

# The Development of Barrier-Free Theater in Korea: Toward Inclusive Art

Mi-Hee KIM (Theater Critic)

## I. Introduction

In recent years, interest in disability arts<sup>1</sup> has grown rapidly within the Korean theater community. A striking example was the opening night of *Dangerous Movements* by Austrian choreographer Michael Turinsky, held this May at Modu Art Theater in Seoul. The second-floor lobby was packed with well-known disabled performers, along with directors and choreographers both with and without disabilities, as well as theater and dance critics and scholars. The atmosphere felt unlike that of a typical theater lobby, shaped by a sense of recognition, anticipation, and shared purpose. This energy reflects the force behind the rise of disability arts in Korea over the past decade: artists' strong desires to learn from leading international performances and adapt those practices within the local context.

This article examines the development of disability theater in Korea over the past decade and explores its broader significance, both aesthetically and socially. It also examines the expansion of the movement and how it is actively reshaping the landscape of Korean theater.

## II. Background of the formation of Korean disability theater

Various circumstances outside of the theater have played an important role in the development of contemporary Korean disability theater. These include policy factors, cultural influences, and social atmosphere.

A policy factor that has led to the development of theater for the disabled is the government's legal and institutional support. In 1998, with the establishment of the Five-Year Plan for the Development of Disability Welfare, the Act on the Welfare of Persons with Disabilities was completely revised. The Act heightens attention to the cultural rights of persons with disabilities and for the first time recognizes their enjoyment of culture and arts as a fundamental human right. This led to the establishment of Korea Disability Arts & Culture Center in 2015, marking a turning point in cultural policy for the disabled in Korea. In 2017, the Moon Jae-in administration declared an 'innovative inclusive nation' as its national vision. As a result, the role of inclusive cultural policy has been included in the inclusive national strategy. And support for the welfare and cultural activities of people with disabilities becomes a part of an inclusive cultural policy which respects

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<sup>1</sup> The terms 'disability theater' and 'disability arts' are used interchangeably here. This is because, although the discussion of this paper is focusing on theater, disability theater tends to be more physical and emphasize sense of movement and unique body of the disabled. Because of its interdisciplinary characteristics beyond dramatic art, it can be called as disability arts.

social equality and diversity.<sup>2</sup> In order to promote creativity as a national human resource, it is necessary to protect the diversity of cultural expressions and increase access to arts for marginalized groups. Everyone in the country should have equal access to cultural expression, regardless of geographical and social background, economic level, physical ability, and etc. It means inclusive of all marginalized groups: persons with disabilities, economically disadvantaged groups, racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities and women.<sup>3</sup> In line with this, policies to support the creation of artists with disabilities have been followed by the establishment of an inclusive theater environment. The opening of Modu Art Theater<sup>4</sup> in October 2023 is its symbolic fruition.

As a cultural factor, contemporary overseas disability arts have influenced the development of Korean disability theater. Domestic theater artists and audiences have been exposed to a variety of disability artworks from overseas, such as Able Arts which was introduced from Japan around the 2000s. World-renowned disability arts have broadened Korean artists' horizons and influenced on their creation. First of all, in 2011, Back to Back Theater's *Small Metal Objects* from Australia was presented at the Seoul Performing Arts Festival and attracted the attention of the domestic performing arts community. It is a collaboration between professional actors and intellectually disabled. The production was presented on the third floor of Seoul Station's KTX terminal, setting against a backdrop of ordinary people coming and going from Seoul Station. Only headphones connected the audience to the performers. The performance raised issues such as sexuality of the disabled, eugenics, false knowledge, desire and death. Another Australian dance performance *Intimate Space* created by Restless Dance Theater, featured at the 2019 Seoul Street Arts Festival. To explore questions of private and public behavior, the performance invited audiences to a hotel and let them experience a site-specific dance. As a collaboration between disabled and non-disabled artists, the performance called for the audiences' change in perceptions of accessibility, diversity and inclusion. The recently opened Modu Art Theater has also made one of its main objectives to

