

# The Facilitation of Ableism in Dance Audience Members

Arielle McKeever

**Abstract:** Within the United States, 61 million adults live with some type of physical or mental disability, making up 26% of society's population. This research explores the challenges faced by arts organizations in making their programs accessible to audience members with disabilities. Through an empirical and normative analysis of five prominent performing arts venues in New York City (Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), David H. Koch Theater, The Joyce Theater, New York City Center, and Radio City Music Hall) this research seeks to address *if the dance community facilitates ableism amongst dance audience members due to their inaccessible venues and or accommodations offered?* Despite the standards established in the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act for public buildings to abide by, these requirements are not sufficient to allow dance to be accessible for all audience members. This research seeks to bring awareness on how to better integrate the disability community to be regular dance audience members.

---

## I. Introduction and Literature Review

### Introduction

61 million adults, within the United States, live with some type of physical or mental disability, making up 26% of society's population ("Disability Impacts All of Us"). That equates to one in every four people that art institutions may be excluding either intentionally or unintentionally, as well as a significant percentage of potential art audiences that are being disregarded. Many such institutions are able to overlook such "progressive" ideas because laws addressing accessibility, established by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), state that institutions do not need to create accommodations for the disability community for buildings constructed before January 26, 1992. Such regulations prohibit historic art institutions from constructing a more accessible and interactive environment for people with physical and mental disabilities.

Disabilities are both prevalent and yet invisible throughout cultural work. This is a mere

reflection, perhaps, of the numerical presence in the world, and the simultaneous marginalization and isolation in society ("Disability. Dance. Artistry"). Disabilities are often overlooked by society, especially in dance, because of their ideology that they are not physically or mentally able to perform at the same "standard" as those without a disability. While this is certainly not true, there is also the additional expense that many dance institutions avoid since they do not understand how much of the population they are excluding from their performances.

In the United States alone, 73.54 million people made up the number of performing arts attendance activities in 2013 according to a study done by Statista ("Dance or ballet performances: attendance U.S. 2013"). However, through this research, I hope to confront whether such performance venues are truly inclusive for people with physical or mental disabilities that make such art performances inaccessible to them. Determining whether such a statistical number of performance attendees could be higher. Through this research I set out to answer: *Does the dance community facilitate ableism amongst dance audience members due to their inaccessible venues and or accommodations offered?* The

study aims to address this question by conducting an empirical analysis on five major theaters in New York City known for being the center for the arts. The theaters include Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), David H. Koch Theater, The Joyce Theater, New York City Center, and Radio City Music Hall. Through an empirical analysis the research consists of key questions to identify the disparity by: identifying barriers of involvement; considering the types of support facilitating disabled people's involvement; gaining information on provision at the local government level; determining the level of disability awareness among arts organizations and venues; and discovering more about disabled people's involvement in mainstream arts venues.

### **Literature Review**

In the articles by Kelly and Livingston accessibility is analyzed in a public building and how it hinders society as a whole, by prohibiting the disability community from equal accessibility despite ADA regulations. Currently, such regulations reflect ineffectiveness as they provide loopholes for large organizations to avoid making their facilities accessible for all types of disabilities. Both stress the importance of going directly to the disability community to best resolve accessibility issues, and not rely on the institution's budget to decide what is feasible to accommodate.

Research from the article by Burgdorf, reveals that only "three-fourths of all disabled persons did not see live theater or live music performances" in the early 90s. Other statistics that attendance in public venues was also down concluding that people with disabilities do not participate in "various aspects of commercial, social, and recreational activities" because they do not feel welcomed or safe attending (Burgdorf). Such a finding reinforces the question if these public buildings truly allow all bodies to attend.

Another important note is mentioned in the articles by Welage et al. and Keerthirathna et al. found in their study were that newly developed public facilities are more inclined to adopt accessibility requirements. However, older buildings that were established before the 1990s act are more inept and make gradual modifications to meet the requirements. All five theaters being reviewed in this study were established before ADA regulations were adopted, and thus will most likely be on the slower trend of adopting new accommodations.

---

## **II. Methods**

### **Empirical Analysis**

This study was conducted through an empirical analysis using an evidence-based approach of study in creating an interpretation of such findings. A collection of both qualitative and quantitative data provided by the five New York City theaters (New York City, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), David H. Koch Theater, The Joyce Theater, New York City Center, and Radio City Music Hall) was pulled from these institutions' public websites and was utilized for analysis.

