

Intro to Modeling, 1/23 by seeley quest

I love co-learning and social action, have organized over four dozen cabarets, salons and screening events, with the majority involving live performances. I'm tenacious, used to DIY creating, don't find social media accessible so I hustle with email to network cross-continent for projects. My parents worked in theatre and teaching; I grew up in it. I was lucky to connect in California with instigations like Sins Invalid, and as part of its core collective contributed to the articulation of Ten Principles of Disability Justice in 2015. My work is multidisciplinary, but biggest projects at this time are theatre that involves community input. Inclined toward hybrid form, I've liked mixing poetry and prose, fiction and non, realism and deconstructed aesthetics. Thematically I often engage with experiences of embodiment, eroticism, effects of capitalism, and the environment. I'm 46, despite disability immigration barriers slowly manifesting work here, and still 'emerging' as an artist in Canada.

Modeling is a theatre project for physically disabled actors, performing characters of a model and a photographer with different physical disabilities. The plot has them meet for a first work session, and engage issues of the body, consent, exhibition, erotic desire, sex work, horizontal oppression, and labour dynamic ambiguities regarding employment hierarchies versus art co-creation. The script is being written for open gender casting. For production, at least two actors will prepare to perform the photographer's role, and at least two prepare to perform the model's, with this design advertised so audiences know cast rotation will highlight different power dynamics in potentially genderqueer, trans, or homo or hetero cisgender pairings. The model character has more subtle disability, and photographer some variety of more perceptible condition, so each iteration's specifics of the performers' physicalities and preferences will inform whether A and B each play one role and then switch roles, or whether C and D actors will be included to present different pairings during alternating shows.

The play will be partly devised, with input from untrained disability community members, and also trained disabled and abled theatre artists. Development sessions including improv exercises in multiple cities, via video if needed and in person, will build engagement with the topics, and for audience community conversations. The script's end will be co-developed with feedback, and the project strive to model respectful collaboration. Eventual goals include: a disabled technical production team—to involve not just hiring afield, but recruiting resources to train apprentices in tech operations too, production with ASL interpreting, surtitles and audio description for live audience and livestream, French translation, and other accessibility measures provided, as well as tracking the production's environmental impact.

Design questions include: how to build trust with performers, and community participants who contribute in the development process but choose not to publicly perform, who all relate to experiencing ableist stigma and embodiment considered "othered," for sharing work that is intimate about our physicalities, and our potential for disturbing behaviours and beliefs as well. I anticipate much of the disabled community welcoming this initiative to risk creating nuanced and sexually charged representation, and also much discomfort and pushback; questions of prioritizing agency, and considering individual and collective concerns, are key.

I wish to ask also, what changes if an actor whose disability is outwardly apparent, for example, who uses a mobility device, reads first in role as a photographer, then enters a role as a model: what it exposes and allows participants and audiences to imagine. Likewise, what differences do genders, racial statuses and other aspects of embodiment make with how we imagine power between the characters?

I'm exploring investment in social practice and not working only with the limited number of professionally trained actors in Canada who experience physical disability. The forms so far are domestic, psychological drama, with at least the initial script section unfolding in real time, exploring unsettling "romance," open to surrealist elements, and experimental structure that foregrounds cast rotation and multi-casting. Audience could be: all disabled English-familiar adults (given mature themes, not youth), classrooms of college students, professional models and photographers, administrators and funders of disabled services, experimental theatre fans, the pro-gender diversity community, sex workers, health aides/care attendants, and many more.

The first reading of the draft so far to happen with actors physically together with audience is scheduled for February 15, 2023 7 PM Atlantic time, as part of a new Nova Scotian festival for works in progress, <https://www.easternfronttheatre.com/early-stages-2023>. It will be accessible to attend remotely via livestream as well. Slowly advancing this since the first idea in 2008, there are approximately 12 pages so far. Support to build and debut in-person staging in the next two years would make a critical difference. Models and photographers navigate embodied representation, and the potentials for attraction, boundary crossing, power contesting and intimate revelations between disabled art makers are yet underexplored on stage. Engaging themes including agency, hierarchy among people with bodily and gender variance, pursuit of authentic connection, and disabled people being honest *and* inventive about our experiences, yields aesthetic, structural and political possibilities for meaningful impact.

Readings to date:

- May 2017, I recruited myself and Grace Thompson to read, in public showcase for work developed at the Feminist Art Conference's Artist Residency, Artscape Daniels Spectrum, <https://www.factoronto.org/2017>

- June 2020, recruited non-professional disabled actors from local community for excerpt reading in *Fireworks Digital Showcase* of Teesri Duniya Theatre's Fireworks Playwrights' Mentorship Program cohort, Montreal/online

- January 2021, recruited myself and Prince Amponsah, and two dramaturgs, for excerpt in the *Catalyst Project*, new series with annual *Wildside Festival*, Centaur Theatre, Montreal/online

March 2022, recorded excerpt video reading with Yousef Kadoura, for NewWorks program of *SpringWorks Festival*, Stratford/online

- May 2022, longest draft reading so far, recruited actors including Karly Palmer, *rEvolver Festival*, Vancouver/online

- December 2020, December 2021, and January 2023, excerpt readings for *Playwriting Circle Showcase* of emerging disabled writers in Canada, Realwheels Theatre, Vancouver/online

~ The title page, and draft of first couple pages as teaser...

