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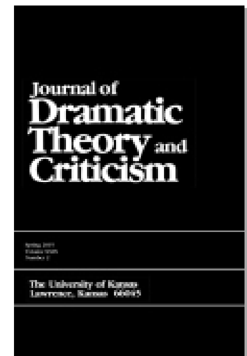

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In Search of Merrick: Kinesthetic Empathy, Able-Bodiedness, and Disability Representation

Stanton B. Garner, Jr.

Acting Disabled

In 2007 the Proteus Theatre Company of Basingstoke, England, presented a one-man show entitled *Merrick, the Elephant Man*.[1] This production, which was developed by director Mary Swan and actor Saul Jaffé, told the story of Joseph Merrick (1862-1890), the well-known "Elephant Man" of Victorian Britain who suffered from Proteus Syndrome, a rare genetic condition that causes abnormal growths and deformities. Disability and the perceptions, myths, and challenges associated with it have played an important role in the Proteus Theatre Company's activities. The community-based company (whose name has nothing to do with the syndrome) provides a long-standing free workshop for adults with disabilities, and its Merrick project was supported by Shire, a biopharmaceutical company that specializes in treatments for life-altering conditions such as Merrick's. After conducting extensive research on Merrick and Proteus Syndrome, Swan and Jaffé developed a production that told Merrick's story through the use of multiple media, burlesque, and acrobatic performance. Jaffé, who is an able-bodied actor, played a range of male and female characters including Tom Norman, the English showman and entrepreneur who exhibited Merrick to paying audiences in 1884; Frederick Treves, the surgeon who brought Merrick to the London Hospital in 1886 where he lived until his death in 1890; as well as numerous others who formed Merrick's world during his childhood and adult life. The heart of Jaffé's performance was his portrayal of Merrick. Eschewing makeup or prosthetics, Jaffé embodied Merrick through a series of physicalized enactments involving posture, gesture, movement, and voice. Over the course of the performance, Jaffé alternated between Merrick's lived experience of disability and the public ways in which this disability was apprehended, described, and staged.

Merrick, the Elephant Man is not the first performative enactment of Merrick's life. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, when Bernard Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* played on Broadway and David Lynch's film by the same name garnered

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widespread attention, Merrick's story has been performed dozens of times—all by able-bodied actors— in original plays, two operas, and revivals of Pomerance's play.[2] The most publicized of these revivals was the recent Broadway production starring Bradley Cooper as Merrick, which originated at the Williamstown Theatre Festival in 2012 and opened at New York's Booth Theater in November 2014. The renewal of interest in Merrick's life in the 1970s had its impetus in the publication of Ashley Montagu's 1971 book, *The Elephant Man: A Study in Human Dignity*. Montagu's book resurrected the story of Merrick's life, which had fallen into relative obscurity after Dr. Frederick Treves's 1923 memoir, *The Elephant Man and Other Reminiscences*, and argued on behalf of its protagonist's humanity. With its extensive visual presentation of Merrick's body, including photos of the Elephant Man's skeleton, which remains in the pathology collection of the Royal London Hospital, Montagu's book foregrounded a set of questions and anxieties that subsequent dramatizations would pursue.

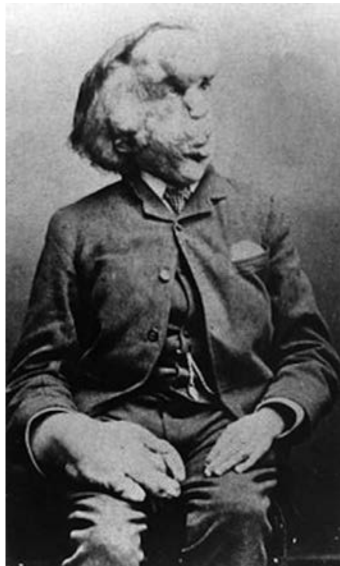

Fig. 1: Joseph Merrick (1862-90). *Carte de visite*, c. 1889. Public Domain.

How can normative conceptions of the "human" accommodate a figure of such aberrant embodiment? How do the ostensibly able-bodied negotiate the aversion, curiosity, medical interest, pity, and compassion that this radically disabling physicality occasions? And how do these questions engage more fundamental issues involving understanding and empathy?

These issues are particularly relevant, of course, to those working at the intersection of disability studies and theatre, dance, and performance studies. Drawing upon what Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander call the "theatricality of

disability and the centrality of performance to the formation of disability cultures and identities,"[3] scholars in disability and performance studies have identified culturally prevalent models of embodiment that "enfreak" those with non-normative bodies, while describing the many forms of performances that individuals with disabilities have used to take control of their appearance and assert their agency in its visual reception. But the culturally familiar phenomenon of able-bodied performers who enact disability for predominantly able-bodied spectators has been given considerably less attention by critics and scholars. The reasons for this are not hard to find. Given the history of disability caricature and the long-standing specularization of bodily impairment, able-bodied representations of disability have often been viewed as a kind of mimicry. The prevalence and familiarity of this mode of disability impersonation reinforce this suspicion. The fact that Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, and Daniel Day Lewis have been popularly and critically rewarded for their on-screen performances of impairment—three Oscars for Best Actor among them—reflects what many see as the public's voyeuristic/sentimental consumption of disability representation and the popularity of a kind of disability shtick.[4] When one reads the following statement in a 1979 review of Pomerance's *The Elephant Man*, it is easy to understand how some might come to that conclusion: "We can add [Philip] Anglim's name to the growing list of bravura performances by actors playing stricken people on Broadway."[5]

It is important, however, not to carry this judgment to the point where it limits our understanding of what goes on in able-bodied disability enactment and spectatorship. For all that we understand about the ableist stigmatization underlying the representation of a figure like Shakespeare's Richard III, we still know relatively little about what it means to perform such corporeally aberrant figures and to witness these performances in the theatre. Our lack of a term equivalent to "cross-gender" or "cross-racial" for indicating enactment and perception that negotiate differences of bodily and cognitive capability indicates how little attention we have given to these vexed and potentially productive questions. Given recent work in neuroscience, philosophy, and other disciplines on how we apprehend and respond to the embodied actions of others, it is time to reconsider and complicate our assumptions about what it means for able-bodied individuals to witness and perform disability. In the following pages, I hope to build on recent discussions of kinesthetic empathy as a way of considering the problem" of able-bodied disability representation and the process of attending to such representations. "Kinesthetic empathy" designates the ability to experience the movements of others through inner simulations or reenactments. Though the concept has antecedents in aesthetics, psychology, and early dance criticism, its current popularity owes much to the neurological discovery of a mirror neuron system in the human and certain animal brains that registers kinetic actions in similar ways when they are observed and when they are enacted. In the area of performance, the idea of kinesthetic empathy has proven highly

productive in dance studies, as evidenced by Susan Leigh Foster's *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (2011), and the research of Dee Reynolds, Matthew Reason, and others associated with the "Watching Dance: Kinesthetic Empathy" project in the United Kingdom. Challenging universalist accounts of audience response, this work explores the cultural, cognitive, and individual variables that condition our ability to empathize with the dancer's kinesthetic experience by inwardly simulating or resonating with it. Though their focus has been directed less at its kinesthetic dimensions, the phenomenon of empathy has also informed the work of Bruce McConachie, Rhonda Blair, and other scholars studying the cognitive dimensions of theatrical performance.

