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THE ABSENT MIRROR: DISABILITY REPRESENTATION IN KENYAN DRAMA AND THEATRE FESTIVALS

Josephat Nehemia Nyangoga

Department of Languages, Linguistics and Literature, Kisii University, Kenya

ORCID ID 0009-0008-5634-1935

Email: josephatnehemiah75@gmail.com Email: sass@kisiiversity.ac.ke

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Abstract

This study examines disability representation in Kenyan festival theatre, focusing on the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), Kenya Music Festival (KMF), and Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA). Grounded in Reception Theory, the study interrogates the extent to which these platforms function as authentic social mirrors, particularly in their inclusion or exclusion of persons with disabilities in scripting, casting, and performance. Despite theatre's role as a reflective and transformative cultural space, preliminary observations indicate that disability remains underrepresented, often relegated to segregated categories or portrayed through limited and stereotypical frameworks. The study adopts a qualitative research design, employing purposive and snowball sampling techniques to identify key participants, including scriptwriters, directors, performers, adjudicators, and audience members with relevant experience in festival theatre. Data is collected through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and performance analysis, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of both production practices and audience reception. The use of snowball sampling further enables access to participants within networks that may otherwise remain underrepresented, particularly individuals with lived experiences of disability. Findings reveal that the structural and ideological organisation of festival theatre contributes to the marginalisation of persons with disabilities, thereby limiting the scope of representation and reinforcing narrow audience perceptions. The study argues that the segregation of "special" performances undermines inclusive practice and fails to reflect the integrated nature of everyday social life. It further posits that meaningful inclusion requires a shift toward integrative representation, where disability is normalised within mainstream theatrical narratives and performance spaces. Indeed, this study contributes to ongoing scholarly debates on inclusivity in the performing arts. It offers practical recommendations for theatre practitioners and festival organisers on how to reimagine scripting, casting, and staging practices to foster equitable participation.

Ultimately, the study seeks to reposition Kenyan festival theatre as a more inclusive and representative cultural space that aligns with the diverse realities of contemporary society.

Keywords: *Absent mirrors, Kenyan theatre, theatre festivals, disability representation, inclusivity*

1. Introduction

Theatre has long been conceived as a mirror of society, reflecting lived realities, social relations, and the diversity of human experience. Within this understanding, festival theatre in Kenya, particularly platforms such as the Kenya National Drama Festival, Kenya Music Festival, and Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association, is expected to project the full spectrum of Kenyan social life. Yet a critical interrogation of these spaces raises a central concern: the extent to which persons with disabilities are authentically represented within dramatic narratives, casting practices, and performance aesthetics. Emerging scholarship in performance and disability studies complicates the notion of theatre as a neutral mirror by demonstrating that representation is not merely reflective but actively constructed through artistic choices and audience reception. For instance, Hill (2025) conceptualises performance as a site of negotiation between artists and audiences, while Hutchison and Loots (2026) emphasise embodied “encounters” that challenge fixed notions of ability. These perspectives foreground the need to examine both representation and interpretation, rather than treating theatre as a passive reflection of reality.

Within African cultural and literary contexts, disability has often been framed ambivalently. Lipenga (2014) observes that contemporary African narratives oscillate between reinforcing stereotypes and enabling alternative identities, a tension further elaborated by Kimani (2025), who interrogates the persistence of the ableist gaze in Kenyan visual media. Such work demonstrates that representations of disability frequently remain symbolic, moralised, or exceptionalised, thereby limiting the articulation of everyday lived realities. This ambivalence provides a critical lens for analysing how disability is framed within dramatic texts and performances, particularly in relation to characterisation and thematic construction.

