever get married? Will she be able to make friends? Will she be happy? And every day you get ready to wage a battle against ignorance and prejudice.

I remember this one time, picking her up from a preschool, and coming inside the class room. Beth was sitting by some other children, and she started to crawl over to them, you know to play with them. Beth was smiling and holding out a doll for another little girl to see, when the supervisor picked her up and set her down in a far corner to play with herself. When I confronted the supervisor about it, she got all flustered and mumbled something about insurance liability. (Starts to get angry) I never took Beth back to that place. (Gets angrier) Just because my daughter can't walk as well as the other kids, or speak as well, she's not allowed to play with them? (Practically yelling) Is she not supposed to interact with people the rest of her life?! She's a person, not a liability. Not some risk to be assessed! Are you just going to put her in a corner the rest of her life so you can try to forget she exists?!

(Calms down) She's gone through so many surgeries, treatments, rigorous physical and speech therapy. I remember long nights holding and rocking her so she could try to get some sleep to relive the pain in her legs. Please don't think I want your pity. I'm not a saint. She's the strong one, not me. I want you to look at her! I want you to see how far she's come. How much she has accomplished learning to do all the things you take for granted. How hard it is for her just to get out of bed in the morning, to eat breakfast, to use the bathroom? Most of us would have given in to the frustration and pain a long time ago, but she doesn't. She greets each day with dignity and grace. She has come so far and done so much, don't you realize that? Every little step she takes, every little word she speaks, it's like a miracle. Don't dismiss my daughter because she's different. Don't look the other way. She has a lot to teach you. A lot to teach all of us—about how to live—about what's really important.

(Wipes tears from eyes) Would I wave a magic wand and make all her disabilities disappear? Yes and no. I wish my daughter didn't have to ever be in pain, what parent doesn't want that for their child? But, having overcome these hardships, being so strong and so brave and surviving despite all the odds stacked against her is what makes Beth the amazing little girl she is. And that I wouldn't change for the world.

H/B—So last week I was hanging out in the commons...

G—It was lunchtime and every lunchtime I sit and look at my book and watch all the kids go by.

H—You didn't see what happened did you?

B—You didn't see it?

H/B—OK, I'll tell you.

H—So this retard was sitting and leaning up against one of the pillars in the commons. She's there everyday—just sitting with that stupid smile on her face.

B—I noticed one of the special ed girls sitting behind a pillar. She's been there before. She just sits and looks around.

H—So then somebody at my table dared me to sneak up behind the pillar and jump out at her. It'd be funny as hell

B—I noticed the kids at the table next to ours looking at the girl and laughing. It kind of made me mad, but I didn't say anything. It's not like they were doing anything TO her, you know? They were just being stupid.

G—I heard some people laughing and I saw they were looking at me. I must have been funny! So I turned back around to see if they would laugh again, and they did! They must have really liked me!

B—I saw one of the guys from the other table get up and start tip toeing toward the girl...

H—Then while she was looking the other way, I did it. I scared the crap out of her. She jumped like 10 feet and started crying...it was hilarious.

B—I couldn't believe what he did—he jumped out at the girl and screamed at the top of his voice. She must have been terrified.

G—I was so scared. I didn't know where the loud noise came from. It made me cry.

H—My friends and me were dying laughing. It was the funniest thing I'd ever seen. The look on the girl's face? Priceless.

G—I heard the kids laughing again, but I didn't know why—I didn't do anything funny. I was crying. I thought they wanted to be my friends, but friends wouldn't laugh at you when you're crying.

B—Her eyes were so big and there were tears running down her face. She looked so hurt and confused. I felt so bad for her. I just wanted to lay that guy out, yell at him and his stupid friends...

H—Yeah, I got some looks, but so what? It was funny.

B—But instead I just sat there and stared. I didn't defend her. I didn't go up to see if she was all right,

G—I don't understand why they were so mean...

B/G—I didn't do anything

So when my friend and I signed up for courses last year, we were looking for something easy—we didn't really care what, so long as we didn't have to work and we got our credit. He found this class in the catalog called "Life Skills Training" where you work with EEN students, you know the "special kids..." How hard could it be? Compared to those kids, my friend said we'll look like a couple of geniuses. It sounded like an easy way out, so I signed up. First day of class, I looked around the room. My friend wasn't there and I was surrounded by all these kids who were....well you know....retards. Found out later that day that my friend had dropped the class during the summer and didn't tell me. Man, was I pissed. I went to my counselor to try and drop it too, but it was too late. So here I was, stuck in this stupid class with a bunch of stupider kids. Second day, I sat down in a desk in corner, hoping just to slide by unnoticed. (THE NEXT PART IS ACTED OUT) It was before the bell rang and I must have looked really mad or something, because all of a sudden one of the kids came over to me, leaned down, and hugged me. I mean, I didn't know what to do. I yelled, "What do you think you're doing?" I kind of pushed her back and she fell. I expected her to start crying or something or maybe freak out, you know like they do—I knew I was going to get in trouble big time. Instead, she just looked up at me and smiled. Then she said,

Girl: It's OK, I know you feel mad. I feel mad too sometimes and hugs make me feel better.