Each institutions' website had an "accessibility" page outlining the "accommodations" they offered within the facility. All of them had additional contact information, utilized in this study to gain further understanding of what accommodations were or were not available if not explicitly stated on the site. While there are a number of ways to view an institution's accessibility levels, this study primarily focuses on six key areas that were viewed as important based on prior research

Figure 1  
 Classification of disability

Mobility impaired/physically disabled e.g. arthritis, rheumatism, progressive illness etc.
Blind/visually impaired/partially sighted
Deaf/hard of hearing/hearing impaired/hearing aid user
Mental ill health e.g. depression, ‘nerves’, anxiety, phobias, agoraphobia, panic attacks etc
Learning disability/intellectual disability including dyslexia, ADD/ADH, aphasia etc.
Hidden disability e.g. speech impairment; epilepsy; diabetes; stomach, liver or digestive problems; skin conditions, allergies; chest/breathing problems, asthma, bronchitis; heart, blood pressure or blood circulation problems; progressive illness not covered above
Any other health problem or disability that limits your day to day activities

mentioned within the literature review. From the findings of each theater, the study then compares all five institutions against each other (Figure 4).

Additionally, it is important to define frequently utilized terms for clarity. Figure 1 represents “who” this research addresses when discussing disabilities. For clarity, this research provides graphs to help summarize research findings and be of use in representing certain disability guidelines and regulations.

**Normative Analysis**

From the results of the empirical analysis, the data was utilized to make recommendations on the next steps and actions needed for theater institutions to make venues even more accessible to the disability community. This analysis relied heavily on the information found within the empirical analysis to be able to provide actionable insights.

**III. Results**

In 2010, The National Endowment for the Arts Office of Accessibility revised the regulations based on the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) published revised Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) regulations in the Federal Register. The regulations adopted the ADA revised requirements for facilities inclusion within public

buildings for the arts. The following regulations are a sample of such standards:

“The revised regulations include a new eight-part section devoted exclusively to the regulation of ticketing for wheelchair spaces and companion seats. The highlights of the new ticketing regulations include, but are not limited to, the following requirements:

- 1) Tickets for accessible seating must be available for purchase during the same times and in the same ways as the purchase of other tickets;
- 2) Accessible seating must be identified to the same level of specificity as other seats on maps, seating charts, and brochures, and, if asked, the location of all available accessible seating must be identified;
- 3) Tickets for accessible seating must be available at all price levels;
- 4) A wheelchair user may purchase up to three companion seats that are contiguous and in the same row so long as such seats are available, and all patrons may purchase that number of seats;
- 5) Accessible seating may only be released when all other tickets are sold out or all other tickets in a specific price range or area are sold out;

- 6) Individuals with disabilities must be able to transfer their tickets to others under the same terms and conditions as other ticket holders;
- 7) Venues must honor tickets for non-accessible locations purchased on the secondary market (i.e. tickets that are re-sold by the original purchaser) by a wheelchair user so long as comparable accessible seats are available at the time the ticket is presented;
- 8) Venues may not ask for proof of disability or ask what the individual’s specific disability is, but may ask if the individual is purchasing tickets for someone with a mobility disability. The venue may investigate if it has reason to believe fraud has been committed,” ( "2010 Revised Regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act Titles II and III”).

According to the American Occupational Therapy Association “accessibility” refers to the degree to which an environment (e.g., a site, facility, workplace, service, or program) can be approached, entered, operated in, or used safely by people with disabilities (Welage et al.). Most theaters in New York City, if not all, fall under the requirements for Title III of the ADA for private businesses and commercial facilities. This states that such facilities must remove architectural barriers if it is “readily achievable” and without “undue financial and administrative burden” (ADA

Guide for Small Businesses). Such language makes barriers to access a recommendation rather than a requirement for such institutions. It provides an opportunity for a public building to dismiss creating accessibility accommodation if it does not seem like the “appropriate time.” As a society, the approach to how a disability is viewed is put at the fault of the person who identifies as such. Specifically, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines a disability as “any restriction or lack of ability to perform an activity in the manner or within the range considered normal for a human being” (“What is a disability?”). Inevitably, our society “rewards” those who do not have a disability by enabling easy access to institutions, while those with a disability must face the repercussions for the lack of access these institutions are willing to provide. In other words, one cannot blame a disabled person for their abilities, however, it should be upon institutions to ensure access for all and not some, because otherwise, that is not true access to the public. Our society naturally favors those without a disability.