In Kenya, studies of media and theatre reinforce the persistence of exclusionary and uneven representational practices. Mburu (2022) notes that disability in broadcast media is often reduced to stereotypical or sentimental narratives, while Namayi (2021) demonstrates that dramatic texts simultaneously reproduce and contest dominant social ideologies. Historically, Komu (2016) situates Kenyan theatre within a trajectory shaped by colonial legacies and post-independence transformations, revealing how institutional structures have influenced whose stories are told and how they are staged. Although recent developments point towards greater inclusivity, as suggested by Njoroge (2026) in the context of disability-inclusive arts education, these shifts remain uneven and insufficiently reflected within mainstream festival performances. Against this backdrop, the relative invisibility of persons with disabilities in Kenyan drama festivals becomes analytically significant. Their absence is evident not only in the limited number of roles written for them, but also in the marginal presence of performers with disabilities in mainstream productions. Where representation does occur, it is frequently marked, exaggerated, or framed in ways that emphasise difference rather than normalcy. This selective visibility undermines theatre’s role as a social mirror and instead produces what may be termed an “absent mirror”, a reflective surface that omits critical segments of the society it purports to represent.

The persistence of such exclusion may be traced, in part, to the historical foundations of festival theatre in Kenya. Originating within colonial frameworks that privileged Eurocentric aesthetics and participation, early drama festivals marginalised African voices and experiences. Although post-independence reforms broadened access, many structural and ideological limitations endure, particularly in relation to marginalised groups. Moreover, the institutional separation of “special” learners into distinct performance categories raises concerns about segregation. While often justified as supportive, such arrangements reinforce notions of otherness and contradict the integrated social realities that theatre seeks to portray. Authentic representation would require the normalisation of disability within mainstream narratives, rather than its isolation or spectacle. Despite a growing body of scholarship on disability in African media and performance, limited attention has been given to Kenyan drama festivals as a distinct cultural site, and even less to how audiences interpret such representations. This gap is significant given that meaning in performance is co-produced through reception. This study, therefore, interrogates the extent to which Kenyan drama festivals function as true mirrors of society by examining both the representation of disability and its interpretation by audiences. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates on equity, representation, and the transformative potential of the performing arts, while calling for a shift from tokenistic or segregated portrayals towards integrative and inclusive theatrical practices.

Theatre is expected to reflect society, yet Kenyan festival platforms such as KNDF, KMF, and KUPAA largely exclude or marginalise persons with disabilities. Their absence, or confinement to “special” categories, creates a gap between lived social reality and staged representation. This limits not only authenticity but also how audiences understand diversity. Despite historical evolution, festival theatre has not fully embraced inclusive representation in practice. This study therefore examines how this exclusion undermines theatre’s role as a true social mirror and a space for meaningful engagement.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Reception Theory, a critical framework that shifts the focus of meaning-making from the producer of a text to its audience. Originating from the work of Hans Robert Jauss and later developed by Wolfgang Iser, Reception Theory posits that meaning is not inherent in a text or performance but is actively constructed by audiences through processes of interpretation shaped by their historical, social, and cultural contexts. In the context of theatre, this perspective is particularly significant because performance is inherently dynamic and relational, relying on audience engagement for its completion. Jauss (1982) introduces the concept of the “*horizon of expectations*,” which refers to the set of cultural norms, prior experiences, and interpretive frameworks that audiences bring to a performance. These expectations influence how audiences perceive, interpret, and evaluate what is presented on stage. In Kenyan festival theatre, audiences attending platforms such as the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), Kenya Music Festival (KMF), and Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association (KUPAA) are shaped by prevailing societal attitudes toward disability. If disability is rarely represented in everyday media and cultural narratives, audiences may develop a limited horizon of expectations that excludes persons with disabilities as active participants in theatrical performance. Consequently, their absence on stage may go unnoticed or be perceived as normal. In this study, the “Absent Mirror” refers to the systematic absence of authentic disability identities within Kenyan theatrical narratives and performance practices. Theatre traditionally functions as a cultural mirror through which societies recognise, negotiate and critique social realities. When disability is excluded, the mirror becomes incomplete, reflecting only able-bodied experiences while rendering disability socially invisible.

Iser (1978) on the other hand, emphasises the role of the audience in filling the “gaps” or “indeterminacies” within a text. In theatre, these gaps are spaces where meaning is not explicitly defined, allowing audiences to actively construct interpretations. However, when disability is systematically excluded from theatrical narratives, these gaps are not merely interpretive but structural. The absence of characters with disabilities limits the range of meanings that can be constructed, effectively narrowing the interpretive possibilities available to audiences. In this sense, the “absent mirror” identified in this study is not only a failure of representation but also a limitation on audience engagement and meaning-making.