In order to suggest how kinesthetically empathic processes can be engaged by able-bodied performances of disability, I will discuss the Proteus production of *Merrick, the Elephant Man*. This production, I argue, deployed a network of performance strategies designed to engage its audience in the experience of what it means to look at—and what it might mean to "inhabit"—a historically situated body such as Merrick's. As I argue, the strategies of engagement and disengagement that the Proteus Theatre production used to stage Merrick's story drew attention to the kinesthetic and empathic circuits linking character, actor, and audience in a sometimes uncomfortable intercorporeal field. As this statement suggests, while my primary concern will be directed at the production's spectators, who represent the target of the performance's kinesthetic and empathic solicitations, I will expand the notion of kinesthetic empathy by considering the rehearsal process that Saul Jaffé went through while developing his performative embodiment of Merrick. The imitative work that actors perform when adopting gestures, movements, and mannerisms of actual or imagined others involves deliberative operations that spectators do not undergo and results in physically actualized impersonations. The kinesthetic and empathic foundations of this process, however, can empathically correspond to those that spectators employ when viewing an actor's movements and gestures. Moreover, given that theatrical performance consists of staged imitations, the actor's kinesthetic embodiments play an essential role in our kinesthetic response to the actions we witness. This seems particularly true in productions like *Merrick, the Elephant Man* where actors draw attention to the physical process of moving in and out of character.

Before I proceed further, a disclaimer is in order. In exploring the issue of disability representation by and for able–bodied individuals, I do not address the performances of disability by disabled actors/performers or the reception of these performances and other forms of disability representation by disabled spectators. Performing disability differs for able-bodied and disabled performers, and the able-bodied spectator's experience of these two kinds of performances differs fundamentally as well.[6] While the experiential component of actual disability performance has been taken up by disability theorists and practitioners,

the absence of the actually disabled body in performances by nondisabled actors for predominantly nondisabled audiences raises issues, I suggest, that are themselves worth exploring—issues having to do with the way individuals and societies apprehend and kinesthetically process corporeal difference and the role of performance and spectatorship in negotiating this mode of apprehension. An understanding of the kinesthetic operations at work in these performances—and the issues of empathy that they bring to view—will reveal that witnessing such performances of disability by nondisabled spectators involves processes and affinities with their own cognitive and ethical complexities.

Kinesthetic Empathy

The term "empathy" was introduced in 1909 by the British psychologist Edward Tichener as a translation for the German word *Einfühlung*. The German original, which means "in-feeling" or "feeling into," was coined several decades earlier by Robert Vischer in his treatise on aesthetic experience, *Über das optische Formgefühl* (On the Optical Sense of Form, 1873). When confronting a work of art, Vischer claimed, we employ the faculty of imagination, or "inner sensation," to project ourselves into the art-object and inhabit its structures as if they were our own. "When I observe a stationary object," Vischer wrote, "I can without difficulty place myself within its inner structure, at its center of gravity. I can think my way into it, mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it."[7] The ability to experience oneself kinesthetically within the art-object also underlies the aesthetic writings of Theodore Lipps, who used the concept of "inner mimesis" (*Nachahmung*) to describe this process of virtual identification.[8]

The movement component of this muscular identification and its implication for the performing arts was developed in the 1930s by John Martin, the first dance critic for the *New York Times*. As an art of movement, Martin claimed, dance was grounded in kinesthesia, the neuromuscular sixth sense that allows internal awareness of our body's positions and movements. Because this awareness is also activated when we watch movement, it provides the basis for what Martin termed "inner mimicry" or "kinesthetic sympathy." He wrote:

> When we see a human body moving, we see movement which is potentially producible by any human body and therefore by our own; through kinesthetic sympathy we actually reproduce it vicariously in our present muscular experience and awaken such associational connotations as might have been ours if the original movement had been of our own making. The irreducible minimum of equipment demanded of a spectator, therefore, is a kinesthetic sense in working condition.[9]

Kinesthetic sympathy allows the spectator to inhabit the dancer's movement in a kind of experiential union: "We shall cease to be mere spectators and become participants in the movement that is presented to us, and though to all outward appearances we shall be sitting quietly in our chairs, we shall nevertheless be dancing synthetically with all our musculature."[10] Because muscular movements carry within them the psychic states that produced them, Martin maintained, the audience's act of simulating these movements provides access to the performer's intentions and emotions. Like all movement forms, dance represents a direct mode of physical and psychical communication, and this becomes obvious when we attend properly to our responses while witnessing the dancer's movements.

Recent dance theorists have critiqued Martin for the universalizing tendency evident in his discussions of the dancing and perceiving body; as Susan Leigh Foster writes, Martin's view of movement "absorbed vast differences into it, transforming culturally specific patterns and practices into pan-human dramatic action."[11] From the perspective of disability, Martin's performing and perceiving body is a normative one, able to execute and experience the full register of human movement. In those rare instances when disability is introduced in Martin's text, it is presented as a deficit or threat. Speaking of the kinesthetic sense, Martin writes: "It is this and this alone which the average man must bring with him to a dance performance; without it he is like a deaf man at a symphony, or a blind man in an art gallery."[12] The complications that non-normative embodiment presents to Martin's notion of kinesthetic sympathy are evident in his discussion of contortionists: "Even in the case of the acrobat and the contortionist we are made to feel, through muscular sympathy, the strain, the difficulty of the tricks performed, and hence to have a corresponding sense of courage, skill, superiority, or sometimes of revulsion for abnormality."[13] This final suggestion raises a number of questions. Does the revulsion that Martin imagines some feel at the sight of the contorted body reflect a failure of muscular mimicry or a deficit in one's neuromuscular repertoire—in other words, a failure of recognition—or does it signal a desire to disown an aberrant set of movement possibilities that one has vicariously reproduced—in other words, a failure of empathy? What happens to Martin's notion of an unproblematically accessible kinesthetic register when an actually disabled body is involved?

