

Accessibility in Contemporary Theatre: Concepts, Challenges and Artistic Implications

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Abstract: *Contemporary theatre is increasingly required to address the participation of audiences and artists with disabilities, a demand that is at once ethical, legal and aesthetic. Drawing on doctoral research devoted to the accessibility of theatre performances worldwide, with particular attention to the Romanian case, this article examines accessibility in the theatre along the three axes announced in its title. It first clarifies the central concepts and the competing models of disability that frame the field; it then identifies the principal barriers that continue to constrain access; and it finally argues that accessibility, far from being a merely technical accommodation added to a finished performance, has become a generative artistic problem that reshapes dramaturgy, the actor-spectator relationship and the very language of the stage. The Romanian context is discussed as a case in which intention and legislation still outpace systematic implementation.*

Keywords: *theatre accessibility; disability; inclusive theatre; social model of disability; audio description; audience experience; performing arts;*

Introduction

Theatre is, among the performing arts, the art of presence and of shared, simultaneous participation. No other art form produces, at the same time, an elevation of the spirit and a heightened sense of communion with oneself and with others. Precisely because it unfolds here and now, in the co-presence of performers and public, theatre raises the question of access in particularly acute terms: to take part in it, a spectator must be able to reach the venue, to perceive what happens on stage and to follow its meaning. For a significant part of the public, these conditions are not self-evident. Over the past four decades, access to culture for people with disabilities has moved from the margins to the centre of cultural policy and artistic practice. The year 1982, declared by the United Nations the Year of Disabled Persons, is widely regarded as a turning point, around which a number of seminal projects in cultural accessibility took shape across the world².

The specificity of the theatre sharpens the problem. A novel can be read in Braille, a film can be subtitled and replayed, but a performance exists only once, in the irreducible presence of living bodies in a shared space and time. The energy that circulates between the stage and the auditorium has a quality that cannot be reproduced, and it is precisely this quality that a spectator with a sensory or motor impairment risks being denied. To make a performance accessible is therefore not to provide a substitute for it, but to find ways of admitting more people into the same living event without dissolving what makes it singular. This is why accessibility in the theatre cannot be reduced to a checklist of technical fixes: each solution touches the substance of the art.

The present article is drawn from doctoral research on the realities and the new tendencies in making theatre performances accessible, with particular attention to the Romanian case. It does not attempt to summarise that research; rather, it isolates a single argument announced by its title. Accessibility in the theatre can be read along three axes: the concepts that define it, the challenges that constrain it, and the artistic implications that make it more

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² Marcus Weisen. *International Perspectives on the Cultural Accessibility of People with Disabilities*, Art Beyond Sight, p. 1.

than a technical accommodation. The thesis defended here is that accessibility, far from being an external requirement imposed upon a finished art object, has become a productive artistic problem in its own right, one that reshapes dramaturgy, scenography and the relationship between stage and auditorium.

1. Conceptual Framework: Defining Accessibility in the Theatre

A working definition may be borrowed from current practice in the field: making theatre accessible presupposes adapting spaces, communication and content so that persons with motor, sensory and neurodivergent conditions can fully enjoy a complete artistic experience.³ In concrete terms, this may include sign-language interpretation, whether live or on screen; audio description, delivered through live commentary or through headsets connected to a mobile application; real-time captioning of lines and sound effects; scenography adapted for high contrast and tactile orientation; spaces designed for reduced mobility; quiet or retreat zones for neurodivergent spectators; and pre-event information about the structure, duration, sounds and lighting of the performance. Defined in this way, accessibility is not a single standardised gesture but a differentiated response to a plurality of needs.

This concept cannot be separated from the broader notion of social inclusion, nor from the legal architecture that frames it. Article 30 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, ratified by Romania in 2011 and devoted to participation in cultural life, recreation and leisure, expressly establishes the obligation of states to ensure that persons with disabilities have access to cultural products in accessible formats, including theatre.⁴ Accessibility is therefore not a benevolent option exercised by cultural institutions at their discretion, but an assumed international legal obligation. The distance between this obligation and its practical fulfilment is, as will be seen, one of the field's defining problems.