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<sup>2</sup> Ki-ran Kim raises a question about how disability arts have come to be a part of an inclusive cultural policy as 'theater for all.' She criticizes the use of the term 'inclusive' to signify 'art for all' in Korea. It should, she argues, be used in a distinctive way from the term 'social (inclusion)' in the UK. In the UK, the term 'inclusive' is used only when policies are proposed to increase access to artistic production and enjoyment for disabled creators and disabled audiences, and the term 'diversity' or 'equality' is often used in the context of cultural production and enjoyment in relation to ethnic, gender and age groups. According to her, when referring to inclusive theater or 'theater for all,' there is no consensus or clear definition of the concept in Korea, which leads to confusion as to whether 'inclusive' signifies diversity and equality or accessibility. See. Ki-ran Kim, "Respect for Sensibility or the Ethics of Sharing," in Proceedings of the Korean Theater Critics Association's Annual Symposium, 'Theater for All, Seeking Possibilities,' September 21, 2024, pp. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup> Byung-tae Jeon, 'Research on Support Measures for the Disabled by Art Genre,' Korea Culture and Tourism Institute, 2014, p.10.

<sup>4</sup> 'Modu' in Korean, means 'everybody' or 'all.'

introduce leading international disability arts. Out of the six production it presented in the year since its opening, two were invited from overseas. They are Back to Back Theater's *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Becomes* and Catalyse Company (from France)'s *Gulliver, the Last Voyage*. *The Shadow Whose Prey the Hunter Become* is a play about the differences in intellectual abilities and discrimination among people with developmental disabilities. Three actors with disabilities or those who do not want to say they have a disability appear in an hour-long show and ask questions about various issues. In the age of artificial intelligence, the performers give voice to the idea that all humans can be intellectually disabled. They also raise questions about categorization of disabled and able-bodied people and tell the history of oppression and discrimination of people with disabilities. *Gulliver, the Last Voyage*, a collaborative adaptation of Jonathan Swift's novel, was performed by actors with developmental disabilities.

A final factor that has influenced the development of disability arts in Korea is social. Two contemporary Korean political incidents have been especially influential. One is the cultural blacklist scandal that took place between Winter 2016 and Spring 2017, and the other is the #Me Too movement that hit the theater industry in 2018. The blacklist scandal aroused anger of the theater community. By excluding huge number of artists from government support, it systematically suppressed the freedom of artistic expression and the rights of artists. Ironically, it was a turning point for the theater community to awaken its political consciousness. Especially theater artists who had grown up after democratization in the 1980's, were shocked and protested strongly because they had never faced such an oppressive situation. The #MeToo movement that followed soon after the blacklist scandal, in fact, brought a tectonic change in Korean theater, which was more damaging than the blacklisting censorship. The #MeToo movement not only pushed male directors and actors who had wielded power out of the Korean theater, but it also marked the beginning of a generation change in theater. As a result, the older generation has been removed from the front lines of the industry. It also resulted in the rise of young female creators such areas in playwriting, directing, and planning. Along with the change in personnel, there have been lots of changes in the theater making process as a whole. A number of actions have been taken to eliminate inequalities in the theater industry and to ensure the rights of artists: conducting sexual violence prevention education, breaking down hierarchies between directors and performers, establishing standard contract practices, and etc.

Through the blacklist scandal, Korean theater artists painfully realized the importance of the democratic value of freedom of expression both as a basic human right and a prerequisite for the existence of an artist. The #MeToo movement has led many Korean theater creators to pay more attention to the socially disadvantaged people, and to pursue politically correct theater embracing diversity and inclusion.<sup>5</sup> Under this social atmosphere, the theater artists naturally became attracted

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<sup>5</sup> The expression 'theater of correctness' was first used by theater critic Bang-ok Kim in her book *From Aesthetic Theater to Theater of Correctness-Korean Theater after Sewol Ferry Disaster and #Me Too* (Theater and Human, 2022). She sees a new wave of transformation in Korean theater in

to disability theater. The #MeToo movement has amplified theater artists' interest not only in female narratives but also in minority groups or marginalized issues such as disability, animal rights, and labor rights.<sup>6</sup> As a result, the Korean theater could broaden its subject matter and aesthetics.

### III. The development of disability theater in Korea

Within less than a decade, Korean disability theater has broadened its spectrum, moving from a welfare program to a mainstream theater, thanks to government support and socio-cultural demands. Initially, the focus was on creating barrier-free performance environments that aimed to remove the physical barriers necessary for disabled audiences to access theaters, but gradually, people with disabilities began to come into creative process of theater. They no longer remain just as theater consumers. In recent years, many artists have tried to find a theatrical aesthetics which is unique and distinctive for disability theater. In the form of a performance, various experiments and attempts are underway in Korean theater, to the extent that it can be called as a hot trend.