The idea of kinesthetic empathy has seen a resurgence in dance theory during the past decade, and as Dee Reynolds and Mathew Reason indicate in their co-edited *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices*, it has also had an impact in fields as diverse as film studies, movement therapy, and interactive sports equipment design.[14] The neurological discovery in the early 1990s of mirror neurons in the premotor cortex of macaque monkey brains, and the subsequent confirmation of an equivalent neural network in human and other animal brains, have provided an important catalyst for this research. Mirror neurons, which activate in the same way when one observes a movement performed by another and when one executes that movement oneself, have been shown to play an important

role in action understanding, imitation, language acquisition, and empathy. Their discovery lends support to parallel findings in cognitive science and philosophy of mind (some of which predate the discovery of mirror neurons) that the ability to simulate the movements, emotions, and intentions of others is fundamental to social cognition.[15]

The exact role of mirror neurons in the experience of empathy has been subject to debate, but the accumulated scientific evidence leaves little doubt that, in neuroscientist Christian Keysers' words, empathy "is deeply engraved in the architecture of our brain."[16] In the rush of excitement that followed their popularization in the early 2000s, mirror neurons were hailed by some as universal keys to the actions, intentions, and experience of others. Neurological research, however, has provided a more nuanced understanding of how these cells work and the simulations and identifications they set into play. Far from offering identical and universal access to others, the evidence indicates our ability to simulate another's actions is variable and individual. Because we employ our own neuromotor repertoires in identifying the movements of others, there is a strong correlation between the strength of cognitive mirroring and such factors as background, experience, and expertise: someone who is trained as a violinist experiences stronger kinesthetic resonance when observing the small motor movements of a professional violinist than one who does not. Moreover, as Caroline Catmur and colleagues have demonstrated, the mirroring properties of the mirror-neuron system are neither innate nor fixed; rather, this system "is both a product and a process of social interaction."[17] Beginning with the infant's earliest experience mirroring the movements, expressions, and sounds of its mother, humans incorporate the movement practices of the communities with which they come in contact. In sensorimotor terms, it seems, we are hardwired to incorporate and rehearse the sociocultural environments we inhabit.

Studies of kinesthetic empathy by dance scholars have underscored the importance of subjective, cultural, and historical factors in kinesthetic mirroring. Reason and Reynolds, for example, found that the kinesthetic and emotional responses of spectators asked to watch classical ballet and the South Indian *bharatanatyam* differed in kind and intensity based on their cultural familiarity with these forms.[18] As Foster characterizes it, "The dancer's performance draws upon and engages with prevailing senses of the body and of subjectivity in a given historical moment. Likewise, the viewer's rapport is shaped by common and prevailing senses of the body and of subjectivity in a given social moment as well as by the unique circumstances of watching a particular dance."[19]

As the above discussion indicates, the neural activities involved in motor simulation can vary in intensity. Mirroring activity is always lessened when one perceives an action being performed compared to when one enacts that action oneself—and lessened still more when one encounters representations of this action

in other forms (a painting or a narrative, say). This discrepancy works in conjunction with inhibitory mechanisms in the brain to ensure that we do not automatically carry out the actions we observe (attempting body flips while watching a gymnastics meet, for instance). But empathic mirroring can also be mitigated or disowned on a more individual basis at preconscious and conscious levels. As neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese observes, for myriad reasons we feel the need to protect ourselves from our motor and emotional identifications with others; the action we observe could actually hurt us or the internalization of certain actions might put our own identity boundaries at risk. One of the reasons that theatre offers such powerful mimetic experiences, Gallese speculates, is that it offers a safe environment where our inhibitory mechanisms are not automatically called into play: "[W]e are free to let our simulations go, without having to bother to be prepared to counteract what is happening on stage."[20]

A significant challenge facing any discussion of empathy, in the end, is the term itself, which holds a number of philosophical, aesthetic, psychological, and popular meanings that have been historically employed to reference a range of different faculties and operations. Empathy is regularly used to denote motion mimicry, the ability to understand the goals of another's action, emotional identification, sympathy, and, as philosopher Evan Thompson puts it, "[t]he understanding of you as an other to me, and of me as an other to you" and "[t]he moral perception of you as a person."[21] Many of the controversies that continue to animate mirror neuron debates have to do with the exact relationship between movement simulation and the other cognitive process that empathy can involve. Considerable research has been conducted, for instance, on the relationship between the mirror system, which matches movement observation with movement execution, and the "mentalizing system" (also called Theory of Mind), which is involved in the representation of others' mental states.[22] Other, more abstract cognitive operations associated with movement apprehension and empathy are similarly related at the neurological level. The act of imagining an action, for instance, has been shown to activate similar areas of the brain as the act of observing or executing it. This finding has obvious implications for theatrical performance, which consists of recounted and performed actions involving the faculty of imagination.

Empathy, in short, is a powerfully mimetic process, and movement apprehension is one of its crucial components. Spectators respond to onstage actions by perceiving and "embodying" them by using a combination of preconscious and conscious mechanisms. That these internal co-enactments are simulated rather than actual does not diminish their ability to engage the spectator in a powerfully kinesthetic relationship with what he or she encounters in performance. This relationship can be fraught with cognitive and ethical dissonance. One of the reasons that the blinding of Gloucester in Act 3 of *King Lear* is difficult to watch—as the notion of kinesthetic empathy suggests—is that the spectator kinesthetically simulates both Gloucester's suffering and Cornwall's vicious gestures in blinding

him; indeed, because Cornwall's actions are intentional and goal directed, the empathic connections that the actor initiates are particularly strong. The actors playing Gloucester and Cornwall are engaged in their own versions of kinesthetic embodiment. As I indicated earlier, actors develop and inhabit the characters they play by taking on—literally incorporating—postures, movements, and actions that they encounter and assimilate into their roles. As Rhonda Blair has pointed out, actor empathy can result from preconscious mimicking processes (a kind of "bottom-up processing") and the more conscious process of imagining oneself into the conditions and experiences of another (a kind of "top-down processing"). "Part of the actor's work," she writes, "is to become more conscious of both of these perspectives, and to learn to manipulate these as effectively as possible through the use, for example, of physical mirroring exercises and imagination, based on research and the rehearsal process."[23] If observing the actions of others means kinesthetically processing them as if one were performing those same actions, then the art of acting involves the preconscious and conscious deployment of empathic operations that spectators undergo when watching actions unfold on stage. Spectators, in turn, take their kinesthetic cues from actors in generating their own kinesthetic and empathic responses.