Modeling: a chamber drama script in progress, by Seeley Quest [2023]

CHARACTERS

MARLO, Model, late-20's to late-40's, slightly toned build, has spinal curvature and chronically painful injuries which aren't immediately obvious. Appreciates the challenge of fulfilling artist clients' needs.

SANDY, Photographer, late-20's to mid-50's, slightly toned build, has short limbs/atypical number of fingers/mobility device/stutter/recurring tremor/etc: someone with fairly typical sensory function, and a signifier of atypical condition, perceptible with clothes on. Likes to be a Top.

Written for open gender casting, characters may be played by performers of varying genders.

Written also for actors of varying races, the script may be adapted to feature artists of colour.

Note: It is intentionally at unfinished draft stage; the plot will be determined partly by devising, collaborative input from theatre makers.

Note: so far it's written that Sandy holds a sizable pro camera for extended durations, and moves from standing to squatting with relative speed. Casting may entail mods like more tripod use and a release cord, depending on actor's limb availability.

Synopsis [100 words]

Professional art model Marlo meets new client photographer Sandy: while shooting Sandy pushes boundaries bringing unexpected sexual energy. Sandy interrogates Marlo about relationship to body, disability, sexuality, exposure and control. Marlo is seduced and challenged, also questions and unsettles Sandy. Sexual tension and sparring increases; tempted toward breaking the professional agreement and having sex, they're also jarred by how pressures regarding disability and power drive each of them. For now it's ambiguous if they'll engage carnally, find some safety with each other, or not trust what pulls them together, though it leans toward the relief of trusting enough to try.

Log line

This play is a psychological drama, unsettling "romance," open to surrealist elements—about a scarred scrappy figure art model and an also scarred defensive figurative photographer who seek to learn if they can be respected and desired by each other as they are, despite ableism limiting their options to work as artists or romantic prospects. They touch a tenuous hope, indicators they could accept mutual attraction and go forward building connection together.

SETTING

Sandy's living room in private apartment, set up with equipment. View of kitchen, and hallway to other rooms.

SCENE 1

(lights up, MARLO and SANDY in SANDY's living room in private apartment, by photo equipment. View of kitchen counter, and hallway. MARLO in zipped jacket with backpack on, after first arriving, looks around living room to a few framed photos, SANDY by kitchen)

SANDY: Hot tea is coming up. I'm glad you said you have the day open; I know it's a long booking. It just takes time to get into the territory I'm hoping for. Meanwhile, make yourself comfortable, and if there's something you need for that just say so.

MARLO: Thanks, tea would be nice.

SANDY: What about this? Close your eyes to just smell it, then tell me what you think. *(puts open container under MARLO's nose)*

MARLO: Mm, real vanilla! Rose, and...I'm not sure what else, but such a fragrance!

SANDY: I think let's go for it. You won't say no to something that delicious, right?

MARLO: All right, since you put it that way...thanks for sharing a treat. I'll take mine as is, undiluted. *(looks back at photos)*
These portraits have a very intimate tone.

(MARLO begins removing clothes; somewhat anxious MARLO fumbles and catches jacket zipper at its top, right under chin. SANDY's been getting tea mugs in back of where MARLO stands, notices struggling and comes up close from behind, touches MARLO's shoulder, then moves in front.)

MARLO: I've got it, thanks.

SANDY: I just thought it's easier when you calm down, and someone can see how the fabric's caught; it's awkward when it's up there and you can't see-

MARLO: -I've got it; I'll work it out.

(MARLO breaks away from SANDY, goes to mirror on wall)

SANDY
Ok, right you are. *(goes to pour tea water)*

MARLO: You know once we're working you aren't supposed to touch me unless you ask permission, right?

SANDY: Of course I'll ask you to adjust poses as necessary. You also won't always be able to see just where I want you to set an angle, so I'll need to make small shifts—and you to trust me to do that, within the range of what you're capable of.

Sorry if that felt presumptuous. I suppose you'd question a yoga or martial arts teacher modifying your posture without checking with you first, huh?

MARLO: Yeah.

SANDY: ...Me too.

MARLO: Hmm, have you taken any yoga or martial arts classes? Found any...welcoming around here?

SANDY: I prefer training on my own terms.
Let's set up.

(notices MARLO looking again at set of portraits by mirror, comes over to bring MARLO a mug)

SANDY: Yeah, some of my series get intimate. The more risqué ones aren't in the living room.

MARLO: You've gone more risqué than this?

SANDY: All artists have to push themselves. Through photography we can encounter unique, sublime bodily realities. I like opportunities with models which let me depict that.

MARLO: *(takes in tea steam)* Presenting one's body for art, what it stirs is what got me to try modeling.

SANDY: Shall we?
(goes to adjust lights, removes layers to short sleeve)

SANDY: Is this warm enough for you to have your clothes off? I can turn it up.

MARLO: Yeah, just up a notch will be good.
(MARLO starts moving out of centrally lit staging area)

SANDY: Wait, will you stay and take them off here? I'd like to start with pictures of that.

MARLO: Oh. I brought my robe, and some drapes like you asked; do you want me to get them out?

SANDY: The drapes here will work, that's not necessary right now....