

Disability Justice and the Future of Performing Arts

A Review of *Loving with Three Hearts: Behind the Scenes of the 2020 Sins Invalid Performance*

By Maya Lee

Tiny LEDs on the sound board and high-end lighting equipment blink. Heavily marked-up scripts and soft brushes flying across make-up caked faces rustle backstage, anxious with anticipation. Quiet sounds of musicians warming up fill the darkened room, their tuners blinking green to signify they are ready. The sights and sounds of performance prep were missing for so many over the last two years; however, not for Sins Invalid. Their make-up artists may have been sporting surgical masks in green rooms full of glass dividers, but they were there, creating.

Patty Berne, Co-Founder, Executive and Artistic Director of Sins Invalid directs *Loving with Three Hearts: Behind the Scenes of the 2020 Sins Invalid Performance*, a documentary on the making of *We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives in Climate Chaos*. *We Love Like Barnacles* was in its production stage when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States. The contagious nature of the virus meant that gathering in large groups was unsafe. Live performance was one of the hardest hit industries, as it was no longer safe to congregate to watch a performance, let alone produce one. Berne decided the show must go on, as safely as possible while still maintaining the vitality and principles of the group.

Living in an ableist society often necessitates that disabled people find creative ways of living, so for Berne, changing the medium was simply a task at hand, not a setback. To accommodate travel restrictions, they set up production in four theaters in different parts of the world to

record artistic performances of several mediums, including poetry reading, dance, and music. Berne directed the different parts of the performance through a video conference platform. The disabled community has often turned to online spaces as means of social connection, so the group was able to use their collective knowledge of alternative community spaces to continue their work. “Zoom” direction brought on its own challenges, but the directors and actors took it in stride and created a beautiful, heart wrenching performance.

Most aspects of the production, including direction, were conducted virtually or recorded, leaving a trail of “Behind the Scenes” footage and setting up the perfect opportunity to create another form of art: documentary. Documentarians always have a profound impact on viewers’ perceptions of their subject, and in the case of *Loving with Three Hearts*, Berne directed both the performance and the documentary. They have an important perspective as to the production of *We Love Like Barnacles*, as well as motivation to express *We Love Like Barnacles* as how they intended the audience to perceive it: disability justice activism.

As a queer, disabled, activist and artist themselves, Berne has a unique understanding of ableism in today’s world. Berne tells us at the beginning of the documentary, “[Ableism] is an oppression the non-disabled world does not understand.” Many charity organizations that raise money and awareness for disability are led by non-disabled people. They lack the lived experience of the lives

of the people they claim to serve. Sins Invalid declares that disabled people must be at the center of decision making when it comes to their community and lives. A common saying within the disability justice community is “nothing for us, without us.” Berne is not only disabled themselves, but also an active member of the activist community, so they better understand the experiences of their actors and community than a non-disabled director.

Sins Invalid calls this principle, “Leadership of the Most Impacted.” It is one of Sins Invalid’s Ten Principles of Disability Justice that they declare must be followed when organizing and designing disability spaces and movements. Created in 2015, these principles are still largely used in disability discourse. Sins Invalid’s commitment to these principles sets a precedent for how we as creatives, activists, oppressed peoples, and allies should be thinking about our own principles as we create our work. Berne’s documentary shows the group’s priorities as artists and activists, as well as how these principles impact the artists, producers, crew, and audience.

The tone Berne sets for their production plays a big role in creating a space where the artists can thrive. In the documentary, Berne explains that their group is about authenticity and passion. They say that to perform as one’s true self, one must be physically and emotionally present within oneself. Berne explains that traditional theater groups are often about efficiency. This systematically excludes disabled artists whose physical, mental, or emotional conditions leave them unable to meet those demands. At Sins, Berne sets a precedent of making sure everyone’s needs are met. In a defining moment of the documentary, performer Alex Cafarelli is pictured outside in her farmer costume holding a big shovel, about to start a scene for her performance of

her poem, “Grief is a Process of Slow Steps to Accept a Terrible Thing,” and she says to her crew, “Before we begin, does anyone have any access needs that aren’t being met?” One of the crew members mentions in an interview that he never had heard of “access needs” before. At Sins Invalid and in many disability circles, preemptively asking about and encouraging people to speak up about their needs is just the norm.

This is the Principle of Disability Justice Sins Invalid calls, “Collective Access.” Often in non-disabled spaces, the onus is on the disabled individual to speak up if a situation isn’t meeting their needs or barring them from participating in an activity or space. Especially if the people in power expresses a sense of frustration for needing to change their plans, it leads to feelings of shame and guilt on the part of the disabled individual. By instead creating a safe space that welcomes difference and encourages “Interdependence,” the principle of leaning on each other for support and attempting to meet each other’s needs, Sins Invalid validates the needs of its community. As Maria Palacios, “Goddess on Wheels” passionately declares to the cameraman, “Sins Invalid comes in and says we can ask for whatever the fuck we need.”