1.1. The Medical and the Individual Model

In relating to persons with disabilities, the specialised literature distinguishes several models. The individual, or medical, model is the most harmful to inclusion, since it places the emphasis on the impairment, treats it as a deviation from a norm and holds the individual responsible for limitations that medicine is then expected to correct⁵. This perspective casts a negative aura over the person, who is perceived as an obstacle, and produces inevitable labels of inferiority and incapacity. It has aptly been called the model of personal tragedy, because it shapes the way persons with disabilities come to think about themselves, internalising the message that their difficulties stem from not possessing a normal body⁶.

1.2. The Social and the Human-Rights Models

The social model changes the paradigm. It locates disability not in the body of the individual but in the response of society and in the inaccessibility of the environment: a wheelchair user is disabled by the staircase that lacks a ramp, and a blind reader by information offered only in standard print. Where reasonable adjustments are made, the barrier is removed and the stigma of incapacity largely dissolves. The human-rights model extends this logic, framing access to culture as an entitlement that the whole community is responsible for securing. Its motto, formulated by the disability movement itself, is that nothing should be

³ *** 2021. *Ghid de accesibilizare a unui spectacol de teatru* [Guide to making a theatre performance accessible], Asociația Ceva de Spus, 2021, p. 2.

⁴ *** 2026. United Nations, *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, Article 30.

⁵ Livius Manea. 2006. *Dizabilitatea ca factor de risc privind accesul la serviciile de educație* [Disability as a risk factor regarding access to education services]. *Calitatea Vieții*, XVII, no. 1–2, 2006, p. 42.

⁶ See *Modelul medical sau cel social* [The medical or the social model], Asociația Ceva de Spus. Retrieved August 31, 2025, from www.cevadespus.ro.

decided about persons with disabilities without their participation⁷. It must be added that the experience of disability cannot be understood in isolation from the other factors that structure a person's identity. The theory of intersectionality offers an indispensable analytical frame: disability intersects with gender, age, social class and the urban or rural environment, producing distinct and mutually amplified configurations of exclusion⁸. Any inclusive endeavour that ignores this plurality risks producing partial solutions, accessible to some yet still exclusive to others.

1.3. The Charity Model

Beyond the medical and the social models, the literature identifies a charity model which, although it springs from a generous intention, can produce stigmatising and limiting effects. Within it, the person with a disability is regarded as the object of others' benevolence, a passive beneficiary of social assistance rather than an active subject with full rights. The consequence for the artistic and cultural field is that performances dedicated to audiences with disabilities are perceived as welfare activities rather than authentic cultural expressions, a perception that diminishes the intrinsic artistic value of the undertaking and maintains the very boundary between a normal and a special public that inclusive theatre sets out to abolish. The confusion between the charitable and the social model is one of the chief reasons why many accessibility initiatives remain isolated, lacking continuity and systemic impact.

2. Disabilities and Barriers to Access

A discussion of access requires a minimal typology of the conditions involved. The principal categories usually named are physical impairments, which limit mobility; visual impairments, partial or total; auditory impairments, partial or total; deafblindness; intellectual impairments, including learning disabilities; and psychic conditions, to which are added associated impairments and rare diseases⁹. Each of these calls for a different repertoire of measures, from light and contrast adjustment for partial sightedness to sign-language interpretation for the deaf and architectural adaptation for reduced mobility.

Sensory access deserves particular attention, because it reveals how an apparently neutral technical choice carries aesthetic weight. For spectators with low vision, light intensity, colour contrast, the size of projected text and the direction of the lighting design are not incidental details but the very conditions of perception. A widespread contemporary practice, the placement of giant screens that relay the event to a large audience, makes the point vividly: while it brings the stage closer to those who could not otherwise see it, it also interposes the choices of a camera director between the spectator and the scene, so that reception becomes guided rather than direct. The same tension runs through every technique of sensory access: each one widens participation while quietly reshaping the experience it transmits.