I sat there and stared at her. I mean, she didn't know me. I don't even remember ever seeing her before in the halls, yet she took the time to notice how I was feeling—and more than that, she wanted to do something about it. Most of my friends are too busy with their own problems to care about anybody else's'. In that moment, something happened. I looked around the room and didn't see a bunch of retarded kids. I didn't feel weird or creeped out. I don't know, I can't describe it. Then I did something that surprised me. I got up and reached down and helped her up. She kept smiling and said

Girl: My name is Sarah. Want to be my friend.

Then something came out of my mouth which surprised me even more. I said, "Yeah, I would. I'm John." She grabbed my hand and took me over to a group of other kids. They all smiled at me too—not a smile that was forced or fake—but real and honest—from their hearts. It was pretty amazing.

Over the course of the next few weeks, I got to know everyone in the class. There was Sam who had CP and had to be supported in his wheelchair, but who had such a positive attitude. He was so funny—he would crack me up everyday. And Jo Ann who like to draw and would give me a new picture she made. There was Bobby who loved NASCAR. And of course Sarah who gave me a hug everyday when I walked in the room. And I hugged her back.

You know, they were all different—I don't mean different because of their disabilities, but different like all of you are different. I mean there were some kids who jerks, and some who were quiet, and some who were bored. I mean that really kinda shocked me. I don't know why I thought that they would all be the same. Why would they be? It's funny but Life Skills Training ended up being my favorite class. And I realized that the Training worked both ways. Everyday I was being trained to lose my prejudices and

misconceptions about the kids I used to call “retarded.” And I understood who the real ‘retarded’ person was....It was me.

Overdue Tip

Dear waitress
If you only knew
What I can do
You would give me that menu
I'm smart
And I can speak
So, please ask me,
"What would you like to eat?"
Dear waiter
Don't be shy
Just look me in the eye
And bring me a piece of apple pie
Tell your peers
They need not fear
Nor shout in my ears
I can hear very clear
About my difference
Dear servers, let me explain
It's a problem with my muscles
Not my brain
Now that you know
I'm like the average Joe,
Next time you see me,
Just say, "Hello"
Take it from me
It's a sure bet
This is the best tip
You'll ever get

No, I didn't do it to take pleasure in her misery. I didn't thrive on hurting her, putting her down. No, it was the faces around me. Snickering and laughing—they were cool, and I wanted to be a part of that. Cause I didn't really mean it, right? I was just feeding the appetite of the Beast.

So I lip synced a few words to her during silent moments of class...and since she was deaf, she thought I was talking to her and she answered back, real loud. The room, the class, the Beast itself erupted with laughter, and for that moment, I was a part of that. It felt great. And then something caught my attention—her eyes.

They haunted me for the rest of the semester and into the summer. I've never felt that bad, that guilty in my life. I just wanted her to know that I didn't intend to hurt her—I just used her to belong—to be part of the Beast. When my eyes met hers the first day of school, I just had to...I apologized. A moment of hesitation passed across those eyes before she replied.

And I was free of the Beast as she forgave me.

I'm sorry I can't tell you what
I'm sure you'd rather hear,
But there's a burden in my heart
I can no longer bear.
There's an anger I must cross
Before I come to you
And make my peace with who you are,
And try your soul anew.
I know I wasn't what you wanted
When you wanted me,
A healthy, happy baby girl
You could raise easily.
I was born impaired, and you
Have never understood
That what I am is whole and fair
And beautiful and good.
You were sorry, first for me
And then for you, and wept,
But I would not be me without
The fact that I am deaf.
I am a gift to celebrate
And not a cause to grieve.
As a child this was what
I needed to believe.
I needed but a different road
To reach the common goal,
But you decided there were things
I couldn't do at all.
And rather than accept what life
Had given in its grace,
You looked at what life had withheld
And turned from its embrace.
Ah, Mother! How you injured me
By what you would not own!
To love myself I had to leave
And make my way alone,
And have my children in the course
Of what I would become,
But always, always looking back
To where I had no home.

He made me mad, OK? It's the same thing everyday. He follows me around like some puppy dog and stares at me. I don't care if he is retarded. It really bugs me, but I just ignore him and eventually he goes away—but today he has nerve to talk to me in front of my friends—like we know each other or something. He walks right over to me with that stupid grin on his face and says, "You're pretty." All my friends started laughing, so he started laughing too. Then—can you believe it-- he tried to hug me!

