

Open Circle's 'Integrated' Approach

As an actress, Suzanne Richard doesn't consider her disability a handicap. Quite the contrary.

"Disability can enhance a role ... it can explore another facet of the character," she said.

Richard made a large impression on audiences as Bottom in Washington Shakespeare Company's "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and as an evil government operative in Studio Secondstage's "A Clockwork Orange." A member of the Maryland Governor's Advisory Committee on Careers in the Arts for People With Disabilities, and a Helen Hayes Awards judge, she also is now a company director.

Her Open Circle Theatre will present "integrated" theater, using actors with and without disabilities. It makes its bow with "Laughing Wild," Christopher Durang's darkly comic two-character rant of urban angst, at the 1409 Playbill Cafe through July 20. Richard co-stars with Dan Via and directed with her roommate, storyteller Arianna Ross.

Richard has osteogenesis imperfecta, which impedes bone development. At 32, she's just 4 feet tall and uses crutches-often to great effect in her stage performances. She's had some 25 surgeries over the years and has metal rods in her legs and spine.

The idea for Open Circle jelled while she was taking a directing class under Studio Theatre's Joy Zinoman. Richard staged an excerpt of "Jesus Christ Superstar" with actor Rob McQuay, who uses a wheelchair, and a deaf actress as one of the Pharisees. The actress's sign language helped to accentuate the debate over Jesus's fate, Richard said.

Her company's focus "doesn't limit the choice of plays at all," she said, "because a person with a disability can be anything and be anybody."

-Jane Horwitz