This concept also fulfills Sins Invalid’s Principle of Disability Justice, “Recognizing Wholeness,” or recognizing the inherent value of people regardless of perceived productivity. The capitalist notion that our self-worth is directly linked to our productivity stifles our confidence and creativity. It especially impacts disabled people whose bodies and minds function differently from what is often expected in their work, social, and personal lives. In showing the making of Antione Hunter’s interpretive dance performance “Untitled,” the camera shows the other cameras pointed

at Antione as he breathes heavily. The cameraman is heard saying there was a technical glitch in the last take, and they would like to try it again. From their “Zoom” director’s chair, Berne asks Hunter how he is feeling energy-wise, illustrating how they prioritize the well-being of their actors over the demands of the performance.

As Berne tells us in one of their interviews, “the world would be a different place if people acknowledged the labor that it takes to live.” Like with Hunter, throughout the documentary Berne demonstrates how Sins Invalid consistently recognizes the inherent worth of their performers and crew through valuing their needs. And yet, the final product was still phenomenal. This proves honoring the needs of individuals does not hinder art, but instead encourages artists to feel welcomed and valued as their authentic selves.

The documentary contains three types of clips that show the making of the performance: interviews, behind the scenes footage, and lengthy clips from their 2020 performance, *We Love Like Barnacles*. The main source of commentary are interviews with the performers and crew. Unlike many documentaries, there is not one overarching voice narrating the documentary. This tactic is successfully enacted similarly to the 2020 Documentary, *Crip Camp*, where co-directors James Lebrecht and Nicole Newnham tell disability justice history through commentary from the people who participated in the disability civil rights movement. Much like in *Crip Camp*, Sins Invalid recognizes the voices of the collective as opposed to only prioritizing one.

Some of the commentary comes from head-on, interview style shots, the rest voiced over other clips of behind-the-scenes footage or footage from the production

itself. They also included footage in web-conference style set-up, allowing for conversation between multiple people. The style of documentary shows how the voices of all the people who made the production happen have a say in how the production is remembered and documented. The documentary opens with a beautiful metaphor about an octopus—how each of its three hearts needed to work together in a collective effort and rely on each other to make the octopus work, just like in disability justice.

Thus illustrates another Principle of Disability Justice: “Collective Liberation.” Collective Liberation means no one is left behind or forgotten in the quest for justice. Often in activism, the people who suffer multiple types of oppression are told they can only fight one battle at a time. This leaves behind those who have intersecting identities. In their principles, Sins Invalid writes, “only mobbing together can we accomplish the revolution we require.” As performer Maria Palacio says, disabled people are often the ones left behind in a crisis. They are used to assuming there is no plan for them during an emergency evacuation. They are used to being told they need to rely on non-disabled people to survive, only to be forgotten when the time comes. Sins Invalid says that all disabled people, regardless of race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, class, or body size need to band together to fight for their right to survive.

We Love Like Barnacles: Crip Lives in Climate Chaos delves deeply into how the changing climate, both physically and politically, affects the lives of the disabled community. The first performance features Alex Cafarelli as “Mistress Asthma,” embodying a common condition with a dark twist. She sings a foreboding, acapella piece about how air pollution causes and

exacerbates asthma, declaring nonchalantly, “Maybe, you’ll die!” Positioned center-stage in a swivel chair surrounded by chains hanging from the rafters, her voice bellows with villain like authority, warning us of the dangers of polluted air.

Later the documentary showcases Maria Palacios “Goddess on Wheels.” In *We Love Like Barnacles*, she is featured in a beautiful “Crippled” flamenco routine, as well as two spoken word performances. Clips from all three performances are intermixed together while she talks about her experience as a disabled person during the pandemic and how Sins Invalid has been a safe space for her to express herself. In her spoken word performance, “The Forgotten,” she is positioned just like Cafarelli, center-stage in a spotlight, sitting in her wheelchair dressed in pajamas. She speaks about how her disabled identity affects her experience of crisis. She says that people ask her, “Are we ready? Do we have an extra wheelchair / do we have a way to get out?” They are asked to take responsibility for themselves to prepare for crisis when they often can barely provide for themselves in peaceful times. She closes her poem with, “Crips can’t afford to prepare for the worst / but the worst always hits us harder.”

Her pain rings through her words as the silence of the empty theater swallows the end of her poem and forces us to consider the way the disabled community is being left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic. We remember or imagine how it feels to hear people say, “Oh, you’ll only die if you are immunocompromised.” Many disabled people are. People say it’s their choice whether or not to wear a mask, when people failing to wear masks makes it dangerous for many disabled people to go about their lives and do their daily tasks like obtaining food or going to work. Both Lamm and Palacios confront us with our own fears of

environmental crises and cry out for change. Their performances demonstrate the Principle of Disability Justice, “Cross-Movement Solidarity,” showing how environmental justice is also a disability justice issue.