In many ways, disability is the test case for issues of kinesthetic empathy. Can someone who does not have muscular dystrophy, after all, ever really understand the experience of someone who does? It would be naive to suggest that he or she could have unfettered access to this merely by imitating that experience in actual body postures or by enacting it prereflectively in the act of observing it. Lennard J. Davis writes,

> The average person imagines what it would be like to be blind, deaf, or lame by the simple act of closing one's eyes, stopping one's ears, or walking with a limp. After a few seconds of this deprivation, one generally rushes back to the comfort of "normality." This process creates in reality not understanding, but an "us-them division" which also neatly enforces the hegemonic demands that one be "normal."[24]

Wanda Strukus addressed this issue in an important article on kinesthetic empathy and disability performance. Working with several performances by AXIS Dance Company, an Oakland-based dance company that integrates disabled and nondisabled dancers, Strukus analyzed her responses during the performances she observed and those of audience members who participated in postperformance discussions. In both sets of responses she found a pronounced discrepancy between empirically observed responses and the automatic empathy responses that overreaching accounts of the mirror-neuron system suggest. As she watched the disabled performers, she found that her connection to their movements resulted,

in part, from conscious efforts to monitor her feelings and increase her kinesthetic connection to these movements as opposed to automatically understanding them. She also found that certain aspects of the performance, such as the contact duets where disabled performers interacted with nondisabled ones, allowed her to bridge the gap between her responses to familiar movements and those that were unfamiliar. The responses of other spectators to the performances they had witnessed highlighted other gaps between the kinesthetic empathy that spectators experience and the actual experiences of those with disabilities. As Strukus observes, "[W]hile it is more pleasant to imagine that the cognitive mechanisms of empathy allow us to truly connect with one another, instead of giving us a very convincing illusion of connecting with one another, knowing that we are always missing the mark is useful information for strengthening empathic bonds."[25] Strukus believes that such strengthening is possible, that performance allows this to happen, and that the combination of automatic and more conscious/volitional cognitive operations offers a way to develop empathic awareness.

Strukus's measured claim for what kinesthetic empathy can achieve provides both a caution and a reasonable sense of possibility to those thinking about able-bodied disability performance. On the one hand, as neuroscientific research indicates, the brain's neuromotor mirroring mechanisms draw upon the observer's own motor repertoire, which means that kinesthetic empathy is oriented in terms of what we know and have experienced. I process the movements of others as I would if I were in their place. Contrarily, as the important role of training in kinesthetic simulation indicates, the observer's motor repertoire can be expanded and refined, establishing empathic inroads into what was previously seen as "other." Indeed, the very othering of those with disabilities may be the greatest inhibitory mechanism to kinesthetic empathy when it comes to corporeal difference. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out in *Staring: How We Look*, the stares of able-bodied individuals directed at non-normative corporeality stigmatize those who do not fit the visual status quo. This othering, Garland-Thomson suggests, conceals—and is driven by—powerful and uncomfortable recognitions. Disability and non-normative embodiment call attention to my body's contingencies and vulnerabilities, to the fact that "[e]ach one of us ineluctably acquires one or more disabilities—naming them variably as illness, disease, injury, old age, failure, dysfunction, or dependence."[26] The notion of kinesthetic empathy clarifies the perceptual and corporeal dynamics of this recognition. Encountering disability can be uncomfortable for the nondisabled—in part or even largely—because the nondisabled observer reproduces disability as a vicarious form of kinesthetic experience. He or she may seek to disown this recognition through aversion, denial, fear, ridicule, or pity, but the cognitive act of incorporating disability entails an unavoidable, prereflective intimacy. Insofar as disability exists as a kinesthetic actuality or potential, the simulated embodiment

described here is given experiential weight by the subject's own body-memory, which holds unrecognized affinities with other forms of embodiment.[27]

The question that should concern us about the performance and witnessing of disability performance by nondisabled actors and spectators then, is not whether the performance being enacted and perceived captures the experience of disability in its original form. The more productive questions are whether actors and spectators take up the kinesthetic invitation that disability offers and whether they accept the ethical responsibilities that empathy entails. If the kinesthetic experience of others is something for which we are hardwired, then the second- and third-hand simulations of disability that performers and audiences produce constitute a different, but important mode of knowability. Insofar as theatre foregrounds the dynamics of embodiment and intercorporeality, it offers a space in which the boundaries of this knowability can be illuminated, examined, and—in limited ways—transcended. In this sense, all disability performance—whether conducted by those with physical impairments or those without—is a meditation on empathy: what it means (and what it takes) to enter in relation with those possessing alternative embodiments, what the ethical implications are of such an investment, and what it means for perception and consciousness to be constituted in and through their relation to other selves and bodies. These issues, I hope to show, framed the rehearsal process and performance of *Merrick, The Elephant Man*.

Merrick, The Elephant Man

Proteus Theatre, founded in 1981, is a community-based, professional theatre company located in Basingstoke, Hampshire. In addition to offering three productions a year that tour throughout southeast England, the company offers numerous community-based workshops and projects. Proteus works with artists in photography, film, dance, music, and the visual arts—and incorporates circus, mime, puppetry, and other performance forms—to create multimedia performance pieces that engage issues of concern to their community in theatrically innovative ways. Having worked with individuals with severe disabilities for a number of years, the company offers a workshop entitled "Breakout!" that provides those with disabilities the opportunity to explore the perceptions, myths, and challenges associated with disability and "to express themselves in new and creative ways."[28] All of Proteus's productions and workshops are inclusive in that they involve participants of varying abilities without distinction. A number of productions, including *Merrick, the Elephant Man*, draw upon and explore the experiences of those with disabilities.[29]

When artistic director Mary Swan contacted Saul Jaffé in 2006 about collaborating on a one-man show, Proteus Theatre was marking its twenty-fifth year. The two discussed the possibility of mounting a revival of Pomerance's *The*

Elephant Man, which the company had produced as part of its opening season. They decided against doing so for several reasons, including the fact that Pomerance's play required sixteen actors. One of their main dissatisfactions with this play was that, like David Lynch's film, it relied heavily on the outline of Merrick's life offered in Treves's autobiographical account. Not only was this account inaccurate in key points—Merrick's first name was Joseph, not John, as Treves recorded it—but the portrait it offered was of a man whose life was entirely determined by others and by his debilitating physical condition. Taking advantage of more recent social histories of the period, revisionist studies of freak show performers, modern medical diagnoses of Merrick's condition, and new perspectives on Merrick's life and reception history, such as Peter W. Graham and Fritz H. Oehlschlaeger's *Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and His Interpreters*,[30] Swan and Jaffé saw the opportunity for a different portrayal in which (as Jaffé describes it) "Merrick himself was the storyteller, an active participant in his own story."[31] Rather than presenting the show's central character entirely in terms of what others projected onto him, they decided to present Merrick's life from what they could discover about his differently embodied perspective. While the final production includes multiple characters—in addition to Treves and the showman Tom Norman, Jaffé played Merrick's stepmother—the actions of *Merrick, the Elephant Man* are oriented toward its central figure's consciousness and memory.