Reception Theory is particularly useful in examining how audiences respond to the inclusion—or exclusion, of persons with disabilities in performance. When individuals with disabilities are integrated into mainstream theatrical productions without being marked as “different,” audiences are encouraged to reinterpret their assumptions about normalcy and difference. This aligns with the argument by Jauss (1982) that literature and art have the capacity to challenge and transform the audience’s horizon of expectations. Inclusive representation, therefore, becomes a powerful tool for social change, as it reshapes audience perceptions and fosters greater acceptance of diversity. Conversely, the segregation of performers into “special” categories within festival structures reinforces existing audience expectations of difference and otherness. From a reception theory perspective, such practices do not challenge but rather confirm the audience’s preconceived notions about disability. This limits the transformative potential of theatre, reducing it to a space that reproduces rather than interrogates social norms. As a result, the audience remains within a fixed interpretive framework that excludes persons with disabilities from the realm of “normal” social participation. Reception Theory underscores the importance of context in shaping audience interpretation. Kenyan audiences are situated within a socio-cultural environment where disability is often stigmatised or misunderstood. The concept of stigma, as elaborated by Goffman (1963) complements Reception Theory by highlighting how societal perceptions influence interactions with individuals who are perceived as different. When theatre fails to provide alternative representations, it reinforces these stigmatising perceptions, limiting the potential for attitudinal change. However, when inclusive performances are presented, they create opportunities for audiences to renegotiate their understanding of disability, thereby expanding their interpretive horizons.

In anchoring this study on Reception theory, the focus is not only on the presence or absence of disability representation but also on how such representation is received and interpreted by audiences. This involves examining audience reactions, feedback and engagement with performances that include or exclude persons with disabilities. It also requires an analysis of how festival structures, scripting choices, and casting practices influence audience perception. Situating the audience at the centre of analysis, this framework highlights the reciprocal relationship between performance and reception, emphasising that theatre is a collaborative process of meaning-making. Reception Theory provides a robust lens through which to interrogate the “absent mirror” in Kenyan festival theatre. It reveals that the exclusion of persons with disabilities is not merely a representational issue but also a limitation on the interpretive and transformative potential of theatre. This way, theatre practitioners can disrupt existing horizons of expectations, create new possibilities for meaning-making and contribute to a more inclusive cultural discourse.

3. Related Literature

3.1 Disability Representation in Theatre and Performance

Theatre has long been recognised as a powerful medium through which societies construct, negotiate, and contest social identities. Beyond entertainment, theatrical performance serves as

a cultural mirror, reflecting prevailing values, ideologies, and power relations while simultaneously offering opportunities to critique and transform them (Carlson, 2018; Fischer-Lichte, 2008). Consequently, the representation of marginalised groups, including persons with disabilities, has become an important concern within contemporary theatre and performance scholarship (Kuppers, 2017; Sandahl & Auslander, 2005).

Disability representation in theatre has historically been dominated by stereotypical portrayals that frame disabled characters as objects of pity, dependence, villainy, or extraordinary inspiration rather than as complex human beings (Garland-Thomson, 2002; Shakespeare, 2014). Such portrayals reinforce ableist assumptions by privileging normative bodies while positioning disability as deviation from the social ideal (Davis, 2013). According to Garland-Thomson (2002), representation plays a central role in constructing cultural understandings of disability because repeated images shape public perceptions of what disabled bodies signify within society.

The emergence of Critical Disability Studies challenged these deficit-oriented perspectives by advocating a shift from the medical model toward the social model of disability (Oliver, 1990; Shakespeare, 2014). Rather than locating disability solely within individual impairment, the social model argues that disability is produced through environmental barriers, discriminatory institutions, and exclusionary cultural practices (Oliver, 1990). Within theatre studies, this perspective has encouraged scholars to interrogate not only how disability is represented on stage but also whose stories are performed, who performs them, and how theatrical institutions either enable or restrict participation (Kuppers, 2017; Johnston, 2016).

Performance scholars further argue that authentic disability representation has transformative potential because live theatre enables audiences to encounter embodied difference in ways that challenge dominant assumptions about normalcy (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Kuppers, 2017). However, inclusion extends beyond merely placing disabled characters on stage. Authentic representation requires the meaningful participation of persons with disabilities in writing, directing, acting, choreography, and artistic leadership to ensure that disability narratives emerge from lived experience rather than external interpretations (Hadley, 2014; Johnston, 2016).

