**CHAPTER 12**

**‘This is miching mallecho. It means mischief’: Problematizing Representations of Actors with Down’s Syndrome in *Growing Up Down’s[[1]](#footnote-1)***

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This article explores the way in which meaning is constructed from, rather than inherent in, a group of Shakespearean actors’ impairments in a BBC documentary. It is particularly interested in the juxtapositions the program-makers create between the actors’ impairments, their supposed effects, and Shakespeare’s words. These juxtapositions create narratives of transformation for the actors from ‘disabled’ – or at least unable with Shakespeare – to capable, even heroic performers. In *Meaning by Shakespeare,* Terry Hawkes takes Ophelia’s question to Hamleton viewing the *Murder of Gonzago/Mousetrap*, “Will 'a tell us what this show meant?” ([3.2.152](http://www.shakespeareswords.com/Plays.aspx?Ac=3&SC=2&IdPlay=2#117513)), and uses it to critique the notion of texts as having an essential, unchanging message. He reads Hamlet’s answer, “Marry, this is miching mallecho. It means mischief” (3.2.146), as embodying the anti-essentialist position that meaning does not inhere in texts but is constructed in relation to what a text, its creation or use, “*intends now”* or “*means to do*”[[2]](#footnote-2): in Hamlet’s case, harm, injury, damage or evil by stealth to Claudius and Gertrude.[[3]](#footnote-3) Hawkes asserts that “we *use* [Shakespeare’s plays] to generate meaning,” that “Shakespeare doesn’t mean: *we* mean *by* Shakespeare.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Similarly, Simi Linton has argued that “disability studies is concerned with human variations, but more so the meanings we make of them.”[[5]](#footnote-5) She contributes to a chorus of voices from disability studies arguing that individuals and society construct the meaning of human variations. Chloe Stopa-Hunt has welcomed the opportunity that using actors with impairments – human variations controversially defined by the World Health Organization as “any loss or abnormality of psychological, physiological or anatomical structure or function” – on inclusive, professional stages has to generate new readings of Shakespeare.[[6]](#footnote-6) Meanwhile, Carrie Sandahl has objected to the way in which “[her own] impairment was being put to use [by directors] to create meaning, meaning over which [she] had little control.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Problematically, prevalent meanings about impairments are generated and deployed by a hegemony of people without them or whose impairments are not considered disabling, i.e. that do not cause ‘restriction in or inability to perform an activity in the manner or within’ a range considered normal.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In *Growing up Down’s –* a documentary featuring actors with Down’s Syndrome staging *Hamlet* – human variation and Shakespeare are used by the non-disabled documentary-makers as “powerful elements” with which to advocate for the capacity, and to a lesser extent heroic, model of disability.[[9]](#footnote-9) The actors are presented by the documentary as unusually ‘”brave people who can ‘make it through’ the complexities of life” and theatrical performance, “overcoming their impairments at all odds.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Such heroic representations have attracted criticism because of the pressure they place on people with impairments to conform to social norms and to mask their socio-psychological suffering.[[11]](#footnote-11) The capacity and heroic messages of this documentary’s makers (empowered, influential and non-disabled) *about* Down’s Syndrome adults – their (well)meaning by Shakespeare, their “intending now’” for *Hamlet* – are problematically privileged over other possible interpretations of the documentary’s subjects words and actions. I will demonstrate this with reference to examples of self-advocacy – people with impairments “support[ing] one another to speak out against discrimination,” “deciding what’s best for [them] and taking charge of getting it” – and, conversely, advocacy (“someone without this label speaking up on their behalf”) throughout.[[12]](#footnote-12) The related terms ”self-/representation” can be found in the work of Jan Gothard and Colin Barnes.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Throughout this article, I will consider the control that the documentary-makers have over meaning: firstly, the meaning/s of the subjects of the documentary, in filming, producing and directing it. I will look at the representations of ability, disability and deficit that their product contains. That I chose to use the term “subject” above – rather than “participant” – reflects my interpretation of the power relationships between the BBC documentary-makers and the actors one of them, William Jessop, filmed. Secondly, I will consider William Jessop’s control over Shakespeare’s work, namely adapting *Hamlet* to provide a script for the company. Finally, I will analyze a fascinating and disturbing rewriting of lines from the *Hamlet*, with which the documentary presumably intends to create a positive takeaway message for its audience about the capabilities of actors with Down’s Syndrome but which clumsily stereotypes, reduces, homogenizes and sentimentalizes people with Down’s Syndrome. I will argue that despite its origins in classic “expositional” documentary, the film evidences a “postdocumentary” dedication to transformation and character arcs in a way that compromises its stars’ self-advocacy. Postdocumentary television is characterized by the fusion of traits from varying genres, such as drama and reality within one program or series.[[14]](#footnote-14)