Rejecting the use of prosthetics to represent Merrick's deformities such as those that actor John Hurt employed in David Lynch's film, Swan and Jaffé decided to show Merrick's condition by kinesthetically embodying it through posture, gesture, movement, and voice. They agreed that the key to re-embodying Merrick lay in coming to understanding how he inhabited his body and the world around him. Swan describes the process they followed: "In all my work—scripted or devised—I begin with a process that enables the actor to find the character physically, vocally, and therefore mentally, before we begin looking at anything else."[32] For his part, Jaffé characterized himself as an "outside-in actor": "[I]f I can understand the tone of the physical gesture, the feel of the character's external world and how it's occupied by them, how they fill it vocally, then the emotional essence that's created internally as a result of the external action will lead me to the right way of thinking as that character."[33]

The search for kinesthetic clues to Merrick's embodiment and the rehearsal work involved in physically incorporating these were extensive. While no film exists of Joseph Merrick in motion, the two were able to consult photographs of his skeleton and photographs of him clothed, semiclothed, and naked taken during his lifetime. Displaying his body in a number of poses and from a number of angles, these photographs provide visual evidence of the postural distortions, asymmetrical body mass, and enlargements that conditioned Merrick's movements and gestures. Swan and Jaffé supplemented the kinesthetic information provided

in these visual materials with more current research. Working through the Proteus Syndrome Foundation, they were able to talk with and observe contemporary individuals afflicted with the syndrome, read first-person accounts of how they coped with everyday life, and speak with family members. Based on their historical and contemporary research, they developed a kinesthetic appreciation of Merrick's condition. In Swan's words,

> We knew how the spine would bend, how the weight would pull the head back and how the foot on one side would drag—from that we were able to "find" him physically, and of course vocally, since the obstruction to the neck, lungs and chest from the spinal position, and what we know about the growths on his face, all lead to that voice being the only possible one for him.[34]

Swan talked Jaffé through his body from the feet upward, getting him "to 'put on' the character like a full body mask."[35] Jaffé then spent hours kinesthetically imagining himself "inside" Merrick's body, refining his sense of how it moved, sat, walked, stood, talked, and related to others. Jaffé describes this process and the physicalized performance that eventually resulted from it:

> [P]hotographic evidence was key, allowing me to study and then mimic Merrick's stance and ingrain the sensation into my body, so that it became second nature. I spent many hours exploring the reality of walking in the stance and then having to make sacrifices, for the sake of alacrity, in the switch between characters. I developed a short-hand physical phrase that allowed me to get into Joseph's character at speed, knowing the rest of the body would follow as I started the scene: raising my left shoulder, twisting my head to meet it and turning down one side of the mouth. As soon as that happened it forced my breathing to change into what I can only describe as a kind of "Darth Vader" inhalation and exhalation. As soon as I heard that sound, I knew I was securely in Joseph's form and that the rest would follow.[36]

In order to flesh out the empathic dimensions of this assumed embodiment (and the others he developed for this production), Swan put Jaffé through a rehearsal exercise she terms "hot-seating": interviewing him for long periods while he was physically in character as a way of discovering Merrick's feelings and thoughts.

Fig. 2: Saul Jaffé as Joseph Merrick in *Merrick, The Elephant Man* (2007). Directed by Mary Swan at the Proteus Theatre, Basingstoke England. Photographer Ben King. Photo courtesy of Proteus Theatre Company.

Working this way with his body's posture and movements, the weight of its limbs, and the changed register of its vocalizations, Jaffé built a kinesthetic body awareness premised on simulated disablements. During the performance of *Merrick, the Elephant Man* he moved in and out of this disabled body, changing embodiments oftentimes in swift transformations. Some of these transformations involved the play's other characters, whom Jaffé played with their own kinesthetic signatures: hence, the shifts from Norman to Merrick to Treves and back to Merrick. Other transformations took place in his performance of Merrick himself. When Merrick addressed the audience as the play's narrator, he did so without the disablement that marked his portrayal elsewhere in the production. In such moments, the audience was shown a Merrick whose subjectivity existed beyond its physically constrained public expression. Jaffé's narrator-Merrick often spoke from a hanging trapeze, as if to suggest the freedom from gravity that marked the mind and spirit of a man whose head weighed so much that he could not sleep lying down for fear of breaking his neck (Fig. 3). In one of the play's late sequences, Merrick conversed with the actress Madge Kendall. His initial interaction with her was unencumbered—he even recited a speech from *Romeo and Juliet*—but when the actress declined his invitation to join him on a trip to the countryside, Jaffé pulled a ribbon from a corset on the dresser's dummy to which he had been speaking, wrapped it around his face and head, and reverted to his newly self-conscious physicality (Fig. 4). Increasingly impeded by the ribbons, his voice became—as it was for the historical Merrick—the product of immense exertion.

Fig. 3: Saul Jaffé performs on the trapeze as Merrick the narrator in *Merrick, The Elephant Man*. Photographer Ben King. Photo courtesy of Proteus Theatre Company.

Fig. 4: Saul Jaffé as Merrick during his interaction with Madge Kendall in *Merrick, The Elephant Man*. Photographer Ben King. Photo courtesy of Proteus Theatre Company.

The practiced ease with which Jaffé moved in and out of his protagonist's encumbered form underscored the performative "as if" nature of kinesthetic embodiment. Jaffé's freedom to undergo such transformation on stage stood in stark contrast to the historical Joseph Merrick's inability to step out of his disablement. As Jaffé's reference to Darth Vader makes clear, the second-order kinesthetic

experience he developed as part of his "Merrick-body" built on a pre-existing gestural and observational repertoire that had been established through earlier acts of conscious and preconscious incorporation. But it would be a mistake, as I have been arguing, to construe the gap between the actor's kinesthetic experiences and that of the historical Merrick as absolute. Based as it was on extensive historical research and interactions with those suffering from Proteus Syndrome, the act of vicariously "taking on" Merrick's body involved an engagement with unfamiliar, difficult modes of comportment and motility. Jaffé's body absorbed the costs of his portrayal; two years after his last performance, he still experienced joint problems in his neck as a result of having twisted his head to meet the shoulder and raising his larynx in order to distort his voice. Other actors playing characters with disabilities have reported similar problems.[37]

The resulting production went to considerable lengths to engage the audience kinesthetically and empathically in Jaffé's performance. In the 59E59 Theater space in New York where I saw *Merrick, the Elephant Man* with twenty able-bodied university students in December 2009, the performance took place in a relatively small acting area, with a proscenium area halfway back with crimson curtains hanging at either side on a framing metal bar, draped white curtains behind these, and a hanging picture frame with white background at center rear. A silver trapeze hung in front of this. The production's few furnishings included a white folding screen, a chaise, three dressmaker's dummies, a crimson-draped small table holding a phrenology head, and a framed photograph of Merrick's mother hung almost unnoticeably to one side. Recalling the backstage of an unused theater or a second-hand store, the production's set emphasized Jaffé's role as animator of his surroundings. Whether he moved through space with Norman's ease or Merrick's labored difficulty, Jaffé directed attention to the body's negotiation of space, material objects, and its own limitations. The production employed technical means to visually accentuate his character's shape, carriage, and movement. When Jaffé appeared for the first time as Merrick behind a screen, for instance, a single backlight on the otherwise darkened stage cast a distorted shadow of his figure on the screen. Low-angled lighting cast similar shadows on the floor at various points throughout the production, thickening Jaffé's trunk and enlarging his head and other limbs to grotesque proportions. By establishing parallel kinesthetic performances, these "shadow embodiments" intensified the perceived difficulty of Jaffé's movements and the muscular effort required to sustain them.