In terms of performance, Korean disability theater can be divided into three types. The first type is classified by content of a play. This type includes those plays whose main characters are disabled people or deal with disability as a subject and theme. The dramatic purpose of this type is to reveal the reality of the disabled through the aesthetics of traditional representation. Examples are as follows: *A Time in a Book*, a play about the death of a protagonist with muscular dystrophy, *In the Blazing Dark*, a play about a blind man, *Kkakduki*, a play about a child of a hearing-impaired person, and *Jellyfish*, a play about a woman with Down syndrome and her conflict with her non-disabled mother over marriage and childbirth.

The second type includes plays that aim to change the form and environment of performance beyond just arguing over the content of plays. This type seeks to be barrier-free in both making and experiencing of theater. It emphasizes the participation of people with disabilities on stage or in the audience. The plays of this type can be divided into two categories: those in which people with disabilities participate only as spectators and those in which they participate in creation or performance. The majority of barrier-free plays that aim to make venues accessible to people disabilities, belongs to the former category. To ensure the physical accessibility of plays for disabled audiences, a variety of services are provided, including ticket reservations, guided touring, wheelchair seating, open/closed audio description, sign language/text interpretation, Braille materials, touch tours, companion discounts and ticket offers. In domestic performances, the term 'barrier-free theater' was first used in June 2014 by the Empo Company's *Snail's Star*. When people

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the seven or eight years since the mid-2010s as a turn from 'aesthetic theater' to 'theater of correctness,' and cites the Sewol ferry disaster, censorship and blacklisting, candlelight vigils and presidential impeachment, #Me Too, youth unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis as events that triggered the transformation.

<sup>6</sup> So-Yeon Kim, 'Disability and Plays, Disability and Theater,' *Cultural Science*, Wn.115, *History of Cultural Science*, p.169.

with disabilities join the creation and performance, the subjectivity of the disabled is emphasized. Gradually, actors with disabilities are taking over the roles of disabled characters that used to be played by non-disabled actors.

The last type includes plays which actively explore the aesthetic differences and new possibilities of disability theater. It is the most progressive type of disability theater. The performativity of movement, pace, and language of the disabled is different from that of non-disabled actors because of the specificity of disability. As a consequence, the performativity of disability theater resists traditional and modern theater aesthetics and values the theatrical contingency. The inevitability and predictability expected from traditional theater aesthetics are considered to be far from the fundamental nature of theater. Many examples can be seen in the recent international productions presented at the Modu Art Theater.

As this article examines the recent changes and characteristics of contemporary Korean disability theater, the followings only focus on the second and third types of disability theater and will reveal how they are manifested through performance examples.

#### 1) Barrier-free plays that emphasize accessibility and participation of people with disabilities

This type of play has as its primary goal the accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities, both in the audience and on stage. It is necessary to distinguish between plays that focus on accessibility services to facilities for the disabled and plays that emphasize the participation of the disabled in the creation and performance.

‘Barrier-free’ is a term that originated in architecture. It was first mentioned at a United Nations conference in June 1974 in a report on barrier-free architectural design. Since, it has expanded to mean the elimination of discrimination and prejudice against people with disabilities. In the field of culture and arts, it is often used in relation to the right to enjoy culture and arts. The first barrier-free play in Korea was *Snail’s Star* performed at the Catholic Youth Centre in June 2014 by Empo Company. The play tells the story of a disabled couple based on a true story and focuses on accessibility for disabled audiences. Its performance space was equipped with audio description and Braille scripts for the visually impaired, printed scripts for low-vision audiences, screens in the seats for the hearing impaired, and a wide seating area for wheelchair audiences. Since then, national/public theaters have mainly taken the lead in producing accessible theater for the disabled.

In October 2021, in *Roadkill in the Theater*, the National Theater Company of Korea attempted to create barrier-free. The play examines the issue of ‘objectification’ in human-centered society through the eyes of animals. Promoting the National Theater Company of Korea’s motto of ‘theater equally enjoyed by all,’ the play provided barrier-free services such as sign language interpretation, audio description, and Korean subtitles. In 2023, the National Theater Company of Korea presented a recreated youth play, *Youngji* which is modified from the original script for barrier-free performance. As a result, the dramatic situation and characters were much more visualized and

sensory on stage than in the original.<sup>7</sup>In addition, Korean subtitles were introduced and audio description was provided for all performances.