Despite significant advances in disability advocacy and inclusive performance practice, recent studies continue to report persistent underrepresentation and stereotyping of persons with disabilities across mainstream theatre industries worldwide (Ellis & Goggin, 2015; UNESCO, 2022). These findings suggest that disability remains insufficiently integrated into mainstream performance cultures, highlighting the need for context-specific studies that examine representation within African theatrical traditions.

3.2 Audience Reception, Cultural Meaning, and Inclusive Performance

Audience reception occupies a central place in performance studies because the meaning of theatrical performance is neither fixed nor solely determined by the playwright or performers. Instead, meaning emerges through the interaction between the performance and the audience, whose interpretations are shaped by cultural experiences, social values, historical contexts, and personal beliefs (Jauss, 1982; Iser, 1978). Reception theorists argue that audiences actively negotiate meanings rather than passively consuming theatrical narratives. Consequently, repeated exposure to particular representations contributes to the formation and reinforcement

of societal understandings of identity, difference, and belonging (Bennett, 1997; Carlson, 2018).

Scholars of disability and performance have extended this argument by demonstrating that audience responses to disability are profoundly influenced by prevailing cultural constructions of normalcy and bodily difference. According to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2009), visual and performative encounters with disability often activate deeply embedded cultural assumptions regarding dependence, vulnerability, and productivity. These assumptions shape not only how audiences interpret disabled performers but also how they evaluate the artistic quality and authenticity of disability narratives. Similarly, Petra Kuppers (2017) argues that disability performance challenges conventional aesthetic expectations by repositioning disabled bodies as sites of creativity, agency, and artistic expression rather than objects of sympathy or medical intervention.

Research further suggests that inclusive theatrical practices possess considerable potential to transform audience attitudes toward disability. Live performance creates opportunities for direct engagement between audiences and performers, encouraging empathy through shared embodied experiences rather than abstract representations (Sandahl & Auslander, 2005; Hadley, 2014). Studies conducted in community theatre and applied theatre contexts indicate that performances involving actors with disabilities can reduce prejudice, promote social inclusion, and stimulate critical reflection on discriminatory cultural assumptions (Johnston, 2016; Goodley, 2017). Nevertheless, these transformative outcomes depend on the authenticity of representation and the extent to which persons with disabilities participate meaningfully in artistic production. Performances that merely reproduce stereotypical disability narratives may inadvertently reinforce existing prejudices rather than challenge them (Shakespeare, 2014; Ellis & Goggin, 2015).

Within African performance scholarship, investigations into audience reception of disability remain relatively limited. Existing studies have largely concentrated on disability representation in literature, film, and media, while comparatively little attention has been devoted to live theatrical performance and festival contexts (Meekosha, 2011; Watermeyer et al., 2019). Furthermore, African theatre scholarship has traditionally prioritised themes such as nationalism, postcolonial identity, gender, governance, and cultural preservation, often overlooking disability as an analytical category (Banham, 1995; Kerr, 1995; Plastow, 1996). Consequently, little is known about how African audiences interpret disability when it appears—or is conspicuously absent—in theatrical performance.

The Kenyan context presents an especially important case for examining audience reception because theatre festivals constitute influential cultural and educational spaces where social values are publicly negotiated. Festivals such as the Kenya National Drama Festival and the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association attract thousands of performers, educators, adjudicators, and audience members annually, thereby shaping public understandings of citizenship, diversity, and national identity. Yet, despite their prominence within Kenya's cultural landscape, empirical research examining audience responses to disability representation within these festivals remains scarce. Existing scholarship has focused predominantly on educational outcomes, language policy, cultural identity, and political expression, leaving disability reception largely unexplored (Brinkman, 2024; Mlama, 1991).