**Shakespeare and disability**

Scholarship with a focus on doing Shakespeare with actors or students with impairments is not the most prevalent literature on Shakespeare and disability. Rather, there is a significant amount of writing by authors working in or informed by disability studies that considers representations of disability in Shakespeare. These include including critical introductions to editions as well as David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder’s seminal book *Narrative Prosthesis*.[[15]](#footnote-15) David Houston Wood has written that “Shakespeare’s creative output encompasses a broad scope of disabled selfhood: from instances of blindness to limping, from alcoholism to excessive fat, from infertility to war wounds, from intellectual incapacity to epilepsy, from senility to ‘madness’, from congenital deformity to acquired impairment, and from feigned disability to actual.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

In terms of writing by and about professionals and performers with impairments, sustained engagement from Shakespeare Studies is lacking. Stopa-Hunt and Sandahl are unusual examples of academically-published self-advocacy on disability in the (Shakespearean) theatre. Mentions of actors with impairments appear occasionally in theatre reviews, for instance of deaf-led company Deafinitely Theatre’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, part of the World Shakespeare/Globe to Globe Festival in 2012. My own selectivity here in mentioning Deafinitely Theatre’s production is reflective of the limited inclusion of such groups in theatre festival programming, despite the existence of inclusive theatre companies regularly producing shows including, and beyond, Shakespeare. More frequently found is mention of a nondisabled actor playing a character with a disability – also known as “crip drag” – usually as a cultural shorthand for that character’s age-related decrepitude, e.g. in a wheelchair or with a walking stick.[[17]](#footnote-17) Some disability activists have suggested that actors “cripping up” should be seen as equally offensive as blacking up, whoever the play-text’s writer.[[18]](#footnote-18) Yet banning the practice in favor of using actors with impairments in these roles, though it would have many social and individual benefits, is no guarantee of representations of disability being welcomed onto the stage. Chloe Stopa-Hunt has pointed to the way in which the critics’ response to, for example, mobility aids is often negative or essentializing. Take, for example, Mark Lawhorn’s suggestion in a review of Greg Doran’s 1999 *The Winter’s Tale* that the able-bodied actor Emily Bruni’s use of a wheelchair in playing Mamillius had “a deadening effect.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

In addition to theatre reviews, there are occasional newspaper and radio features on Shakespearean theatre practitioners with impairments. For instance, some attention was given recently, in local papers and on BBC Radio 4, to Bolton’s Octagon Theatre hiring Alyson Woodhouse, who is blind, as an assistant director.[[20]](#footnote-20) Reaching an audience of educators in schools and higher education, there are articles, such as those I commissioned from Stopa-Hunt on “wheelchair Shakespeare,” Kelly Hunter on playing Shakespeare with autistic children (and her subsequent book), and Heather Edgren on staging Shakespeare with students with learning difficulties for the British Shakespeare Association’s magazine *Teaching Shakespeare.[[21]](#footnote-21)* This paucity is indicative of the under-representation of actors with impairments in professional Shakespearean theatre internationally and the way in which they are “weeded out of…training programs” because of institutions’ drive to “create standardized bodies [and voices] appropriate to particular performance media [and]…artistic forms.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Theatre practitioners and writers such as Jo Verrent and Jonathan Meth have celebrated examples of arts workplaces’ and training institutions’ inclusivity and positive discrimination in the *Guardian’*s series on disability arts. The series is not, however, specifically about Shakespearean theatre.

In recent decades, it has become common for television programs to portray groups of non-professionals learning Shakespeare and, what the Royal Shakespeare Company calls ‘hard-to-reach’ groups, learning Shakespeare for the audience’s delectation and edification. These groups include black and minority ethnic (BME) people, those in areas of deprivation, or school students identified as behaviourally “unteachable” (frequently the learners featured are shown as displaying several of these characteristics). In programs such as *When Romeo met Juliet*; *Macbeth, the Moviestar and Me;* and *Jamie’s Dream School,* Shakespeare is frequently welcomed by producers and celebrity theatre professionals, and to a lesser extent, non-celebrity participants as vehicles for educational and personal transformation of individuals from marginalized communities or with marginalized behaviours.[[23]](#footnote-23) *Growing Up Down’s* adds to this canon with its narrative of the “com[ing] of age,” through *Hamlet,* of another group frequently subject to marginalization: people with learning disabilities. The above programs struggle to balance progressive attitudes and aims with un/conscious drives to create a spectacle out of impairment – physical, intellectual, financial, social; celebrate conformity to social or academic norms; and laud rare and heroic feats. This is something I suggest could be largely overcome with greater recourse to self-advocacy in the processes of conceiving and producing programs. This chapter also contributes to diversifying considerations of Shakespeare on television away from the adaptations of his plays, or documentaries about his life, that have been historically dominant, in the vein of Cary M. Mazer, Stephen O’Neill, Laurie Osborne, Mariangela Tempera, and my own writing on the programs above as part of a growing genre of Shakespearean make-over documentaries (or Sh-makeover).[[24]](#footnote-24)