The barriers themselves are not only physical. They are architectural, when a building cannot be entered; sensory and communicational, when the performance cannot be perceived or followed; and, most persistently, attitudinal, residing in the collective mentality that still regards persons with disabilities as a brake on the development of others. Language itself records this struggle, in the slow movement from terms such as handicapped or invalid toward the formulation person with a disability, a shift that is far from merely cosmetic¹⁰.

⁷ James I. Charlton. 1998. *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability Oppression and Empowerment*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 3.

⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw. 1991. „Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”. *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (6): 1241–1299, p. 1244.

⁹ *** 2021. See *Discriminarea persoanelor cu dizabilități* [The discrimination of persons with disabilities], Asociația Pro Etnica, p. 32.

¹⁰ Teodor Cârnaț & Mariana Pavlencu & Vitalie Costișanu. 2016. „Dizabilitate versus persoane cu nevoi speciale”. *Revista Națională de Drept*, no. 6: 6.

Perhaps the most consequential barrier, however, is the distance between the existence of a legislative framework and its concrete implementation. A recent British Council study of arts and disability in Romania observes that this gap is among the most significant obstacles identified at both the national and the European level: the laws exist, but the mechanisms of application and monitoring remain insufficient¹¹. In the Romanian case this finding validates a wider structural pattern, in which declared commitments are not matched by the resources, the training and the continuity required to make them real.

3. The Legislative Framework: From Protection to Rights

The Romanian legal architecture of accessibility took shape gradually and in step with the European framework. Law no. 448/2006 on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities defined the category in detail and affirmed that society bears a moral and legal obligation to support the recovery, integration and social inclusion of persons with disabilities¹². The decisive turn came in 2011, when Romania ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, thereby binding itself to the human-rights paradigm and, through Article 30, to securing participation in cultural life. More recently, Law no. 96/2023, amending Law no. 448/2006, has made explicit and obligatory the specific adaptations required of buildings open to the public, including those used for cultural and leisure activities¹³.

This legislative scaffolding is completed by the National Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities, entitled *A Fair Romania* and covering the period 2022–2027, which sets as its general objective the full and effective participation of persons with disabilities across all domains of life in an accessible environment, and which reaffirms the commitment assumed by Romania through its ratification of the Convention.¹⁴ The framework is, on paper, modern and coherent. Yet the very abundance of norms throws into relief the problem already noted: the distance between legislation and implementation. The laws exist; what frequently fails is the machinery of application, financing and monitoring that would turn a declared right into a lived reality. In the cultural field this means that the obligation enshrined in Article 30 is honoured unevenly, through the initiative of particular institutions rather than as a matter of routine.

4. Artistic Implications: Accessibility as Creative Practice

The central claim of this article is that the techniques of access, once they enter the theatre, cease to be neutral supports and become elements of the performance itself. They alter what is seen and heard, the rhythm of the staging and the distribution of attention; in doing so they pose genuine aesthetic questions rather than purely logistical ones.

4.1. Sign Language and Audio Description as Performance

When a sign-language interpreter shares the stage with the actors, the interpreter functions almost as another performer, doubling the spoken text and entering the visual composition of the scene. At the Constanța State Theatre, where performances adapted for deaf spectators are programmed with a predictable regularity, the interpreter Lena Dermengiu

¹¹ Olga Macrinici & Jonathan Meth. 2026. *Artele și dizabilitatea în România. De la practici fragmentate către un cadru național* [Arts and disability in Romania. From fragmented practices to a national framework]. British Council România, p. 89.