Additionally, in Antione Hunter’s performance “Untitled,” he dances to a poem about his experience living as a disabled Black man in a racist, ableist society. Antione dramatically and athletically moves his body as the poem booms, speaking to the non-disabled community, “you cannot elbow your way into a space created for us, by us, and demand a seat at the table. That’s colonization.” His performance highlights how his identities intersect, causing him to suffer from anti-black racism on top of ableism. It shows how anti-racism necessitates fighting ableism, as Black disabled people are more likely to experience police brutality than non-disabled Black people. With their voices and bodies, the artists at Sins Invalid express how in moments of extreme environmental and political crisis across the globe, disabled people are hit hardest. Thus, the Principle of Disability Justice “Intersectionality” is essential. To achieve Collective Liberation, we must understand the ways intersecting identities affect lived experience and which systems work simultaneously to oppress people.

One of the most unique aspects of both the original digital production and the documentary is their temporality. Sins Invalid only showed the recorded performance as a livestream style event on certain dates and times in October of 2020, and then once again in June of 2021. The documentary was only available for three days in November 2021 at SuperFest, an online disability film festival. The online platform allowed people from all over the

globe to watch them from their bedrooms, safe from the COVID-19 virus, including people who may not have been able to travel to a theater had it been in-person. Sins Invalid also made the tickets with sliding scale prices, making the performance more accessible to people regardless of monetary status. However, the medium and temporality of the performance limited accessibility to those who had access to the internet and were available on those exact dates and times.

Every medium has accessibility strengths and weaknesses, but one of the main strengths of digital mediums is usually their ease of replication. Instead of leaning into that, Sins Invalid emulates the temporary nature of live performance. It even brings feelings of missed opportunity if you missed the showing, just like with an in-person live performance. They don't discuss this choice directly in the documentary, but it introduces the unresolved conversation about what draws us to live performance. Art critic John Berger tells us that the invention of the camera played a big role in our perception of a work of art's uniqueness (Berger 21). Viewing the Sistine chapel in person is a different experience from seeing photographs, and the existence of the photographs removes the paintings from their physical context and gives them a multiplicity of meanings. The same could be said for live performance. There is a mystifying experience of seeing *the original* showing of the performance, as opposed to a rewindable Netflix or YouTube version. With a recorded performance, what even constitutes as the original?

Nonetheless, through the ways they present and replicate their artistic performance, Sins Invalid toys with this idea. Presenting these performances in the documentary is both a replication and a lens to view the art. Berne's choice as a documentarian to

include commentary from the artists adds another layer of accessibility. Explanations and background information as to how and why the performance was put together expands the reach of the art to those who aren't as acquainted with the topics or art forms. It encourages people to see their performance as a politicized act of disability justice both in its content and production.

During the pandemic, we had to lean into the idea of accommodations as everyone's lives were turned upside down, flipped backwards, and pulled apart. Many accommodations that disabled people had been requesting for a long time (remote work, food delivery, etc.) became the mainstream because non-disabled people's lives significantly changed. We began to acknowledge more how our personal lives affect our work and social lives, as we've seen parents try and work from home while their kids were attending online school the next room over. As we are starting to "go back to normal," it seems we forgot how to recognize each other's humanity.

As my own performing arts group has started again in-person, the group's high demands of physical presence and time commitment are clashing with my well-being. The environment is set up in such a way that I do not feel comfortable voicing my needs. This churns out a quality product in the short term, but in the long-term it leaves artists overwhelmed and burnt out. So many members of the group quit, including those who had been members for almost four years. Many of us feel like we have lost our passion for a medium we once loved, a sickening feeling. My performing arts group is only recreational, but at the professional level, the mindset of productivity and efficiency are even more extreme.

We need to learn from groups like Sins Invalid to make theater and creative practices more inclusive and overall, better

for everyone. We can see from both the quality of the Sins Invalid performance and their documentary that the damaging atmosphere of relentless productivity is not necessary to produce quality art. As creatives we want to share our art with the world, but how can we do that when we are stifled by the very mediums in which we try to express ourselves? Every director and leader of any arts organization should look to Sins Invalid for guidance on restructuring their practices to create a more welcoming environment that fosters creativity and artistic passion.

Sins proves to us in *Loving with Three Hearts: Behind the Scenes of the 2020 Sins Invalid Performance* how much of a difference it makes on the experience of the artists, crew, and audience when they incorporate their Principles of Disability Justice into their practice. These principles allowed them to think more creatively and produce an almost “live” performance in the middle of a pandemic, while many other groups simply shut their doors and gave up. We can no longer ignore how the widely accepted tradition of disregarding well-being in the performing arts is outdated and harmful. Sins Invalid not only tells us we can do better but shows us how.

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