Figure 2  
2010 ADA Standards: Number of Wheelchair Spaces in Assembly Areas

Capacity of Seating (i.e. # of Seats)	Minimum # of Required Wheelchair Spaces
4 to 25	1
26 to 50	2
51 to 150	4
151 to 300	5
301 to 500	6
501 to 5000	6, plus 1 for each 150, or fraction thereof, between 501 through 5000
5001 and over	36, plus 1 for each 200, or fraction thereof, over 5000

Figure 3  
2010 ADA Standards: Receivers for Assistive Listening Systems

Capacity of Seating in Assembly Area	Minimum # of Required Receivers	Minimum # of Receivers Required to be Hearing-aid Compatible
50 or less	2	2
51 to 200	2, plus 1 per 25 seats over 50 seats or fraction thereof	2
201 to 500	2, plus 1 per 25 seats over 50 seats or fraction thereof	1 per 4 receivers or fraction thereof
501 to 1000	20, plus 1 per 33 seats over 500 seats or fraction thereof	1 per 4 receivers or fraction thereof
1001 to 2000	35, plus 1 per 50 seats over 1000 seats or fraction thereof	1 per 4 receivers or fraction thereof
2001 and over	55 plus 1 per 100 seats over 2000 seats or fraction thereof	1 per 4 receivers or fraction thereof

Figure 4  
Results of Accessibility from the 5 Theaters

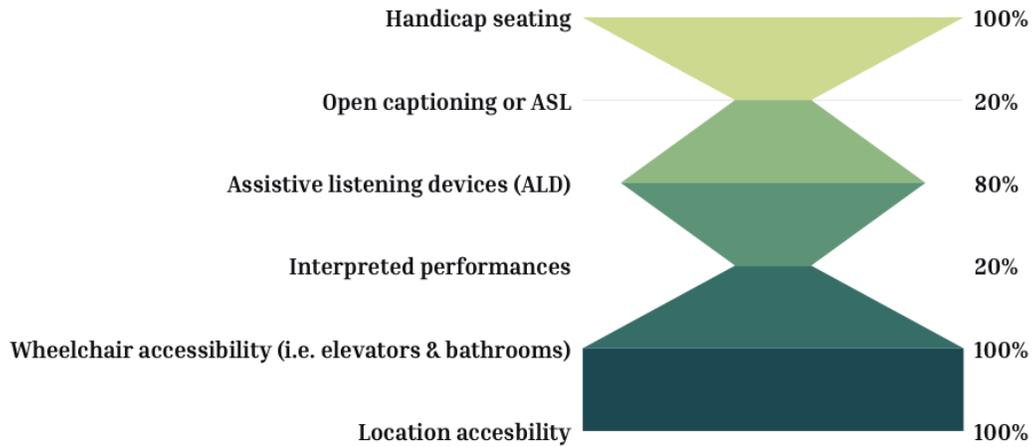


Figure 5  
Results of Accessibility from the each Theater

Accessibility	BAM	David H Koch Theater	The Joyce Theater	New York City Center	Radio City Music Hall
Handicap seating	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Open captioning or ASL	Sometimes	No	No	No	No
Assistive listening devices (ALD)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Interpreted performances	No	No	No	No	Yes
Wheelchair accessibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Location accessibility	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

After evaluating the five prominent performing arts dance theaters in New York City, Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), David H. Koch Theater, The Joyce Theater, New York City Center, and Radio City Music Hall, the results showed that 100% of these have the appropriate number of handicap seating, wheelchair accessibility, and location accessibility. Assistive learning devices (ALD) were implemented by 80% of the theaters, while open captioning/ASL and interpreted performances lacked far more since only one theater had such features.

---

#### **IV. Findings and Limitations**

##### **Findings**

As a result of the data, all five theaters do abide by the requirements outlined in the ADA guidelines, especially the revised requirements of The National Endowment for the Arts Office of Accessibility requirements shown in Figure 2 and Figure 3. Both figures provide clear numbers and percentages of the amount of accessible accommodations that are necessary for the size of the public venue, which are important details the ADA guidelines lack. While it is understandable that laying out each public building's requirements would be tedious, being less vague and allowing for interpretation and autonomy for the institution to choose what and when to implement it, has not been effective. Figure 4 showcases areas in which improvement is needed. All five theaters have the appropriate number of handicap seating, wheelchair accessibility, and location accessibility. However, one can see the areas in which some theaters have taken it upon themselves to implement their own accommodations. Figure 5 reveals which theaters have what features are available.

From the results, I was surprised to find that larger and more well-funded theaters like David H. Koch Theater and New York City

Center do not have additional features outside of the basic ADA guidelines. This further goes to show that older buildings are more likely to adopt such modifications in time if not necessary as discussed in the literature review. Additionally, it is clear from the low percentages in Figure 4 that more attention needs to go into providing resources for those with non-visible disabilities in these spaces.