***Hamlet* vs? *Growing up Down’s***

The lines between the making of the theatre production of *Hamlet* and the documentary are blurred by filmmaker William Jessop’s involvement with both: his mother, Jane, founded the Blue Apple theatre company for actors with learning disabilities in 2005 (I will refer to both using their first names throughout because several members of the Jessop family feature herein). Many such producing companies exist throughout the UK, including Deafinitely, Chickenshed, Graeae and Pegasus. Teatr 21 and Blue Teapot are companies elsewhere in Europe whose work I have sampled. Such organizations have proliferated since the decline in Europe of the routine institutionalization of people with learning impairments, the extension of rights to and the provision of statutory education, and demands for meaningful employment and leisure opportunities after formal education (though whether this reflects what people with learning disabilities want for themselves, or socially paternalistic aspirations for them, is hotly debated). Some of these companies tour, some pay their actors wages: increasingly they challenge once-dominant notions of theatre made by people with impairments as therapy, rather than “authentic art” and the situation of such performers “as patients in search of cure.”[[25]](#footnote-25) Working with a local population of people with learning disabilities, Blue Apple’s main company of “able and learning-disabled actor” stages two major productions open to the paying public each year.[[26]](#footnote-26)

When, in 2011, the main Blue Apple company expressed an interest in staging *Hamlet*, William created what the website calls “a bold new adaptation of Shakespeare's original text,” a ‘fresh, fearless and funny adaptation us[ing] Shakespeare's original language.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Within the company’s marketing shtick, the vexed question for Shakespeareans and textual scholars of what constitutes original text and original language where *Hamlet* is concerned, perhaps understandably, has no place. The company uses the phrase “original” as widely-accepted shorthand for a version in unmodernized English. Unmodernized Shakespeare in turn popularly connotes difficult, and therefore, (good) quality Shakespeare.[[28]](#footnote-28) It is worth noting some other features of the play’s adaptation at this stage, because of their potential impact on meaning-making in the production and documentary*.* Only twelve per cent of William’s script (itself twelve per cent of the Penguin *Complete Works* edition) is shown being performed or rehearsed in the documentary. Key features include: textual cuts (William’s script uses twelve per cent of lines from Penguin text of *Hamlet)*; the redistribution of lines from one character to another (one laudable feature of this adaptation for women actors is the relative beefing up of the female characters—Gertrude goes from having the fifth to third largest speaking part, again, as far as the Penguin edition is concerned); the repetition of key speeches or phrases; the re-ordering of lines (“To be or not to be” opens the play); and bowdlerization, which is oddly infantilizing – especially given the frank discussions about sexuality the actors have on camera and the use of the Mousse T vs. Dandy Warhol’s song ‘Horny as a Dandy’ in the documentary’s soundtrack.

In addition to scripting the production of *Hamlet* and filming its performances, William decided to film the development of the show and four of the lead actors’ home lives over a year – those of Tommy/Hamlet, Katy/Ophelia, Lawrie/Claudius, and James/Laertes. Tommy, Jane’s son and William’s brother, is an actor with Down’s Syndrome who previously starred in the BBC film, *Coming Down the Mountain*, and appeared on elsewhere on radio and film. Behind-the-scenes footage of Tommy and his fellow actors makes up the majority of the documentary. Made with the production companies Maverick Television and Dartmouth Films, the sixty-minute documentary was commissioned by Elliot Reed for BBC3’s Fresh strand for eighteen to thirty-four-year olds after William had already shot footage of the production and its actors’ lives. William’s twelve-month time frame for the documentary’s action allows him to largely eschew providing “an urgency of plot” to the narrative, in contrast to other programs depicting teaching and learning encounters with Shakespeare which more usually last five days or a few weeks.[[29]](#footnote-29) Another benefit of the substantial period of filming is that the considerable and varied footage of the actors living in the community contributes positively to politicising and discussing in/equality in a way that many disability-themed films and television programs do not: for example, in the UK, Channel 4 documentaries introducing viewers to Britain’s fattest man, a family with primordial dwarfism, and brothers with Leukodystrophy. It goes beyond “cultivating aficionados of” a wide range of individual cases of impairment[[30]](#footnote-30) to consider the relationship between the actors’ impairments and the restrictions or challenges they face in their achievements as actors, lovers, and friends. These factors in the documentary’s production, along with William’s stated purpose in filming the actors outside the theatre, suggest a conscious twist on the classic ‘expositional’ documentary intention of “explor[ing] the effect, not of Down’s Syndrome, but of Hamlet on their lives.”[[31]](#footnote-31) In his words, he “discovered” that “what happened was quite extraordinary – the play and reality began to blur.” Citation? Broadcast Now? Any blurring of these two realms by the actors (I will discuss my reservations about this below) was reinforced by William in the documentary’s initial title, *Hamlet in Love,* and its narrative focus on young-but-troubled-love which conflate the eponymous character with Tommy as actor.[[32]](#footnote-32) (Broadcast Now).