¹² *Legea nr. 448/2006 privind protecția și promovarea drepturilor persoanelor cu handicap* [Law no. 448/2006 on the protection and promotion of the rights of persons with disabilities], Art. 2.

¹³ *Legea nr. 96/2023 pentru modificarea și completarea Legii nr. 448/2006* [Law no. 96/2023 amending and supplementing Law no. 448/2006], Parlamentul României, 2023.

¹⁴ *Strategia Națională privind drepturile persoanelor cu dizabilități „O Românie echitabilă” 2022–2027* [National Strategy on the rights of persons with disabilities „A Fair Romania” 2022–2027], approved by Government Decision no. 490/2022.

performs precisely this double role. The artistic implications are considerable, for it is difficult to cover every actor's part, and yet the result is a promising beginning that will surely develop further. A radical version of the same idea appeared in the production *Unicitatea mea*, directed by Daniel Irizarry and presented at the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, in which an actress, distinguished by no evident costume or attitude and integrated as a character in her own right, had the sole task of rendering the other actors' lines in sign language. Access here is not appended to the performance; it is woven into its dramaturgy. Audio description undergoes a similar transformation, becoming a creative act of verbal composition rather than a flat enumeration of what is visible.¹⁵ The same principle governs the practice of the touch tour, which allows spectators with sight loss to explore the set, the properties and the costumes before the performance, and even to meet the actors. What might be classified as a mere support service is in fact a distinct mode of theatrical experience, a way of entering the world of the staging through the hand rather than the eye, and it can also open that world to potential performers with visual impairments.

4.2. Relaxed, Sensory and Immersive Theatre

The relaxed performance, with its adjusted levels of light and sound, its tolerance of movement and noise in the auditorium and its provision of quiet spaces, was developed to support neurodivergent spectators and audiences who do not conform to the conventional discipline of the darkened hall.¹⁶ Far from diminishing the work, such adjustments invite a rethinking of the codes of reception that the modern theatre had come to take for granted. Sensory and immersive forms push this further, replacing the dominance of sight with a multisensory dramaturgy in which the spectator is addressed through sound, touch, vibration and movement.¹⁷ What began as a measure of access reveals itself as an aesthetic resource: the very dismantling of the dark, silent, sight-centred auditorium opens new expressive possibilities for all spectators.

It is worth recalling how recent and how contingent the conventions now being questioned actually are. For long periods of theatre history the connection between actors and spectators was close: the public commented aloud, sat among the performers or in their immediate vicinity, and the playing space and the hall were lit alike. Only with the darkening of the auditorium did the spectator, left in shadow, lose this active status and harden into a silent observer behind the transparent partition that Stanislavskian theatre would later name the fourth wall. The performance art of the later twentieth century, from the durational presence of Marina Abramović to a range of participatory experiments, set out precisely to breach that wall and to restore the spectator to the event. Seen in this light, the multisensory address of accessible theatre is not a departure from the tradition but a return to an older, more reciprocal relationship between stage and public, now pursued by deliberate artistic means.

4.3. Participatory, Inclusive and Digital Theatre

The participatory turn in contemporary art, which redistributes authorship between performers and public, is closely allied with the project of inclusion, since both dissolve the rigid hierarchy of stage and auditorium.¹⁸ Inclusive theatre, in turn, integrates performers with disabilities into the permanent repertoire rather than confining them to occasional events,

¹⁵ Louise Fryer. 2016. *An Introduction to Audio Description. A Practical Guide*. London: Routledge, p. 12.

¹⁶ E. H. R. Abbott & A. Critten & E. H. MacGregor. 2024. „Relaxed Performances: Supporting Aural Diversity and Neurodiversity among Classical Concert Audiences in the United Kingdom”. *Sound Studies*: 1–24, p. 4.

¹⁷ Rose Biggin. 2017. *Immersive Theatre and Audience Experience*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 21.

