

## Artist in Residence Report: Our Stage/Our Voices Program

Stephen Sykes | April 2025

During my time as the Artist in Residence with the *Our Stage/Our Voices* program at the University of Illinois Springfield (UIS) Performing Arts Center, I had the privilege of leading several inclusive arts initiatives aimed at empowering disabled performers and expanding access to the performing arts. This experience was deeply rewarding and impactful, both personally and for the community we served.

In the spring, we conducted a community survey focused on disabled performers and theatergoers. The survey aimed to better understand the barriers they face in accessing, participating in, and enjoying live theater. While participation in the survey was not at a level I'd hoped for, it did serve as a jumping-off point for a productive discussion later in the year with representatives from several local theatre groups. At this roundtable, held on Oct. 14, 2024, We talked about venue accessibility, sensory accommodations, and the need for more inclusive casting practices. I'd very much like to meet again with these groups in 2026 – even if it's not under the Our Stage/Our Voices banner – to see what enhancements they have added disabled performers and patrons.

Over the summer, we partnered with Capital City Improv to host an improv workshop specifically designed for disabled performers. At least 10 people attended one or more sessions. The workshop fostered a playful, supportive environment where participants explored storytelling, spontaneity, and self-expression. It was a space of joy, risk-taking, and growth, and the final improv showcase on Aug. 30, 2024, was well attended. I even had a performer suggest someone should found an all-disabled improv group – an idea worth pondering.

In the fall, we presented *ALL ACCESS: A SHOW FOR EVERY BODY*, a talent showcase that celebrated performers of all abilities. Featuring songs, scenes, and a live podcast, the event held on Nov. 16, 2024, offered a platform for disabled artists to share their work with the broader community. Not only did it feature performers who were given a stage they might not have had otherwise, but it gave some of those performers a chance to try out new talents. One neurodivergent artist, who was already an award-winning visual artist, had the opportunity to try their hand at vocal performance. They spoke of how *ALL ACCESS* gave them a safe, welcoming environment in which to literally have their voice heard.

The residency concluded in the winter with a fully staged production of *Almost, Maine*, presented with a blended cast of disabled and non-disabled actors. The rehearsal process was inclusive and adaptive, with accommodations made for mobility, communication, and sensory needs. The performances on March 13-16, 2025, were a beautiful testament to the creative potential of inclusive theater. Audiences were moved not just by the play's content, but by the

presence of a truly representative cast onstage, sharing human stories that resonated across ability lines.

This residency has been the opportunity of a lifetime, and I couldn't have done it without the support of the Performing Arts Center staff. I am grateful to the PAC for their commitment to disability inclusion in the arts. I look forward to seeing how this momentum continues to grow, and how the seeds we planted this year will flourish in future programs.