The number of barrier-free performances and the number of disabled audience members at the National Theater Company of Korea are gradually increasing. In 2019, there were no barrier-free performances among total 16 performances. In 2020, there were two, accounting for 20 percent of all performances; in 2021, six, 40 percent; and in the first half of 2022, four, 45 percent. The number of audience members with disabilities has also been increasing, from 0.51% of the total audience in 2020 to 0.73% in 2021 and 1.55% in the first half of 2022. In 2021, the National Theater Company produced *The Accessibility Enhancement Manual for Barrier-Free Performances*, which specifies how to support theatergoers with disabilities, and creates an environment that enables the theater to function as a truly barrier-free venue.<sup>8</sup>

On the other hand, the National Theater of Korea has been incorporating barrier-free devices into its performances since the end of the COVID-19 pandemic. Beginning in 2020 with the ‘Together, Creating a Barrier-Free Theater’ project, audio description, subtitles, and sign language were introduced to most performances. In October 2021, a sound play *Oakee* by the company Dabinnao, a theater company for people with disabilities, was invited to perform at the National Theater of Korea. The Theater provided on-stage commentary and sign language interpretation, Braille show guides, assisted wheelchair service, accessible shuttle bus service. And actors with disabilities were cast as the main creators. Also noteworthy was the May 2024 production *Macbeth* in sign language and Pansori directed by Mi-ran Kim. Featuring six deaf actors and four Pansori performers, it adapted the original play into a contemporary version of the murder of the butchers. *Macbeth* was praised by critics for its experimental challenge using sign language and Pansori. The play looked like an aesthetic experiment on the barrier-free form itself. Starting from the recognition that it is impossible to completely eliminate the disabilities experienced by disabled audiences, the director Kim paradoxically proposes a play in which everyone has a disability. She presents fragmentary images of the 16 episodes that have been deconstructed and reconstructed from the Shakespeare’s text. Her experimental attempt leaves open for the audience to interpret the stage in their own way through sign language, subtitles, and spoken language. It results in the creation of a new form of barrier-free theater, which has neither a disability narrative nor a disability format. The production stands out for the idea that if it is impossible to fulfill barrier-free completely, we should rather shift to a ‘barrier conscious performance.’

Namsan Arts Center, a creative space under the Seoul Metropolitan Government, also tried barrier-free performances in four shows in 2019. In April 2019, *Route 7*, a co-production between Namsan Arts Center and the theater company Here is Naturally Theater, was the first barrier-free performance in a public theater that provided text and sign language interpretation for the hearing impaired and audio description for the visually impaired. The Seoul Metropolitan Theater’s

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p.162.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.welfarenews.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=86865>, accessed May 24, 2025.



repertoire in 2021, *Ten Million Cities* is also a barrier-free performance. About 100 everyday people from the city were summoned to the stage, and Jisung Ha, an actor with a brain lesion, was cast as an ordinary person in a wheelchair boarding a bus. A ramp was installed in the rehearsal room, a sign language interpreter was present throughout the rehearsal period, and the entire performances were barrier-free, with subtitles and audio description provided.

In addition to public theaters, Doosan Arts Center, a private producing theater, has also contributed to the development of barrier-free arts in Korea. Doosan Arts Center has served as a bridgehead for the growth of emerging artists by discovering and supporting them in the long-term basis. It also operates a multi programme called 'Humanities Theater' that connects humanities lectures, arts and sciences, with a theme from the times and the society. It is no wonder that Doosan Arts Center has been at the forefront of barrier-free support. Accessibility supports for people with disabilities are provided for all performances, and the lectures at the Doosan Humanities Theater are interpreted in text in real time, and videos with sign language interpretation are posted on YouTube after the lecture.

Such festivals as the Korea National Theater Festival and the Seoul Performing Arts Festival also support barrier-free performances. However, there are many limitations to implementing barrier-free performances, making it more of a cosmetic measure.

According to a study by Project Oset, only 14 (11.7%) of the 120 theater venues in the mecca of Korean theater, Daehakro, is fully accessible to people with disabilities, and only 21 (17.5%) is partially accessible.<sup>9</sup> The reality is that barrier-free is still regarded as an option for performance, not a requirement.