So I hit him, so what? I don't care if he did run away crying. Those freaks don't have real feelings like us—everyone knows that. Besides, you can't be too nice to those type of people, can you?

THE BALLAD OF Special EDDIE

PART 1

**This is a story about special Eddie,
Diagnosed as a bowl of neuro-spaghetti
His mother sat with her friends and cried
While his father kept it all inside**

**When he was five his mom took Eddie
To school, but they said He's not ready-
He will wet his pants, he will get in fights
He will freak out under the fluorescent lights.
It's for his good; we have got to spare him-
A special preschool might prepare him.**

**So that day in warm September
Was one for Eddie to remember,
For that decision really led
to ten more years of special Ed.
Special teachers , Special books ,
Extra special dirty looks.**

**BD, LD, TMR?
How we wonder what you are!
Though Eddies social life was plain,
He had more names than kings of Spain.**

**The school psychologist declared
He's neurologically impaired
With overlays (coincidental)
Social and environmental.
Although the problem just might be
His unilaterality.
The case is really so pathetic-
The cause is probably genetic**

**Eddie never did deny it.
He just sat back and he kept quiet.
Year by year, the time went past .
In special seventh grade at last,
His sixteenth birthday finally neared,
Then Ed dropped out and disappeared.**

**His teacher wondered what went wrong;
It worried her, but not for long.
She seen this kind of thing before
And frankly she expected more.
Eddies not the first or last
Forgotten as the years go past.**

PART 2

**Down in a bar on Highway 3,
Today some guy sits next to me
And the bartender brings him a short draft beer,
Smiles and says, Hey, Eddies here!
Then this beautiful girl runs across the floor
And gives him a look I've seen before.**

**She says, when you want to leave, I'm ready.
You're really something special, Eddie.
So he told his friends he would be back
And left in a dark blue Cadillac.
My drink went down like a glass of fire-
If it wasn't Eddie, I'm a liar.**

**I swallowed my drink, and swallowed my pride
And asked who's that who stepped outside?
Eddie they laughed, don't you know that face?
He's the guy who owns this place,
The Laundromat and the bowling alley ...
And half the land around the valley.**

**I sat awhile and kept on drinking,
Thought and thought and kept on thinking ...
He looked happy and I guess,
In any book he's a success.**

**He's not the first and not the last one.
Seems that someone pulled a fast one.
Did we help him succeed?
Or simply label him as "special need."
Or did we rather make it tough
For him to show his native stuff?**

**Uncertainty must never show...
So, never say that you don't know.
May be we should take our turn
At saying we've a lot to learn.**

(DESKS ARE ARRANGED LIKE A CLASSROOM)

Teacher - Please open your books to page 216. Who would like to read? *No one raises their hand. Teacher looks around classroom. Anyone? Alright...Jason, why don't you read?*

Janice – *Looks up, startled. Quickly looks down at book. Ummm...pause...*

Teacher – Are you on page 216?

Janice – *Nods.*

Teacher – Go on then.

Janice – *Looks down. Ummm...*

Students – *Chuckles mockingly, under their breaths.*

Janice – *Ummm...*

Teacher –Go on Jason, just read the paragraph.

Janice – *Silent as he stares down at the paper.*

Student – *Under his breath, but loud enough to hear. What a retard!*

Student – *Leans over and whispers a joke about Jason in a friend's ear, they laugh mockingly.*

Janice – *Scene freezes, Jason turns to the audience. This is what it's like for me. Class will be going just fine...then the teacher calls on me to read out loud. It always happens the same way. She starts getting impatient, and the other kids start laughing. It makes me feel terrible. But I can't help it! The words...they just don't make sense to me. It looks like some foreign language that I've never seen before! (POINTS TO SCREEN WHERE A TEXT BOOK PAGE IS DISPLAYED WITH LETTERS REVERSED). This is what it looks like to me. Can you read that? People tell me, "Why can't you do this? It's so easy!" But it's NOT easy. Not for me at least. But no one gets that. They're so busy focusing on what I *can't* do, that they don't realize how difficult it is to do something they take for granted. I have dyslexia and I have to retrain my brain to see things the way you see them. And not just textbooks, but road signs, menus, directions, everything. It's not easy, but I've been working hard... getting private lessons and everything...and I'm getting better, but it hurts when people call me stupid or slow. My I.Q. is probably higher than yours, which is lucky I guess since I have to work twice as hard as the other students just to keep up. But they say it will get easier—I just wish it was easier to make people understand. Just because I see things backwards doesn't mean that's what I am.*

-2-

(THE AUDIENCE IS BOMBARDED WITH VERY LOUD STATIC NOISE AND BRIGHT LIGHTS SHINING IN THEIR EYES.)