The production employed additional strategies for deepening audience empathy with its protagonist. The New York *Merrick, the Elephant Man* opened with Jaffé in the role of Tom Norman addressing the audience as if they were spectators gathered to view one of his exhibits. In addition to joking with the audience about its variable forms of embodiment—"Grab a seat . . . push the weak out [of] the way"[38]—Jaffé directed impromptu remarks at individual audience members. His monologue was awkward for an audience that had come to see a show, not be part

of it; and the embarrassment it occasioned at the performance I attended owed much to our physical discomfort at finding ourselves objects of spectacle. At this performance Jaffé further linked this awareness to Merrick's kinesthetic experience by passing around a watermelon and calling attention to its weight: "Heavy, ain't it? Well imagine carrying that around for a head? . . . Imagine what it must do to his neck?!"[39]

By foregrounding and thematizing what might normally be subliminal identifications, the empathic channels that this sequence seemed designed to open prepared the audience kinesthetically for its perceptual encounter with Jaffé's Merrick. His process of assuming Merrick's posture and movements was gradual and deliberate. Jaffé transitioned into and out of this physicalization with a gestic self-consciousness that foregrounded the kinesthetic efforts involved. As his body became rigid and started to twist, I as a spectator experienced my own body tightening; in fact, as a frequent sufferer of neck and upper back pain, I found these transformations quite uncomfortable. Once he achieved the Merrick-body, Jaffé's movements were slow and labored, calling attention to the body's weight, to the effort and strain of individual muscle groups. The trapeze contributed to this kinesthetic self-consciousness. While the trapeze enabled Jaffé's Merrick to stand above the action—outside his body, as it were—while he narrated the events of his life, it also demonstrated his body's susceptibility to gravity and its own weight. At several points during the production Jaffé slid his body down the ropes, stretched himself out on the trapeze in different positions, and contorted his body into various postures, including one where he balanced on the trapeze with his legs while the top half of his body hung upside down. While the effect of these practiced movements was one of virtuosity, they also provided the audience with an intensely vicarious experience of a body straining against its own weight and awkward form to achieve balance and fluidity.[40] Observing these difficult balancings, my own body pulled in different directions, and I experienced vicarious strain in my neck, shoulders, and legs. It was a physical and emotional relief when Jaffé left this body-performance for Norman, Treves, and Merrick-the-narrator. In a phenomenon familiar to spectators of tightrope and aerial acrobatic performance, my kinesthetic response to Jaffé's trapeze convolutions was clearly intensified by the degree of physical risk he assumed.[41]

Jaffé's movement between roles played an additional role in his audience's kinesthetic and ethical engagement. At the same time that it made spectators aware of their kinesthetic/empathic investments in Merrick's disability, the production also asked them to assume the external perspectives by which his disfigurement was apprehended and responded to by those encountering him. Jaffé's Norman invited the audience to adopt the showman's perspective on the extraordinary body as spectacle, while Jaffé's Treves framed Merrick's disfigurement within the perspective of the medical case study, referring to him in a lecture as a "specimen." Swan and Jaffé resisted oversimplifying these points of view. Though the historical

Norman made money from the exhibition of human oddities and curiosities, his character questions the spectatorial interest in this kind of display. For his part, Jaffé's Treves combined a clinical interest in Merrick's bodily condition with a humanitarian's concern for his patient's well-being. The distancing, potentially objectifying perspectives these characters represented was complicated, in other words, by an ethical awareness of Merrick's embodied personhood. Both perspectives stood in contrast to the brutal objectification to which Jaffé's Merrick was subjected to by his stepmother and by the crowd that attacked him at Liverpool Street Station after he returned from the Continent, where he had been abandoned and robbed by one of his employers.

The concept of kinesthetic empathy illuminates the perceptual, experiential, and ethical dynamic at work in Jaffé's shifting portrayals. As noted in the previous section, given that we respond to the kinesthetic activities we observe on stage—undergoing cognitive experiences of them "as if" they were our own—our corporeal identifications during the course of a production can be changing and contradictory. Two scenes from *Merrick, the Elephant Man* demonstrate the conflicting ways that spectators can be implicated through these identifications in what they observe. In the beating scene just referred to, Jaffé indicated Merrick's struggle to make his way through the crowd at Liverpool station by using the folding screens to block his movements. Backing out of the screens, he ran into the dummies, knocking them off balance, and staggering among them as a way of representing their attack. The attacks reminded Merrick of his stepmother's beatings, and as he recounted his childhood victimization, he positioned himself directly behind a hooped and corseted dressmaker's dummy. Speaking his stepmother's words, he addressed the smaller dummy from behind the larger one—then, removing a stick from the larger dummy, moved across the space, assumed his stepmother's controlled and sadistic bearing, and beat the surrogate child. After a particularly strong blow, Jaffé and the child dummy collapsed on the floor, and Jaffé-as-Merrick handed Dr. Treves' card to a solicitous policeman that the actor then proceeded to enact. From the viewpoint of kinesthetic identification, the scene's intricate movement between historical moments and figures entailed an equally precise choreographing of audience identifications. Spectators were invited to enact the vulnerable embodiment of a man pursued and treated as an animal or monster, while alternately inhabiting the attitudes and gestures of those giving the blows. From a kinesthetic perspective, they are complicit in both. The scene may resolve its kinesthetic dissonance in the policeman's compassionate gestures, but whatever calm the audience may feel remains troubled by the conflicting identifications it has undergone.

An earlier scene also engaged and complicated the spectators' act of kinesthetic empathy. In this scene, Jaffé's Norman used an overhead projector to help illustrate Merrick's journey to the continent and his abandonment by the man who employed him there. With colored markers he drew an outline of England, a boat, an anchor,

a footprint, the sun, and a dark cloud on the transparency and the projection screen behind him. At the point in his story where Merrick finds himself penniless and alone in the rain, Jaffé sprinkled water on the transparency, thereby blurring his illustration into multicolored globs. With a pointed instrument he drew the water's edges into thin filaments reaching around, between, and through the larger masses. As he did so, he changed character and, in the role of Treves, continued his earlier lecture on Merrick's condition. Magnified on what increasingly looked like a medical slide, the reworked image became a cell from Merrick's body, mutated and distorted by his disfiguring syndrome. The sequence effected a striking transformation from the biographical to the clinical, from the story of Merrick's exhibition as spectacle to the cellular pathology that disfigured his body from within. Up to this point, Jaffé's bodily attitude was easy, unencumbered, and his movements were subordinated to the acts of narration and illustration. At the end of Treves's lecture, however, Jaffé moved between the projector and the screen and stood with his back to the audience. When he turned around, he faced the audience and slowly transformed his body into Merrick's: first one arm, then the other, and lastly, his entire body. With his distended shadow lurching behind him, he attempted to hold his balance while the molecular image of his condition remained projected on his face.