## 2) New aesthetics of disability theater implemented by subjectivity

Abled bodies have created social, cultural, and political barriers, structuring and labelling disabled bodies as unable to meet social standards and devaluing their lives.<sup>10</sup> Ableist norms have socially silenced, excluded, and segregated disabled people from the lives of mainstream communities. Contrary to the body view of the ableists, disability aesthetics embraces disabled bodies as damaged and inferior, challenges the ableist norms and calls for change of our society. It criticizes and subverts such concept as wholeness, unity, coherence, and completeness which has been praised by ableist aesthetics. The concept of subjectivity is central to the creation of disability art which, with the unique experiences and perspectives of disabled individuals, challenges ableists' norms.

The term 'subjectivity' can be defined as the rights and status of a party as a subject who is able to make its experiences and voices heard. It is an important concept in addressing social inequality, identity, and rights claims. The emphasis on subjectivity is to ensure that the individual's experiences and voices are not influenced by the oppressive structures and the external forces that

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.hankookilbo.com/News/Read/201912011638317806>. Accessed May 24, 2025.

<sup>10</sup> Ronald J. Berger, *Introducing Disability Studies*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 2013, p.27.

surround them. In the context of disability arts, subjectivity refers to artistic practice that involves the direct participation or involvement of people with disabilities in the creation of the work, so that their experiences and perspectives can be reflected without distortion.

In the disability performing arts, questions about non-disabled people portraying disability have been raised and participation of disabled people in performances has been increasing. Rather than attempting to imitate or represent the acting of non-disabled people as norm, disabled artists present their subjectivity on stage by themselves and this allows the audiences to accept and experience their disability as it is,

Aein, a theater company composed of people with disabilities, performed *Recognition Struggle: Artist's Edition* at Doosan Arts Center Space 111 in 2019. The play was written and directed by Yeon-ju Lee. It takes the subjectivity of disabled actors as the message and content of the play and denounces the non-disability-centeredness of our society and the art world. Actors with physical disabilities enter the stage and talk about the process of failure which they have experienced when they were struggling to be recognized as artists. Presenting the process of getting an artist's pass from the government, the play criticizes the reality that the disabled are treated as the same people who need to prove their existence and then be recognized as artists. Through their disabled bodies, the actors let the audience to perceive the tempo, and movement of the play at a different pace from that of able-bodied actors. The play is characterized by its sarcasm and wit, which elicits reflective thoughts from the audience.

*Jellyfish*, which was revived at the Modu Art Theater in early May in 2025, was performed by people with and without disabilities. Although it is a traditional dramatic play, it attracted a great attention for the acting of subjectivity. Based on a play by British playwright Ben Weatherill, it displays a story of Kelly's marriage and sexuality. She has Down syndrome and struggles with her mother Agnes over her marriage to non-disabled boyfriend Neil. Actress Jiyeon Baek, who has Down syndrome, performed the role of Kelly, while Dominic, a hypodermic disorder friend of Kelly was performed by hypodermic disorder actor Bumjin Kim. The disabled and non-disabled actors performed together on stage and a prompter closely accompanied Jiyeon Baek for script support throughout the performance. Kelly's special physicality was not hidden from the stage during the performance, making the play a relaxed performance. Agnes, who has prejudices about love and marriage between disabled people, regards her daughter as an object to be protected and overcome. Kelly confronts her mother, in pursuit of an independent life, wants to live true to her sexual desires and choices. This narrative, in fact, reveals our familiar prejudices that even parents of the disabled have about marriage and sexuality for their children, and urges the audience to change their views for people with disabilities.