**Ability in *Growing up Down’s***

In the documentary’s voiceover and publicity for the program, William frequently refers to one premise of the show as being a test of theatrical ability, to see whether this group of ”extraordinary young actors” (“extraordinary” can be read as ‘”with Down’s Syndrome/learning disabilities,” as well as “super-talented”) working in “mainstream theatres for the first time” can “really pull off Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*,” “the world’s most famous play” – given widespread low expectations of people with Down’s Syndrome as exemplified by Jane and Tommy Jessop’s doctor (see below). This is answered at the end of the documentary by the performers’, who might reasonably be expected to have some bias, satisfaction at their achievement: Katy tells us that they received three curtain calls and exclaims “We’re famous” while James reflects on his achievement and self-efficacy saying “I never believed that I’d really understand Shakespeare.” William’s voiceover question is further answered in the documentary with reference to ticket sales for the show having gone from worryingly low to “pretty good,” applause, standing ovations and soundbites from departing audience members which tally with those given in response to successful West End productions in their rather generic approval: “I'm just gobsmacked how amazing it was.” “I thought it was stunning,” and “Absolutely fantastic production.” Blue Apple’s *Hamlet* tour for the paying, theatre-going public in South East England counteracts the sense, which sometimes adheres to theatre by actors with impairments, of theatre as therapy for the participants rather than art for an audience’s consumption.[[33]](#footnote-33)

In terms of presenting a capacity model of disability, the actors in *Growing Up Down’s* go beyond their own and others’ constructions of them as expert performers to posit themselves as experts in terms of dramaturgy, the play-text and its authenticity. Clearly conscious of the credibility gap, which research has acknowledged that people with impairments face, sensing a need to “work harder, be a bit aggressive” to be taken seriously, the majority of actors repeatedly decide against suggestions from individual actors to change the plot.[[34]](#footnote-34) For instance, Katy at one point floats the idea of a happy ending in which Ophelia and Hamlet survive, marry and celebrate with a dance; Lawrie similarly moots the possibility of altering the play’s action so that Claudius can “get away with everything.” The cast vote on all such decisions, practicing self-advocacy in the sense of “tak[ing] responsibility and mak[ing themselves] responsible” for the production’s success,[[35]](#footnote-35) as well as “*generat[ing]* new aesthetic practices and theories…not just [being seen as] ‘problem’ students or audiences to be grudgingly accommodated.”[[36]](#footnote-36) Despite the fact that the version of *Hamlet* they are working with is already an adaptation produced by William from folio and quarto versions of the play, the actors repeatedly resist changes to that script on the grounds of their infidelity to Shakespeare and the play-text, concepts frequently invoked by Shakespearean academics and the play-going public. The actors’ advice to each other when debating changes include: “Its Shakespeare himself.” “If that's what a play is...then that's what a play is,” “Follow the play's rules,” “The play is *Hamlet*…It can't be *Claudius*, cos that's not a play. It's called *Hamlet*. Cos it's all about Hamlet,” as well as staking individual claims to fidelity: “I’m doing the play…sticking to the play.” While such statements are often framed explicitly in terms of opposition to another cast member’s outlandish proposal, this resistance arguably also constitutes an implicit refusal to confirm deficit views of theatre by people with impairments as less than art, as inferior or watered-down.[[37]](#footnote-37)

Existing literature by people with impairments, on their ability to stage professional theatre, maintains that it should not be surprising given that “many [people] with disabilities understand [their] disabilities as performance, not exclusively in an aesthetic or theoretical sense, but as an actual mode of living in the world… disabled people are constantly onstage and we’re constantly performing.”[[38]](#footnote-38) The playwright and wheelchair-user John Belluso similarly argues that:

Any time I get on a public bus, I feel it’s a moment of theatre. I’m lifted, the stage is moving up, and I enter, and people are along the lines, and they’re turning and looking, and I make my entrance. It’s the theatre, and I have to perform.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The feeling of being the object of non-disabled people’s gaze and opening oneself to that is closely echoed by a Teatr 21 actor with Down’s Syndrome during an interview on the program *The Love Boat*.[[40]](#footnote-40) However, the documentary itself does not always avoid the pitfall of theatre as therapy. In addition to suggesting the play’s universal appeal and the actors’ universal ability, the documentary also positions the production as a means of instigating the actor’s personal (over their professional) growth and refers to John Langdon Down’s belief in the therapeutic value of dramatic performance for those with the syndrome to which he gave his name. Its use as a measure of success with which the actors can, as William’s voiceover puts it, “tour to prove themselves before the public” equally echoes and further cements Shakespeare’s historical place in education policy and assessment, as the author used to determine elite ability among populations from students in Victorian England to applications for India’s civil service.[[41]](#footnote-41)

Beyond the theatre, the *NHS Choices* website explicitly and consistently frames its consideration of people with Down’s Syndrome in terms of positive capacity. It features statements such as: “children and adults with Down’s syndrome *can* and do continue to learn throughout their lives just like the rest of the population;” “acquire many of the cognitive and social skills most other people develop;” “leave home, form new relationships, gain employment… lead independent lives [and] pursue further education.”[[42]](#footnote-42) A case study of a girl with Down’s Syndrome and her mother is provided to evidence the assertion.[[43]](#footnote-43)A range of similar, everyday abilities are captured in the documentary by William’s decision to record his participants’ lives outside, as well as within, the theatre. Some of them house-share with their peers, while all four reminisce about past, pursue present, and imagine future, romantic and sexual relationships, both queer and straight. *Growing up Down’s* goes some way towards redressing what Milton Diamond and Thomas Shakespeare have posited in relation to society and the media as either an “unwillingness to engage with disabled people's sexuality,” because it is not seen as a rehabilitation priority; an assumption or imposition of asexuality or sexual inadequacy; or a demonization of their sexuality as malignant.[[44]](#footnote-44) While the documentary shows only relationships between people with Down’s Syndrome – choosing as Tom Shakespeare puts it, in inverted commas, their “own kind” – it does challenge the lazy assumption that the actors “chose each other for no other reason [than their shared status as disabled], and not for any other qualities [they] might possess.”[[45]](#footnote-45) For example, the participants identify their actual or desired partners’ emotional intelligence, career, celebrity, good looks, and caring nature as inspiring their desire. *Growing Up Down’s* portrayal of queer and straight desire among the participants also successfully redresses an imbalance that Shakespeare and his colleagues recognize their own project was unable to: the under-exploration of lesbian and gay experience among people with impairments.[[46]](#footnote-46)The futile yearning of *Growing up Down’s* openly queer Lawrie (playing Claudius) for straight Tommy (playing Hamlet) also offers potential for a resistant or against-the-grain queer reading of these characters in which Claudius uses Gertrude to get close to her son and Hamlet’s hatred of his uncle is fueled not just by his father’s death but Claudius’ unwanted affections. The documentary’s actors not only have many abilities but are also *en*abling of others’, with and without impairments, readings of *Hamlet*.

**Deficit in *Growing up Down’s***

There are deficit narratives in almost all programs showing the teaching and learning of Shakespeare. They highlight the participants’ lack of money, formal education, cultural capital, opportunity and inclusion as well as the ultimate failure to extend Shakespeare for all in education policy and practice. In *Growing Up Down’s* the participants’ deficit is located in their homogenously-described impairments, with the exception of James who does not have Down’s Syndrome but an unspecified learning impairment. These include the delayed development and acquisition of vocabulary; gap between sensory-motor and cognitive performance; poor motivation and concentration; difficulty coping with change, understanding and communicating new and complex information and mental states are all made reference to in the documentary.[[47]](#footnote-47) At the outset of the documentary, Jane Jessop recounts her friend’s and doctor’s expectations that Tommy’s life would be defined by deficit: “A doctor came to examine him and said he'd do very little, ever. He wouldn't write and he wouldn't read, and he didn't do any developing for a whole year.” Acknowledging such attitudes is pivotal for the documentary in creating a narrative of transformation in the director’s and audience’s perceptions of the actors, from deficit to capacity. However, Jane’s recollection is the only point in the documentary at which a person without Down’s Syndrome is asked explicitly to comment on the actors’ past or present lack of ability in relation to their learning impairments. The production’s director, Peter, is shown giving notes about the actors’ deficiencies in their performances after the dress rehearsal, as directors usually do: “It needs a lot more energy,” “there are things pulling it back,” and to Tommy, “you had neither of your props.” Rather, William includes moments in which the actors with Down’s Syndrome discuss their feelings of inadequacy with each other. For example, Tommy asks Lawrie how he feels about having Down’s Syndrome, eliciting Lawrie’s response which shows an internalized awareness of Down’s-related difference and difficulty: “[It] Feels always strange, because I always felt like I always had a problem in my life.” On another occasion, apparently unprompted, James reveals to William a sense that *Hamlet*’s author is judging the actors on the possible shortcomings of their production, particularly with respect to memorization: “Shakespeare does not like people without no lines…He'll be thinking, ‘Is he going to get this, this idiot?’" These occasions offer rarely broadcast examples of self-doubt, or “crip killjoy,” in a medium that much prefers narratives where people are either shown to be recuperating from, or self-accepting and happy in spite of, their impairments.