Fig. 5: Saul Jaffé as Merrick standing in front of the projection screen at the end of Frederick Treves' lecture in *Merrick, The Elephant Man*. Photographer Ben King. Photo courtesy of Proteus Theatre Company.

As Jaffé's Merrick stood unsteadily, framed by the spectacularizing and clinical perspectives that had been brought to bear on him and were now superimposed on his body, the play's audience was similarly framed in the act of spectatorship. Having been encouraged to adopt the cultural optics through which Merrick's disability has traditionally been viewed, the audience found itself—as it had throughout the

production—implicated in the kinesthetically-grounded subjectivity these optics usually disown. As Norman remarked in his opening monologue: "You are here out of curiosity, either that or you were dragged, either way a sense of foreboding now settles on [the] proceedings, a sense of the heaviness to come as we participate in one man's struggle for recognition as a human being!"[42] By eschewing the use of prosthetics and accomplishing the representation of Merrick's disfigurement through physicalized enactment, Jaffé and Swan directed attention to the kinesthetic nature of this awareness on the part of actor and spectator. In this sense, the humanity their representation seeks to affirm is different than the Victorian moral abstraction intended in Norman's opening remarks. The recognition that others are human arises in a shared cognitive field where the perception and understanding of others is neurologically and experientially linked to an awareness of our own bodies. Difference—including difference as severe as Merrick's—is neither erased in this process nor outside the realm of apprehension. As our growing understanding of empathic mechanisms suggests, such difference exists and comes to be known within a field of affinities and potentialities.

There is no guarantee of course that audiences will inevitably or fully accept the kinesthetic invitations that a production like *Merrick, the Elephant Man* extends. As their responses after the performance we attended in New York indicated, the degree to which my students accepted the production's invitation to apprehend and empathize with Jaffé's Merrick varied widely. Some students seemed relatively disengaged during the performance and afterwards. Several students mentioned how uncomfortable they felt when Jaffé addressed them directly as spectators at the start of the performance, which suggests that this strategy for implicating the audience in Merrick's self-consciousness may have inhibited later empathic operations. In the case of some students, I suspect that the disavowal of engagement masked perceptions during the actual performance that they found unfamiliar and uncomfortable, experiences that challenged their own kinesthetic groundings. In contrast, several of the students in attendance seem to have achieved a high level of empathic engagement with Jaffé's Merrick, including one student who contacted Jaffé weeks later to learn more about his performance. Jaffé's work with the trapeze work seems to have been a particular occasion for kinesthetic empathy with these audience members.

In the end, *Merrick, the Elephant Man*—like the many other attempts to represent Merrick's life—is as much about the difficulties in apprehending Merrick as it is about Merrick himself. The historical Joseph Merrick is gone, and the embodied subjectivity with which he experienced his progressive disfigurement remains, in the end, his alone. Disfigured to the point where his very humanity was questioned, Merrick exists as a field of kinesthetic traces, a vanishing point in history that calls to those who pursue it in particular body-performances and acts of spectatorship. As in all situations where otherness is evoked, the empathic

connections this process calls into play form the basis for an embodied ethics of performance, one that provides the opportunity to suspend what Petra Kuppers calls "non-disabled certainties about disability."[43] Faced with impairment and other forms of otherness as kinesthetic phenomena, able-bodied actors and spectators can own or disown the affinities they discover and have the opportunity to re-enact. If they choose the former and approach the act of identification with the humility that negotiating difference requires, disability and disfigurement as severe as Merrick's can be understood as kinesthetic possibilities in their own right, rendered apprehensible by the kinesthetic grounding we share and the effort we expend in engaging it.

Notes

1. After a successful run at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in 2008, *Merrick, the Elephant Man* was brought to New York in late 2009 as part of the Brits Off Broadway season. A one-minute promotional video of *Merrick, the Elephant Man* that includes clips from the production can be viewed on the Proteus Theatre web site. See *Proteus Presents The Elephant Man*, promotional trailer, *Proteus: The Changing Face of Theatre*, Proteus Theatre Company, n.d., <http://www.proteustheatre.com/?page=elephantman> (accessed 30 June 2014).

2. Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* was first performed in 1977. Other plays about Joseph Merrick that appeared around the time of Pomerance's play were Roy Faudree's *The Elephant Man* (1975), Thomas Gibbons' *Exhibition: Scenes from the Life of Joseph Merrick* (1977), and William Turner's *The Elephant Man* (1978). Later operatic treatments include Laurent Petitgirard and Eric Nonn's *Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man* (2002) and Carl Unander-Scharin and Michael Williams' *The Elephant Man* (2012). David Lynch's film was released in 1980.

3. Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, eds., *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2005) 5.

4. Film critic Stephen Rebello wrote: "Oscar smiles on those who suffer. The Academy's seventy-six years of doling out nominations and gold statuettes is littered with examples of voters going gaga whenever actors harness an arsenal of tics, stammers, and other agonies to play the mentally challenged, physically challenged, addicted, up-against-it types, or combinations thereof" ("Oscar = Death?" *The Advocate* 2 March 2004: 48).

5. Douglas Witt, "'The Elephant Man' a True Triumph," *Daily News* 20 April 1971.

6. Those who are interested in the perception of Merrick's disabilities by those who are themselves disabled can view David Hevey's powerful seventeen-minute film *Behind the Shadow of Merrick*, which was completed in 2008 as part of the "Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries" project commissioned by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester. Hevey's film explores the responses to Merrick of those with disabilities and severe disfigurement. David Hevey, dir., *Behind the Shadow of Merrick* (2008), viewable at "Rethinking Disability Representation in Museums and Galleries," School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, n.d. <http://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/museumstudies/rcmg/projects/rethinking-disability-representation-1> (accessed 30 June 2014). See also David Hevey, "Behind the Shadow of Merrick," *Re-Presenting Disability: Activism and Agency in the Museum*, eds. Richard Sandall, Jocelyn Dodd, and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (London: Routledge, 2010) 79-91.

7. Robert Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form; A Contribution to Aesthetics," *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*, eds. Robert Vischer, Francis Mallgrave and Eletherios Ikonomou, (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1994) 104.

8. Theodore Lipps (1903), quoted in Dee Reynolds, *Rhythmic Subjects: Uses of Energy in the*

Dances of Mary Wigman, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham (Hampshire, UK: Dance Books, 2007) 34, 242.

9. John Martin, *America Dancing: The Background and Personalities of the Modern Dance* (1936; Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1968) 117.

10. John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (New York: Norton, 1939) 53.

11. Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) 161.

