

***The Pillowman* (Media Review)**

McDonagh, M. (2003). *The Pillowman*. London: Faber.

Reviewed by Elizabeth A. Thomson¹

Disability service providers at higher education institutions do not exist in a vacuum. A disability service office is interconnected to many parts of the college or university, including a theater arts program. This review of the play, *The Pillowman*, illustrates its importance for disability service providers because the play could be produced on their campus but should be considered first within a disability studies frame.

The Pillowman (2003) is an award-winning dark comedy play by Irish playwright Martin McDonagh. According to Playbill (Hernandez, 2007), *The Pillowman* was one of the ten most-produced plays at the time. Colleges and universities such as the University of Minnesota Morris, Oxford University, University Nebraska-Lincoln, and the University of Colorado Boulder have produced it. Internationally, the play reopened as a revival in November 2022 in London. The play has received accolades including a Tony and an Olivier Award, and is described as “spellbinding” (Brantley, 2005), “exhilarating and viciously funny new comedy-drama” (*The Pillowman*: Tickets, n.d.) and “one of the greatest plays of the past 25 years” (*The Pillowman*, n.d.).

The Pillowman is a play about short story writer Katurian, his family members, and the impact of the stories he writes. While the play is not set in a specific year or place, it is described as being in a totalitarian police state. Michal is Katurian’s brother who has an undiagnosed intellectual disability due to the earlier abuse from their parents. Since the death of their parents, Michal and Katurian have a close relationship with each other; Michal admires his brother and more importantly the stories he writes. Katurian ultimately commits filicide and kills Michal before the police can.

At the heart of this media review, I question why there has been a lack of discussion around the role of filicide; how the play has received such theatrical accolades without acknowledging the potential harm

it perpetuates; and lastly, what the responsibility is of the theatre organizations that produce *The Pillowman*. This review is timely and relevant as disability is being seen more as part of diversity (Kim & Aquino, 2017; Owen, 2021), and disabled students are advocating for disability cultural centers at various higher education institutions (University of Illinois Chicago). This review explores the above points within a Disability Studies lens since no reviews do so. Additionally, I hope this review will provide further critical awareness for future theatre organizations that consider producing it. To be clear, I am not supporting the suppression of the creative arts. I am supporting that all those involved in play selection go into the selection process with as much information as possible.

Disability Studies is an interdisciplinary field, stems from the civil rights era, and centers disabled people and their experiences (Mullaney, 2019). Disability Studies asserts considering the disabled body-mind without the negative assumption that there is something wrong with body-mind (Longmore & Garland-Thomson, 1999; Mitchell & Snyder, 1997). Furthermore, Disability Studies interrogates systems and practices for ableism or disability oppression rather than perpetuating the disabled person as sad, bad, or tragic (Charlton, 1998).

I have a personal and professional relationship to the review of this play. Professionally, in my position of Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, a group of students met with me to share their concerns about the play. I met with the student theatre organization’s leaders and faculty advisors. Using dialogue techniques, I listened to better understand, empathize, and build community. I did not go into the conversations trying to cancel the production of the play. I took copious notes throughout the play’s tech run as well as during the play’s performances. As I experienced the play during its tech rehearsal, I used the (Disability) Bechdel Test (Pulrang, 2013). Using this test, I specifically sought if the disabled character “died” or was “cured” and had complexity.

Personally, I have a relationship with the play as I identify as disabled and have been an active member of the disability community in the past five years. I am highly aware of the recurring narratives around disabled people. I earned my PhD in Disability Studies, and explored the effect of a disability culture center on disabled students’ experiences on campus.

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As a result, my personal and professional approach is commonly an equity or in this case a Disability Studies approach. To ensure good research practice, I reflected on how I may be biased due to my professional and personal relationship to the topic. I journaled, reviewed my field notes, and asked other people in the field for their opinions. What follows is a review of *The Pillowman* based on this work.

McDonagh's approach seems to be one that highlights the storyteller and the act of writing. The play is meta—writing a story about a storyteller—and has been compared to a set of Russian nesting dolls. He also incorporates dark comedy in this violent and complicated play. There are strengths I appreciate about the play. One strength is that the play illuminates “the writer.” With the main character being a writer, the audience has the opportunity to “get into his head.” The play is one of narration and storytelling. One experiences flashbacks of Katurian's childhood as well as Katurian's stories. Another strength is showing the non-specific named time period of a totalitarian police state. With this ambiguous time, the play's setting could be past, current or future depending on when and where the play is being performed. Lastly, the play does have an intellectually disabled character who has a prominent and complicated role in my opinion. In summary, as with many pieces of art, *The Pillowman* is complex, and the piece is not “black or white” or “good or bad.”