Jae Shin is a director of disability theater who has been for a long time in creating a new theatrical aesthetic of subjectivity. She claims that she uses theater to raise social issues. In such play as *Only Nine Day's Hamlet* in 2013, she made actual laid-off workers appear on stage as performers. In 2016, she started working on researching the boundary between disability and non-disability and presented *Disability Theater* (2016), *Uncomfortable Entries* (2017), and *I am Human*



(2018). Those plays are experimental plays where she regards the conventional theater from a different perspective. Jae Shin raised questions about existing theater in *Three Elements of Theater* (2017). For the same purpose, she also created the project team Osetto to reflect on those socially taken-for-granted propositions. In November 2022, she directed and produced Sejong Cultural Centre's production of *A Character Who Hasn't Appeared Yet*. The play is considered as a pioneering work for disability theater. It was been developed over a year through the process of research, interviews, and a development in which facilitators, volunteers, and artists worked together to find their own way of expression. Actors with developmental disabilities who have just transitioned out of institutions and into the community appear on stage. In a circle on the stage, the performers with developmental disabilities sit and move around in various ways, sometimes with the help of an assistant, sometimes with the help of a sound recording and sometimes with improvised dance. Slowly but clearly, the performers' bodies move in rhythm and at their own pace they improvise to the music, discovering their physicality as it is. In this way, the play made the audience experience new senses which non-disabled performers couldn't provide.

#### **IV. Modu Art Theater, a base for the development of Korean disability theater**

In October 2023, the Modu Art Theater was opened with the goal of 'a venue for the intensive presentation and enjoyment of disability arts with the aim of expanding the creation and enjoyment of disability arts.' It is located on the 1-3 floors of the Salvation Army Building in Chungjeongno, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul. The theater building is conveniently connected to Chungjeongno Station on Subway Lines 2 and 5. It has 250-seat black box theater which is suitable for small to medium-sized theater, dance, and musical performances. In addition, it holds three rehearsal rooms and studios. The theater is designed as a step-free space and is equipped with disabled facilities on each floor. It provides information and human resources support, including audio description, subtitles, and sign language for the visually impaired and hearing impaired.<sup>11</sup> Since its opening, the Modu Art Theater has made an effort to expand the spectrum and quantity of performing arts with disabilities. It has also educated and trained human resources for disability performing arts by introducing diverse disability arts and holding many workshops.

As of October 2024, the proportion of self-produced plays of the Modu Art Theater is 30 to 40%. Although the theater was originally not planned for producing, it is attempting to plan and produce plays in various ways to build the brand of the theater and contribute to the qualitative growth of

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<sup>11</sup> The following information on the accessibility and management practices of the Modu Art Theater is mostly cited from the presentation "A Case of Accessibility and Management of Modu Arts Theater" by Se-hyung Oh, head of the theater management department of Korea Disability Arts & Culture Center, presented at the 2024 Korean Theater Critics Association's annual symposium, 'Theater or All, Exploring the Possibilities.' September 21, 2024 Conference Proceedings, pp. 10-12.

disability arts in Korea. In the first year of its opening, 10 plays were planned and produced, and efforts have been made to find and apply different approaches and methodologies for different type of disability. The repertoire ranges from disability awareness plays to disability aesthetics plays, from representational arts to contemporary postdramatic, multidisciplinary arts. In the early years of its opening, the theater has been working to develop plays for different types of disability audiences. In other words, the focus was on accessibility and communication methods such as sign language and audio commentary in theater. But as the need for creation of disability arts with weighty themes and aesthetic differences has increased over the past years, now more attention is being paid to plays that can capture the identity and emotions of disabled artists. On the other hand, Se-hyung Oh, director of the theater management department of the Korea Disability Arts & Culture Center puts importance on the role of critics in developing disability theater. He asks critics to have an active discourse through regularly academic conference, in order to lay a theoretical foundation for disability theater.

By analyzing the characteristics of the plays staged by the Modu Art Theater in the year since its opening, it is possible to foresee the direction of Korean disability theater. Two international productions (Back to Back Theater's *The Shadow of the Hunter's Prey* and Catalyse Company's *Gulliver, Last Voyage*) and a domestic theater company Buksaetong's *Ttok, Ttok, Ttok* created for developmentally disabled, were presented. The Theater also staged three of self-produced productions: *The Forest of Blue Butterflies*, a musical about prejudice and awareness of disability by the theater company Dabinnao; *Jellyfish*, written by Ben Weatherill and directed by Saerom Min; *Landscape in the Dark*, a showcase exploring the experience and identity of the visually impaired by Yoseop Bae. Other productions in 2020 include such reading play as *The Nine Fridas*, *In Water I'm Weightless* by British writer Katie O'Reilly (planned for a reading play by Inchul Jeon's directing). In 2025, for international reading performances, Samuel Hunter's *The Healing* (directing by Inchul Jeon), Mike Ervin's *The History of Bowling* by (directing by Jaehoon Shin) and David E. Freeman's *Creeps* (directing by Bo-ram Kang) are scheduled. According to Oh, the reason why Modu Art Theater is taking the lead in introducing overseas plays is that, after all its efforts to develop plays by Korean playwrights, domestic plays are still in lack of the perspective from the disabled.<sup>12</sup> It seems to be a necessary step for Korean artists learn from best international plays and artists to acquire diverse methodology of creation. It is also praiseworthy that Modu Arts Theater is making various efforts to train people with disabilities through acting or creative workshops by guest artists. On the other hand, as director Oh is well aware, even best international plays have limits in staging in Korea. To narrow down the cultural difference from the original text, a careful cultural translation is required at every translation play.