Less progressively, William’s voiceovers include statements of deficit from him, introducing those made by the actors. They represent the “extensive and heavy commentary” seen in traditional documentaries.[[48]](#footnote-48) For example, his line “Away from the theatre, Lawrie's plagued by self-doubt” precedes and accentuates footage of the actor looking at his face in his bathroom mirror, saying: “I could be a good-looking guy, hot with the girls. So far, no-one thinks I look hot or sexy.” The documentary-makers arguably, intentionally or otherwise, craft a similar narrative around other Blue Apple actors’ notions of aesthetic deficit in a scene with Katy cleansing her face in the bathroom mirror and talking to the camera: “my face won't be nice for Ophelia. Cos Ophelia is...is fair.” However, Katy resists a reading of this as relating to any sense of deficit she has in her appearance because of Down’s Syndrome by delimiting any aesthetic deficit as strictly temporally limited and unusual: “At the moment, I don't look beautiful. I'm going to get my face back to normal. How it was,” implicitly, before an outbreak of spots.

The documentary-makers also articulate a sense of deficit among the actors regarding their in/ability to distinguish between the play and real life, in decoupling “internal representations from real objects and events,…engag[ing] in pretence or symbolic play,…imagin[ing] the mental state of another person and reason[ing] about it.”[[49]](#footnote-49) William’s tone in these voiceovers echoes that of doctor-patient observations: “When Tommy first started acting, he found it hard to separate the fictional storylines from real life. I've also noticed this in other actors with Down's.” Tommy’s having overcome this difficulty is shown in shots of him counseling other actors to distinguish between the play and life as well as his consistent use of characters’ names to talk about action and emotion in the play, and actors’ names to talk about life outside it. For example, shots of Tommy in rehearsal for the closet scene are interspersed with those of him walking in the twilight countryside angrily shouting his line “Follow my mother” (V.i.321), i.e. “die!” When William asks “who were you shouting that at?” Tommy replies that he was directing it at “Katy mostly,” having been hurt by her saying she hates him and subsequently deciding to split up until the tour ends. The context around the quotation suggests he is deliberately appropriating the line and imagining hurling it at his ex to vent his upset and frustration. He is shown actively and incisively appropriating *Hamlet* to understand and share his life experiences. The documentary then shows contrasting cases who are supposedly unable as yet to consistently make this distinction, Lawrie and Katy. William’s subsequent voiceovers run thus: “Katy's finding it hard to understand that Tommy's just acting…And Katy isn't the only one confusing the play with real life. Lawrie's been wrestling with the guilt of his evil character Claudius” and “From the very start, Lawrie seems to confuse the play with his real life.” The documentary evidences this supposed slippage further with footage of James telling Lawrie in an off-script outburst during rehearsals to “go to hell.” This is followed with footage of the latter’s resulting upset reaction inflected by the early modern, Christian understandings of the afterlife encountered through rehearsal, as well as his personal experiences of bereavement. Yet, just like Tommy, Lawrie elsewhere shows himself quite capable of separating the two, as a professional actor would, in his direct-to-camera address: “I *know it's only acting* but, I feel I have a lot in common with Hamlet” (my emphasis). Furthermore, when the actors directly reflect on their affinity with their characters to the camera it is overwhelmingly and consciously in terms of being *similarly* – not identically – in love, loved or jealous. In spite of this evidence of the actors’ ability to overcome difficulties separating out reality and fiction, which clinicians have identified as characteristic of their impairment, William shapes these moments in the documentary into a voiceover narrative that one of the “extraordinary” effects of staging the play on the actors’ lives was that “the play and reality began to blur.” William’s and the BBC’s advocacy mission for the documentary may be largely to blame as well as producer’s and viewer’s preferences for dramatic transformation narratives in postdocumentary television. Another factor is society’s addiction to a specific kind of transformation narrative around ‘characters’ with impairments: narrative prosthesis or rehabilitation stories.[[50]](#footnote-50)

**Problematizing *Growing up Down’s* advocacy**

The documentary realizes many positive and rare achievements including getting actors with Down’s Syndrome on national television. This was recently expanded in BBC3’s 2015 “disability season” (broadcast in summer 2015, when viewing figures are traditionally low). *Growing up Down’s* highlights the actors’ abilities, achievements, and contains moments of self-advocacy. Nonetheless, it also has problematic qualities, some there from William’s initiation of the Blue Apple *Hamlet* project, others introduced by *Growing Up Down’s* in the production of the documentary. I want to identify these below, with the intention of informing future practice for filmmakers and producers representing people with impairments.