However, if a Disability Studies lens is applied, *The Pillowman* becomes problematic. First, as some critics note, the play casts non-disabled actors to play Michal. Historically, disabled characters in films and plays have been played by non-disabled people. This behavior is often justified as “acting,” and some non-disabled actors receive awards for their performances. However, one of the impacts to not casting disabled actors is not only authenticity, but financial, and lack of increased visibility with their craft, which could lead to further work.

Second, the play presents a number of old tropes that feed damaging views of disability, such as the notion that mental disability equals moral deficiency, disability as an excuse for jerkassery, and “bury your disabled” (Theatre/*The Pillowman*, n.d.). Additionally, the word “retarded” is used frequently, although it is considered by today's standard antiquated, offensive, and hurtful (The effects of the R-word, n.d.; Why the R-word is the R-slur, n.d.).

Third, the main character and writer, Katurian kills Michal, his disabled brother, to save him from his impending death by the police. This behavior is an extension of filicide, the act of killing one's son or daughter. As early as 2008, the murder of disabled people has been documented (disability-memorial.org/index-by-year). Since then, people around the world have organized vigils on March 1 to recognize this as a social problem.

Lastly, a challenging aspect of plays is their temporal nature. For example, a play at a university might run only for three days. While some of the actors might stay as students, the play itself moves on from the campus' psyche. But, what about the impact of the play? What, if any, is the responsibility of the play's producer for possible community harm? I return to McDonagh's quote that there might be more duty than just telling the story. Unfortunately, there is no text in which he expounds more. What is theatre's accountability for the plays they produce?

The Pillowman is but one play that portrays harmful disability tropes. I offer that through continued awareness and education, we can increase inclusivity and be in disability allyship and solidarity. To that end, I suggest the below selected resources on theatre, disability, and recommendations, if your college/university is considering producing the play. The Disability Studies lens informed the below selected resources and recommendations because they center disability or the disabled actor, acknowledges systemic ableism and disability oppression, and interrogates where power and privilege is.

Recommendations

- Collaborate with your Disability Cultural Center and/or your Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to host educational dialogues, a response, or support students.
- Before approving the selection of *The Pillowman*, have an intentional conversation critically considering - How does the play portray disabled people? Do disabled people have power? Or are they seen as victims? This equity lens approach could be used for critically thinking about all future play selections.
- Consider a play that empowers disabled characters.
- Support disabled playwrights, authors, artists, and filmmakers by producing or showing their work.

- If producing the play, provide additional content warnings about the play. These prior warnings give audience members more information to decide whether they want to attend.
- Organize a “talk back” after one of the play’s shows. Additionally, do not use the talk back to defend or excuse. Really try to be open to criticisms audience members may have.
- Consider a collaboration between Disability Studies and the Theatre Arts discipline.
- Use dialogue as a communication method, which aims to increase community, understanding, relations, and empathy. Dialogue is about understanding over agreement.

About the Author

Elizabeth (liz) Anh Thomson received their B.A. degree in Sociology/Anthropology and German from Lake Forest College; M.A. degree in Women and Gender Studies from Roosevelt University; and Ph.D. in Disability Studies from University of Illinois Chicago. Their experience includes working at two different cultural centers and teaching Asian American Studies and Gender and Women’s Studies. They are currently Interim Associate Vice Chancellor for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at the University of Minnesota Morris. Their research explores the impact of disability cultural centers in higher education. They can be reached by email at: lthomson@morris.umn.edu

Selected Recommended Films Centering Disabled People

- *CODA* (2021)
- *Champions* (2023)
- *Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution* (2020)
- *The Peanut Butter Falcon* (2019)
- *Sins Invalid: An Unshamed Claim to Beauty* (2013)
- *Special* (2019-2021)
- *When I Walk* (2013)

Selected Resources on Theatre and Disability

- American Theatre’s blog: <https://www.americantheatre.org/category/special-section/disability-and-theatre/>
- Bodies of Work: <https://bow.ahs.uic.edu/>
- Dream Street NYC: www.dreamstreetyc.org/dreamstreet-who-are-we
- OnStage Blog: <https://www.onstageblog.com/editorials/2022/4/13/strategies-for-combatting-ableism>
- Guide to Theatre Access; Disability Arts International: www.disabilityartsinternational.org/resources/a-guide-to-theatre-access/
- Tellin’ Tales Theatre: <https://tellintales.org/>