12. Martin, *America Dancing* 122.

13. John Martin, *The Modern Dance* (1933; Brooklyn: Dance Horizons, 1966) 12.

14. Dee Reynolds and Matthew Reason, eds., *Kinesthetic Empathy in Creative and Cultural Practices* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012).

15. For an excellent discussion of the interdisciplinary work on social cognition and its implications for theater spectatorship, see Bruce McConachie's *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) esp. 65-82.

16. Vittorio Gallese discusses the role of mirror neurons in social cognition in "The 'Shared Manifold' Hypothesis: From Mirror Neurons to Empathy," *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8.5-7 (May-July 2001): 33-50. A useful overview of mirror-neuron research can be found in Christian Keysar's *The Empathic Brain: How the Discovery of Mirror Neurons Changes Our Understanding of Human Nature* (Lexington, KY: Social Brain Press, 2011) 11.

17. Caroline Catmur, Vincent Walsh, and Cecelia Hayes, "Sensorimotor Learning Configures the Human Mirror System," *Current Biology* 17:7 (4 September 2007) 1527.

18. Matthew Reason and Dee Reynolds, "Kinesthesia, Empathy, and Related Pleasures: An Inquiry into Audience Experiences of Watching Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 42:2 (Winter 2010): 49-75.

19. Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011) 2.

20. Quoted in Hanna Chapelle Wojciehowski, "The Mirror Neuron Mechanism and Literary Studies: An Interview with Vittorio Gallese," *California Italian Studies* 2.1 (2011), <http://www.unipr.it/arpa/mirror/pubs/pdffiles/Gallese/2011/cis_interview_2011> (accessed 30 June 2014).

21. Evan Thompson, *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007) 393. The preliminary two types of empathy that Thompson proposes are (1) "The passive or involuntary coupling or pairing of my living body with your living body in perception and action" and (2) "The imaginary movement or transposition of myself into your place" (392-93). Thompson's discussion continues a phenomenological tradition that produced its own discourse on empathy and intersubjectivity in the writings of Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Vittorio Gallese, one of the early researchers on mirror neurons, has used the insights of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty to conceptualize their operations ("Embodied Simulation: From Neurons to Phenomenal Experience," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 4.1 [March 2005]: 23-48). Shaun Gallagher provides a useful additional discussion of the relationship between phenomenology and cognitive science in "Cognitive Science," *The Routledge Companion to Phenomenology*, eds. Sebastian Luft and Søren Overgaard (London and New York: Routledge, 2012) 574-585.

22. For an overview of research in this area, see Frank Van Overwalle and Kris Baetens, "Understanding Others' Actions and Goals by Mirror and Mentalizing Systems: A Meta-analysis," *NeuroImage* 48.3 (2009): 564-84. In an earlier review of empathy research. R. J. R. Blair proposed that empathy is "a loose collection of partially dissociable neurocognitive systems": cognitive empathy (the equivalent of the mentalizing system), motor empathy, and emotional empathy ("Responding to the Emotions of Others: Dissociating Forms of Empathy through the Study of Typical and Psychiatric Populations," *Consciousness and Cognition* 14.4 [2005]: 698). Amy Cook provides a selective but useful overview of empathy research in "For Hecuba or for Hamlet: Rethinking Emotion and Empathy in the Theatre," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 25.2 (Spring 2011): 78-83.

23. Rhonda Blair, "Cognitive Neuroscience and Acting: Imagination, Conceptual Blending, and Empathy," *TDR* 53.4 (Winter 2009): 100.

24. Lennard J. Davis, "J'Accuse: Cultural Imperialism—Ableist Style," *Social Alternatives* 18.1 (January 1999): 36.

25. Wanda Strukus, "Miming the Gap: Physically Integrated Performance and Kinesthetic Empathy," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 25.2 (Spring 2011): 103. In her study of trauma representation in contemporary art, Jill Bennett advocates "an empathy grounded not in affinity (*feeling for* another insofar as we can imagine *being* that other) but on a *feeling for* another that entails an encounter with something irreducible and different, often inaccessible" (*Empathic Vision: Affect,*

Trauma, and Contemporary Art [Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005] 10).

26. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Staring: How We Look* (New York: Oxford UP, 2009) 19.

27. This line of reasoning is consistent with the work of critical disability theorists who argue for what Leonard Davis calls "the instability of the category of disability as a subset of the instability of identity in a postmodern era" (*Bending over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism and Other Difficult Positions* [New York: New York UP, 2002] 25). Margrit Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses of Disability, Subjectivity, and Sexuality* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 2-10.

28. "Breakout! Blue Sky Thinking for Adults with Disabilities," *Proteus: The Changing Face of Theatre*, Proteus Theatre Company, n.d., <http://www.proteustheatre.com/?page=BreakoutProject> (accessed 30 June 2014).

29. In 2008, the year after making *Merrick*, Proteus toured a piece called *Below Zero*, which explored the experience of modern day Proteus Syndrome sufferers. This project was based, in part, on Swan's conversations with a teenager afflicted with Proteus Syndrome during her research for *Merrick*. The company's 2011 production *Frankenstein* also reflects its concern with disability. Finally, a 2012-13 production entitled *Missing in Action* was developed through interviews with families of service personnel traumatized by combat injuries.

30. Peter W. Graham and Fritz H. Oehlschlaeger, *Articulating the Elephant Man: Joseph Merrick and His Interpreters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992).

31. Saul Jaffé, personal correspondence with author, 16 June 2011.

32. Mary Swan, personal correspondence with author, 8 August 2011.

33. Jaffé.

34. Swan.

35. Swan.

36. Jaffé.

37. The published text of Pomerance's *The Elephant Man* opens with the following warning: "No one with any history of back trouble should attempt the part of MERRICK as contorted. Anyone playing the part of MERRICK should be advised to consult a physician about the problems of sustaining any unnatural or twisted position" (Bernard Pomerance, *The Elephant Man* [New York: Grove, 1979] ix). Performer Billie Whitelaw suffered permanent damage to her spine and neck as a result of the rigid postures and constrained mobility she assumed over extended periods of time in her performances of Samuel Beckett's characters; see *Billie Whitelaw . . . Who He?* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996) 131.

38. Mary Swan and Saul Jaffé, "Merrick, The Elephant Man," unpublished playscript (2008) 8.

39. 8.

40. Jaffé comments on the ironic relation between able-bodiedness and disability in this trapeze work: "[T]he trapeze can be quite tortuous, so the inevitable irony then is that an able-bodied actor has to disable himself on it in order to make the disabled character appear able-bodied" (Jaffé).

41. For a brief but provocative discussion of the connection between kinesthetic empathy and risk, see Joseph Roach, "A Feeling for Risk: Notes on Kinesthetic Empathy and the World Performance Project," *Theater* 42.1 (Spring 2012): 7-9.

42. Swan and Jaffé 2.

43. Petra Kuppers, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) 12.