Despite critical and medical literature increasingly recognizing the individuality of people with impairments, and the documentary maintaining an emphasis on individual actors throughout, it nominally homogenizes the group (although Williams’s original title for the documentary, *Hamlet in Love*, eschewed this) and focuses on their “commonality” of being “special,” rather than, say their commonality with non-disabled readers and performers of the play in feeling the “smack of Hamlet.”[[51]](#footnote-51) Notwithstanding Blue Apple’s website declaring its main company to be inclusive, and the DVD of the production evidencing the presence of non-disabled actors in supporting roles, viewers of the documentary see only its actors with impairments. The opportunity to counter dominant representations of segregation is therefore lost. Despite the inclusion of queer desire in the program, the promotional material around the documentary is largely heteronormative, foregrounding Tommy and Katy’s relationship and downplaying Lawrie’s unrequited love for Tommy and the way it complicates their friendship for both. Despite avoiding the portrayal of the actors as tragic figures or victims of impairment, and including material that shows participants making mistakes, behaving aggressively or in psychological distress, the documentary’s emphasis on Shakespeare’s and *Hamlet*’s elite cultural value could be seen as pushing them towards the problematic image of “super-cripples.”

Despite the way in which the actors clearly take responsibility for the production, exercise self-advocacy during rehearsals and in speaking directly to camera, the documentary is ultimately a product of its makers’ advocacy. It therefore risks perpetuating the way in which “disabled people are [often] displaced as subjects and fetishized as objects[[52]](#footnote-52) and have “consistently had their histories written for them by others: caseworkers, psychologists, historians, social scientists” and other academics such as myself.[[53]](#footnote-53) *Growing Up Down’s* exhibits some tension between a narrative of universality – in which Hamlet is everyman, and everyman (including men and women with Down’s Syndrome) really has a smack of Hamlet – and one in which Hamlet has a particular resonance for this group. The documentary constructs Hamlet’s fictional experiences of anger, grieving, remembering and forgetting as mapping particularly well onto the medical characteristics of Down’s Syndrome.

**Who are *Growing up Down’s* ‘wondrous fools’?**

The will to make the documentary proclaim a homogenizing affinity between Hamlet’s experience and those of people with Down’s Syndrome is most awkwardly and objectionably evident in the last significant lines spoken by Tommy as Hamlet. I have repeatedly listened to them and checked them against the transcript of the program on BUFVC’s *Box of Broadcast* online off-air recording service, and they are rendered thus: “I pray you all,/ that whatsoever else shall hap' tonight,/ you look through our sad performance and see/ that we fools of nature are wondrous too.” Given the program’s focus and ostensible purpose (to explore whether the actors could “pull off” the production), these lines might be glossed as “whatever happens in tonight’s performance, we hope you will see that actors with learning disabilities are amazing too,” i.e. compare favorably with non-disabled actors. Having largely avoided sentimentalizing the participants throughout the documentary, this declamation, a feature of William’s performance text, undermines that integrity. This is all the more so given its positioning towards the end of the documentary, as a cheap but catchy parting shot. The language in this extract is offensive: the phrases “fools of nature” and “sad performance” connote the powerless – “plaything[s], pawn[s] and puppet[s],” and the inherently defective – “born fool[s], simpleton[s] by nature.” They invoke the very personal tragedy, pitiful models of disability that the documentary is supposed to be rebutting.[[54]](#footnote-54). “Wondrous” is glossed as “unbelievable, bizarre, and strange.[[55]](#footnote-55) Its use reinforces the notions of spectacle and freakishness that have often accompanied disability on stage. The guileful use of these lines lets slip a gamut of negative discourse and cultural stereotypes of Down’s Syndrome and learning difficulties, something Ato Quayson identifies as ‘the most deadly instruments for denying the humanity of people’ (210). It is unfortunate that these lines from the production were chosen for an ostensibly progressive documentary. There was no need to do so: as mentioned above, the documentary only uses twelve per cent of William’s script, so there were presumably plenty of alternative lines filmed from the performances which might have made the cut instead.