¹⁸ Claire Bishop. 2012. *Artificial Hells. Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso, p. 11.

treating disability as a dimension of artistic identity rather than a deficit to be compensated¹⁹. Digital technologies extend the same logic, since the tools that mediate a performance for a spectator who cannot be physically present are also tools of access²⁰. These developments belong to a broader cultural moment in which the once firm boundaries between the living, the human and the technological have grown porous, a condition the specialised literature names posthumanism. Within it, assistive devices, captioning systems, mobile applications and immersive media cease to appear as prosthetic afterthoughts and become ordinary instruments of artistic mediation. The risk, in each of these forms, is that the charitable framing should reduce an artistic achievement to an act of assistance; the opportunity is that accessibility should be recognised as a source of aesthetic innovation, continuous with the most exploratory tendencies of contemporary performance.

5. The Romanian Context: Between Reality and Aspiration

Measured against these possibilities, the Romanian achievements remain timid and sporadic, and they belong almost entirely to the very recent period in which decision-makers have begun to grasp the importance of accessibility. The Constanța State Theatre has established a sustained programme of performances adapted for deaf spectators; the Masca Theatre in Bucharest has launched initiatives addressed to audiences without hearing; and the project PerformAccess, conducted by the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, has explored performative translations of silence. These are genuine openings, but their visibility is limited and their impact uneven.

The principal challenge is continuity. Too many initiatives remain, as it were, on paper, dependent on the goodwill of individuals rather than embedded in institutional routine. Theatre has the capacity to change mentalities, even lives, yet that capacity is realised only through patient, repeated practice rather than through isolated gestures²¹. A culture that treats art not as a luxury but as a necessity has every reason to make its theatres accessible; the obstacle is rarely a lack of techniques and almost always a lack of sustained institutional will²².

The Romanian case also confirms the article's central argument in a positive sense. Where accessibility has been pursued seriously, it has produced not charitable gestures but artistic results: a sign-language interpreter who becomes a stage presence, a production conceived from the outset around the rendering of silence, a programme that trains both audiences and makers to think differently about perception. The lesson is that the move from a model of protection to a model of rights, already accomplished in law, must now be accomplished in practice and in aesthetics. Accessibility will become a norm of the Romanian theatre not when it is mandated, which it already is, but when theatres come to regard it as an opportunity for invention rather than a duty discharged.

6. Conclusions

The questions raised at the outset admit a coherent answer. Accessibility in contemporary theatre is, conceptually, best understood through the social and human-rights models, which locate disability in the environment and in society rather than in the individual, and which treat access to culture as an entitlement rather than a favour. Its principal challenges are not, in the first instance, technical: they are attitudinal and institutional, and they crystallise in the persistent gap between legislation and implementation. Its artistic implications, finally, are the most promising part of the story. Sign-language interpretation, audio description,

¹⁹ Stephanie Barton-Farcas. 2017. *Disability and Theatre. A Practical Manual for Inclusion in the Arts*. New York: Routledge, p. 5.

²⁰ Steve Dixon. 2007. *Digital Performance*. London: The MIT Press, p. 3.

²¹ George Banu. 2017. *Scena lumii. Anii Dilemei* [*The stage of the world. The Dilemma years*]. Iași: Polirom, p. 55.

²² Mario Vargas Llosa. 2018. *Civilizația spectacolului* [*The civilisation of the spectacle*]. București: Humanitas, p. 71.

relaxed, sensory, immersive and inclusive forms are not external additions to a finished work but interventions that reshape dramaturgy and the relationship between stage and auditorium. Accessibility, properly understood, is at once an ethical obligation and an artistic opportunity. For the Romanian theatre, the task ahead is to convert sporadic goodwill into systematic practice, so that the access of all to the theatre ceases to be an exception and becomes a norm.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank his doctoral supervisor, Professor Constantin Chiriac, and the Doctoral School of Theatre and Performing Arts of the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu, for their guidance, as well as the Constanța State Theatre for the artistic experience that informed this research.

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