##### **Limitations**

This study faced several restricting setbacks for the research to be conducted as originally planned. To be able to show more significant findings on the accessibility of theaters, I had sought to attend performances at each theater and gather both qualitative and quantitative data on their accessibility during the summer of 2021. However, due to the COVID-19 most in-person live performances were canceled to mitigate increasing COVID-19 cases. As a result, I postponed my in-person research until December of 2021, only for the Omicron variant to emerge at that time, closing the door yet again to many theaters in New York City. As a result, this research was not able to provide the outcome I was hoping it would due to abiding by COVID-19 restrictions. Additionally, since many theaters were closed due to COVID-19 it made it very challenging to get in contact with staff members to understand what accessibility accommodations each theater was able to provide. Upon my research, I discovered there is limited prior research done about accessibility in performing art theaters. Public data was limited, primarily making me rely on each theater's website to view the public information on what they offer.

---

#### **V. Recommendations and Conclusion**

##### **Recommendations**

Future research could seek to find theaters or organizations that are leaders in

creating spaces to be as accessible as possible for audience members with a disability and use that as a “standard” for other institutions to set as a goal. This research primarily focuses on understanding The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and whether that should be used to accurately represent a building's accessibility. Other research could survey the disability community as to what accommodations are not in most public theaters that should be outside of the ADA guidelines.

### Conclusion

It is crucial as a society that we are inclusive of everyone and everybody. Public spaces are not public unless they can be accessed by everyone. The arts, especially dance, are such a fundamental part of societal growth and development that they should not be restricted to only certain individuals. It is the duty of these institutions to break the barriers of access that are prohibiting people with disabilities from feeling safe and welcomed in these public spaces.

---

## VI. References

"Accessibility - David H. Koch Theater."

<https://www.davidhkotheater.com/pla-n-your-visit/accessibility/>.

"Accessibility | The Joyce Theater."

<https://www.joyce.org/accessibility>.

"Accessibility | New York City

Center." <https://www.nycitycenter.org/pla-n-your-visit/accessibility/>.

"ADA Guide for Small Businesses" *U.S.*

*Department of Justice, 1997,*  
<https://www.ada.gov/reachingout/smbusgd.pdf>

"BAM | Accessibility - Brooklyn Academy of

Music."

<https://www.bam.org/visit/accessibility>.

Burgdorf, Robert L. "Equal Access to Public Accommodations." *The Milbank Quarterly*, vol. 69, 1991, pp. 183–213, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3350163>.

"Dance or ballet performances: attendance U.S. 2013." Statista, 8 Apr. 2016, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/193033/attendance-at-dance-or-ballet-performances-in-the-us-since-2003>.

"Disability. Dance. Artistry." *Dance/NYC*, Dance/NYC in Alliance with Dance/USA, [www.dance.nyc/uploads/DanceNYC\\_DisabilityDanceArtistry\\_Online.pdf](http://www.dance.nyc/uploads/DanceNYC_DisabilityDanceArtistry_Online.pdf).

"Disability Impacts All of Us." *Centers for*

*Disease Control and Prevention*, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 16 Sept. 2020, [www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html](http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/disabilityandhealth/infographic-disability-impacts-all.html).

"Disabled Services at Radio City Music Hall - Madison Square Garden." <https://www.msg.com/radio-city-music-hall/disabled-services>.

Keerthirathna, W. A. D., Gayani Karunasena, and V. A. K. Rodrigo. "Disability access in public buildings." *International Research Conference on Sustainability in Built Environment*. 2010.

Kelly, Rosemary. "Barriers to Disabled People's Participation in and Access to the Arts in

Northern Ireland." *Arts Council of Northern Ireland*, Arts Council of Northern Ireland, 17 Dec. 2007, [www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/DisabilityBaselineSurvey.pdf](http://www.artscouncil-ni.org/images/uploads/publications-documents/DisabilityBaselineSurvey.pdf).

Livingston, Kathy. "When architecture disables:  
Teaching undergraduates to perceive ableism in

the built environment." *Teaching  
Sociology* (2000): 182-191.

Welage, Nandana, and Karen PY Liu.  
"Wheelchair accessibility of public  
buildings: a review of the  
literature." *Disability and  
Rehabilitation: Assistive Technology* 6.1  
(2011): 1-9.

"What is a disability?" *The United Nations and  
Disabled Persons -The First Fifty  
Years, 2003-04,*  
<https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/enable/dis50y10.htm>.

"2010 ADA Standards for Accessible Design."

[www.ada.gov/regs2010/2010ADASTandards/2010ADAstandards.htm](http://www.ada.gov/regs2010/2010ADASTandards/2010ADAstandards.htm).

"2010 Revised Regulations of the Americans  
with Disabilities Act Titles II and III."  
<https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/NEA-ADA-TipSheet-v2.pdf>.