The producers legitimize such retrograde and patronizing sentiments by presenting these lines as though they were Shakespeare’s: authentic products of his widely-held genius and knack for speaking to all human conditions and eventualities. Rather, they are William’s mawkish patchwork of Shakespeare’s words. “I pray you all…whatsoever else shall hap tonight” includes two lines of Claudius’ recommendations on concealing Polonius’ death which appear in all three early editions (Ham I.ii.246 & 250). “Look through our bad performance” has been slightly altered from Claudius’ incitement to Laertes to kill Hamlet in the same editions. “See that” appears in Hamlet’s “angels and ministers” soliloquy in the 1603 Quarto (Q1), along with a description of his father’s ghost as “wondrous strange,” while “we fooles of nature” appears in his musings on the ghost’s appearance in the First Folio version (1.3). “That,” “are” and “too” have been gleaned from elsewhere in the play. The pastiche reduces successful Shakespeare by Down’s Syndrome actors to a matter of William as dramaturge and documentary-maker “putting the words in the right place” (as James elsewhere in the documentary defines the art of acting). It ignores the actors’ transparent and self-advocated commitment to (the admittedly fraught concepts) of real and original Shakespeare. It is the documentary-makers’ very own, presumably well-intentioned, piece of “miching mallecho” drama.

This final serve of ‘Shakespeare’ in the documentary further begs the question, identified earlier, of whether it is really the actors who cannot distinguish between fiction and reality because of their Down’s Syndrome, or the documentary-makers because of their sense of (ad)vocation. The lines and their position at the end of the documentary also indicate the producers’ failure to explore the ability of actors with intellectual impairments to be involved in arts collaborations throughout the process, beyond the “starring” roles. Dorota Krzeminska and Jolanta Rzeznicka-Krupa – researching companies of actors with learning disabilities in Poland – as well as playwright Christian O’Reilly and Blue Teapot’s director Petal Pilley, staging the production *Sanctuary* in Ireland, have demonstrated their actors’ involvement in researching, plotting, scripting, directing and marketing productions.[[56]](#footnote-56) *Growing Up Down’s* goes “over [its actors/subjects] heads” to advocate for understanding their abilities using a reactionary textual pastiche to achieve the “revelatory” narrative – actors with Down’s Syndrome can “pull off” *Hamlet* – desired by the documentary-makers.[[57]](#footnote-57)Admittedly, I have had the benefit in preparing this article of hearing O’Reilly talk about his methods and processes, whereas I have only had access to published, usually promotional, interviews with William. It may be typical of this medium that they foreground William’s individual role in the making of the program and reflect William’s inexperience or ambition that he does not manage to convey a greater sense of shared input.

I have dwelt in these last few paragraphs on representations of deficit in the program, and given them a longer consideration than the representations of ability with which I started and which constitute *Growing Up Down’s* overall message of capacity (triumphing) over disability. One reason that the deficit narrative remains so central to the program and substantial in this article is the requirement of postdocumentary television to demonstrate the kind of character arcs, narrative transformations, of failure to success (Blue Apple’s director is shown, at one crisis point, hoping for a “moment of great lightness [in which] things will turn around”), historically expected on television in drama.[[58]](#footnote-58) To better contribute to anti-oppression work, postdocumentary programming – Shakespearean or not – needs to consistently listen to the people who experience oppression, believe what they say, and look to them for leadership in ending that oppression.[[59]](#footnote-59) (Collymore). From my analysis of *Growing Up Down’s –* and other documentaries I have seen which go behind-the-scenes of theatre productions by people with learning disabilities, such as *Somebody to Love* and the Teatr21 episode of *The Love Boat* – I venture some recommendations for subsequent documentary-makers. Resist glibness and boost the leadership roles of people with learning disabilities in the production wherever possible: give more weight to the value of their program’s title and closing scenes which frame its content – paying more attention not to their role in marketing the film, but to establishing the program’s possible meanings; involve the people you aim to represent at every level – in front of and behind the camera, in the editing suite and marketing department; and further self-advocacy – making advocacy such as mine in this article and the documentary-makers’s in *Growing Up Down’s* redundant. Avoid, if not meaning by Shakespeare, “meaning by” people with impairments.

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51. See Goodley, *Self-Advocacy*, 52; NHS, *NHS Choices*; Vlachou, *Teachers’ and Peers’ Attitudes*, 34. The phrase “smack of Hamlet” comes from Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who wrote, “I have a smack of Hamlet myself;” *Lectures and Notes on Shakespeare and Other English Poets* (London, George Bell, 1904), 531. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Sandahl, “From the Streets to the Stage,” 623. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Goodley, *Self-Advocacy*, 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. *Shakespeare’s Words Hamlet, Shakespeare’s Words King Lear.* [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. *Shakespeare’s Words Hamlet.* [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
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