## V. Training for creating and producing disability theater

The Korea Disability Arts & Culture Center is the official institute of arts and creative education

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<sup>12</sup>*Ibid*, pp. 10-11.

for people with disabilities in Korea. Its mission is to create a cultural and artistic ecosystem for people with disabilities, and its vision is to become a key platform for the creative expression and growth of artists with disabilities. It has I-eum Arts Creation Academy for art education program and supports cultural and artistic education for artists with disabilities. To this purpose, it has a plan to develop a manual for training instructors for artists with disabilities. It also develops cultural and artistic education programmes for people with disabilities based on the understanding of different types of disability and artistic genre. Currently education for artists with disabilities is mainly provided by the Modu Art Theater.

Since its opening, the Modu Art Theater has run various training programmes for performers with disabilities. The theater-related educational programmes have been presented as lectures, workshops, and events. The goal is to improve the capabilities of domestic theater artists with disabilities. For this purpose, it invited leading domestic and international creators to perform and then have workshops to share their know-how with domestic artists. In terms of content, the training programmes hosted by the Modu Art Theater can be classified into the following categories: exploring movement and acting methodologies, searching new physical aesthetics of disability arts, researching the integration of new technologies and disability arts, and sharing methodologies in creative process. The overall goal of these efforts is, through the special physicality of disabled artists, to explore the unique disability aesthetics that cannot be found in the conventional theater. The programmes are open to both disabled and non-disabled people, showing that they serve as a stepping stone for the development of Korean disability arts.

In October 2022, the Korea National University of Arts published a barrier-free theater production manual for the first time in Korea. That reflects the national education institute considers the understanding and education of disability theater significant in educating future professional theater artists.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Traditional aesthetics have often valued intellect and spirit over the physical body, sidelining sensory experience and disconnecting art from embodiment. Anti-materialist views have treated the body as secondary, limiting its role in artistic expression. This perspective overlooks how perception and emotional response are grounded in the body. Disability arts challenges this by placing the body, especially its vulnerability, at the center of meaning. It questions conventional ideas of beauty, coherence, perfection, and normativity, and instead focuses on personal experience, sensory perception, and difference. Rather than viewing disability as a deficit or tragedy, this approach sees it as a natural part of human diversity. It offers an alternative to dominant ableist norms and treats disability as a source of creative power and self-expression. In doing so, disability art becomes a platform for disabled voices and a force for social and political change.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, we also need to be mindful of the limitations and dangers of disability

Today, disability is no longer considered as an individual flaw but as a product of society and social inequalities that lead to disability. The growing interest in disability theater among non-disabled Korean artists is tied to recent sociopolitical shifts. The 2016 blacklist scandal and the 2018 #MeToo movement heightened political awareness throughout the arts. The #MeToo movement triggered a generational shift that brought younger female artists to the forefront of Korean theater. It is no coincidence that many of the key figures in disability theater today, such as Jae Shin, Mi-ran Kim, Ja-hye Koo, Yeon-joo Lee and Jin-yeop Lee, are women who experienced these upheavals firsthand. Their work, shaped by the Sewol Ferry disaster, censorship, and struggles for justice, has helped expand the boundaries of Korean theater.

Disability theater in Korea is part of a broader cultural movement grounded in the political pursuit of a more inclusive society. In both form and content, it reflects a shared commitment to social inclusion and artistic practice.

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aesthetics. There is the potential for disability bodies to fetishize and exoticize disability, and there is also the practical dilemma of converging disability identities into cultural identities due to the realism of bodily identification with disability. However, the political and realistic disability body works as a differentiating factor in staging disability, creating a unique aesthetic for disability art.