How did that feel? Did it make you feel uncomfortable? Did it hurt? Was the sound too loud? Were the lights too bright? This is what I have to deal with everyday. Welcome to my world... I have autism.. Walking down the hallway at school can be a nightmare: guys bursting into laughter...girls screeching as they gossip loudly...the hallway lights blinding me as I try to maneuver through the crowd without bumping into anyone. And as if my over sensitivity to light and sound isn't enough--even the slightest touch to my skin can be so painful...can you imagine going through a day when everything you see, hear, or feel has the potential to bring to unbearable pain. It's as if the world is a torture chamber and you're its prisoner, but I'm learning to deal with it. But when I hear you laugh as I cover my ears or fall down and shut my eyes you cause a pain that hurts far worse. Don't be too quick to judge. Try to remember what it's like. Please. (LIGHTS AND NOISE COME UP AGAIN FOR A FEW BEATS.)

-3-

(THE ROOM IS MADE COMPLETELY DARK. THE CHARACTER SPEAKS FROM THE DARKNESS.)

Listen to me. Just listen. This is what it's like for me. I'm blind. I have been since birth. I've never known anything other than this. But you don't have to feel sorry for me. Sure, I can't eyes don't work like yours, but there are other ways to see. I can recognize my friends by the sound of their voice, the shape of their body, the smell of the cologne they wear... I can read with my fingers...(smiles) and I'm never afraid of the dark. Yeah, being blind makes some things difficult but I think it's given me an advantage that people with sight don't always have. Some people are so consumed with the colors and the sights that surround them that they don't ever step back and actually just think. As Helen Keller once put it, "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart." There's a lot to be felt in the darkness just as there is in the light. Not being able to see doesn't limit me laughing or loving or crying. It doesn't make me better or worse than you. Just different in one small way. Please don't let my blindness blind you from seeing who I am. Look at me with your heart—and you'll find me looking back.

(Actor comes out in a wheelchair. The word ASSUME is projected on the screen.)

There's an old saying that goes, "You should never 'assume' cause when you do, you make an 'ASS' out of 'U' and 'ME. Pretty stupid, huh? And yet for me—in some ways—it's true. People assume a lot when they see me. Like—since my legs don't work, neither does my brain. I went to GameStop last week to look around—which by the way brings up two more assumptions: Number One that people in wheelchairs can't get around on their own—I drive my own car—a red Grand Am, it's pretty sweet...and that someone like me doesn't like the same things that someone like you does. I do almost everything you do—I play video games, go shopping, hang out with friends—I just don't walk. I don't do math either, but that's another story...I'm just like you (smiles) only cooler... (laughs) I'm just playin' with ya. Which is another assumption now that I think about it—that I'm somehow really fragile, and you can't joke around with me. Why wouldn't I laugh at the same things you laugh at? I make fun of my friends all the time and they come right back at me. I'm better at it than they are, but they can't help that they're stupid. Anyway—I was at GameStop and this guy—one of the clerks came up to me and asked me if I wanted any help. Which is cool, except for the way he said it. It was something like this: (speaking very loudly and slowly) CAN I HELP YOU FIND ANYTHING? Now I'd seen this before—he assumed that since I was physically disabled, there was something wrong with me mentally as well. Or maybe that I was deaf—or both. I was ready for him: (speaks in same loud and slow tone) NO THANK YOU, I'M JUST LOOKING. Then as he started to walk away, I said. IT'S SO COOL THAT GAMESTOP WOULD HIRE SOMEONE WITH YOUR CONDITION. He looked at me with this stupid, confused look so I said, SORRY--I'M NOT TALKING TOO FAST FOR YOU AM I? Then I turned around and said in my normal voice "Asshole." And rolled away down the aisle (laughs) You should have seen the look on his face. It was hilarious.

But you see—that's just it—he assumed something about me without actually knowing anything about me. A wheelchair is just that—a chair with wheels. Just like your glasses or your braces or anything else that helps you get by. It doesn't really make you different, less human—so why 'assume' that it does? You don't want to be an 'ass' do you?

L ook not on my body but my soul,
O nly on the face behind the veil,
O nly with the touch of inner Braille,
K nowing through yourself my being whole.
N or ought you touch my skin but with your heart,
O nly in the tenderness of love.
T hough my outer self repulsive prove,
O f me the mask is but a minor part.
N or should you know me out of charity:
M isfortune can become a kind of grace,
Y ielding special wisdom to a few.
B ring mainly for yourself your empathy,
O pening a richer, wider view,
D oorway to a person much like you
Y et fired by the fate he must embrace.