

# Prove a Villain: A Note on Ableism & Our Adaptation

by Sienna Singh

Shakespeare's *Richard III* presents an incredibly ableist view of disability. Instead of taking that ableism further (as many modern productions do by having an able-bodied person embody the role of Richard), we've taken the themes of oppression in this play and used our own lived experiences to tell this story.

I am one of the team members of Panoply Theatre Collective, a co-writer of *Prove a Villain*, and will be playing *Richard III* in our production. I want to take a moment to address our script adaptation, and choice of having me play this role. I want to say that we acknowledge any discomfort some people may have in our choice to not have a visibly disabled person play Richard. This play has provided an opportunity for artists with disabilities to address their lived experience through the eyes of this iconic character, and we continue to support and believe in adaptations which center folks with visible disabilities in the re-telling of this story. We are also interested in exploring the themes in this story through other lenses, for a multitude of reasons.

To address my own identity: I am a young, female presenting, non-binary actor who identifies as disabled and mentally ill. I experience chronic migraine and headaches, sensory sensitivities, borderline personality disorder as well as other mental health struggles, ulcerative colitis, and finally Bertolotti syndrome. Bertolotti is a spinal difference, where the bottom of the spine is fused to the sacrum. This condition causes pain and physical limitations in similar ways to scoliosis, which the historical figure Richard III had. I also have one leg which is shorter than the other, and recurring sciatica because of it.

For all of these conditions, the effects are almost completely invisible. I go through my life with chronic pain in many areas and all of the fatigue, irritability, and discomfort that accompanies it. I can relate in a lot of ways to the fictional Richard of Shakespeare's play, and the historical King. I know what it feels to be judged by others because people do not understand what you are going through. However, I also acknowledge that I do not know what it feels like to walk around with a *visible* disability. I recognize that this is an experience I may never fully understand, but I can also see the crossover the play has with my life as a disabled person, as well as as a woman. All my life I have been subjected to people not believing in me, having microaggressions thrown my way, and being walked all over because of how I am perceived.

Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* through an ableist lens, painting him as "evil" simply because of his disability - a view commonly accepted five hundred years ago when this play was written, and which we are still dealing with the ramifications of today. Not only is the play problematic in this way, it's also inaccurate from a historical perspective. Although the text is based on the real King, Shakespeare took liberties in his writing, giving Richard disabilities that the real figure never possessed. We know now, after centuries of debate caused by political propaganda and Shakespeare's play itself, the historical figure Richard III had scoliosis, which is

a spinal curvature. This condition affects everyone differently and to varying degrees of discomfort, pain, and physical appearances.

We believe that Shakespeare's original play does a disservice to disabled people, casting them in an extremely problematic, and unrealistic light. We are also continuing to learn about how problematic it is to have an actor portray a character with a physical disability they do not have themselves. All of this being said, there are core themes in the play we connect to and want to explore: prejudice, othering, and the oppressive cycles that keep marginalized people from moving up in the world, whether they play by the rules of the system or fight against them. In his iconic "Now is the winter of our discontent" speech, Richard says: **"since I cannot prove a lover, I am determined to prove a villain."** Our story takes this idea, and examines sexism and gender roles through the same system. However, we have adapted this show so that I do not have to embody any visible disabilities that the historical Richard III had, or any physical characteristics that Shakespeare invented for his character. It is important to note that we are not trying to erase the experience of ableism, but rather challenge Shakespeare's right to tell this story, and use our own lived experience to examine the experience of discrimination. We are choosing to tell the story of a woman who has spent her life being discriminated against, and has decided to try to stand up against that in a way that may seem evil, but is a result of the years of oppression she has experienced. We may not have used this play as a jumping-off point to create *Prove a Villain* if it had been written from the perspective of someone with lived experience of ableism, or perhaps even if the portrayal of the fictional Richard III be closer in resemblance to the historical figure. But that is not the case.

We hope that this explanation will help people understand our decision. We uphold all stories of oppression, and hope for more stories of disabilities to be told. I for one believe that this story, although specific in the ways we have changed it, still extends to a universal experience of oppression, and examines our society and the systems that uphold it.

If you are curious to learn more about disability frameworks, I recommend looking into activist Mia Mingus. She works with a lens called Disability Justice which explains how we all have to come together and look at the world from a perspective of access and accommodation. It asks how we can take the ways that disabled people have to look at the world in order to survive, and states that maybe we can all do that for all people at all times. What would the world look like if we all tried to create more accommodation, if that was a normal part of our world? Disability Justice puts women, transgender, BIPOC, queer, and disabled people at the forefront of change, in order to create a more accessible world. I ask you to consider that this play, although not addressing all issues around disability, is trying to keep these things in mind as we go through this process. We are writing from a queer female lens, and aim to challenge people's ideas around power, justice, and what it means to climb the ranks of society while stepping on those beneath you. I hope that one day we can all have equal access and opportunity, but until then, I hope we can all do the work together to get there.

- **Sienna Singh**

**Resources/References:**

[Scoliosis Explanation](#)

[Bertolotti Explained](#)

[Disability Justice Explained](#)

[Mia Mingus's Website](#)

[Mia Mingus Interview on Disability Justice](#)

Various recent *Richard III* productions and views from differently-abled actors:

[The Globe Theatre January 2024](#)

[Disabled actors' responses to the Globe](#)

[Katy Sullivan on playing Richard](#)