This study addresses this gap by investigating how disability representation—or its absence—in Kenyan drama and theatre festivals influences audience interpretation and cultural meaning. Drawing on Reception Theory, the study argues that repeated exclusion of persons with disabilities from mainstream festival performances contributes to the formation of restricted "horizons of expectation," within which disability becomes culturally invisible or perceived as peripheral to artistic and social life (Jauss, 1982). Conversely, authentic and inclusive performances have the potential to expand these interpretive horizons by normalising disability as an integral aspect of human diversity. In this regard, audience reception becomes a critical site through which theatre can either reproduce or challenge dominant cultural narratives about disability.

4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine the representation of disability in Kenyan Drama Festivals. The approach is suited to the interpretive nature of the study, which seeks to understand how disability is constructed and perceived within dramatic performances and audience experiences. The target population comprises audiences drawn from the Kenya Performing Arts Association (KUPAA), the Kenya National Drama Festival (KNDF), and the Kenya Music Festival (KMF). These audiences are selected because they form the primary consumers and interpreters of festival performances, and therefore offer relevant insights into how disability is represented and received. Sampling is conducted using purposive and snowball techniques. Purposive sampling is used to identify audience members who have attended performances that engage with themes of disability or include characters with disabilities. Snowball sampling is then employed to reach additional participants through referrals from initial respondents, particularly those with deeper engagement or interest in festival productions. The sampling process continues until thematic saturation is achieved. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews and focused discussions with selected audience members, alongside observation of selected performances. These methods allow the researcher to capture both individual interpretations and shared audience responses to disability representation. Data analysis is conducted thematically, with responses organised into key patterns relating to perception, stereotypes, agency, and inclusivity in performance. Ethical considerations are observed through informed consent, voluntary participation, and assurance of confidentiality. While the use of non-probability sampling limits generalisation, the approach provides in-depth insights into audience interpretations within Kenyan festival contexts.

5. Discussions of Findings

5.1 Disability Representation as Constructed Meaning in Festival Theatre

The findings of this study confirm that disability representation in Kenyan festival theatre is not a neutral reflection of social reality but a product of deliberate cultural and artistic construction. Drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of representation, meaning is produced through selection, framing, and repetition rather than simple imitation. Within performances staged at the Kenya National Drama Festival, Kenya Music Festival, and Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association, disability is either marginalised or presented through narrow tropes such as pity, moral symbolism, or exceptional resilience. This aligns with findings by Kimani (2025), who demonstrates the persistence of an ableist gaze in Kenyan visual narratives, and Kennedy J. Lipenga, who notes the ambivalent positioning of disability within African imaginaries. The study therefore extends these insights into the domain of festival theatre, showing that dramaturgical practices continue to reproduce constrained representations.

5.2 The “Absent Mirror” and the Limits of Mimesis

While theatre is traditionally grounded in the Aristotelian principle of mimesis as a mirror of society, the findings of this study demonstrate that this metaphor is profoundly compromised within the Kenyan festival context. The absence, marginalisation, or distortion of disability produces what is conceptualised here as an “absent mirror,” in which critical dimensions of social reality are selectively omitted. This raises a fundamental question central to this study: to what extent do scriptwriters, directors, and festival organisers consciously imagine persons with disabilities as integral to both the creative process and the performance ensemble? If theatre is indeed intended to reflect the societies in which it is embedded, then such reflection ought to be comprehensive rather than partial. Yet, the evidence suggests that this is rarely the case.

The persistent invisibility of disability within performances staged at the Kenya National Drama Festival, Kenya Music Festival, and Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association calls into question the authenticity of these platforms as representative cultural spaces. A theatre that claims to mirror society but consistently excludes or marginalises certain identities risks becoming a site of selective representation, what may be described, more critically, as a “performative fiction” rather than an authentic social reflection. In this sense, the issue is not merely one of absence, but of representational integrity: a theatre that does not accommodate the full spectrum of lived experience cannot credibly claim to reflect society in its totality.

This finding resonates with Hill (2025), who conceptualises performance as a contested space in which some identities are foregrounded while others are systematically silenced. It also aligns with the work of Hutchison and Loots (2026), who demonstrate that embodiment in performance can either reproduce or disrupt normative assumptions about ability. In the Kenyan festival context, however, the study finds that prevailing practices largely sustain normative frameworks, privileging able-bodied representations and thereby failing to capture the everyday coexistence of diverse bodies and experiences that characterise social life.

If literature and theatre are to retain their epistemic and cultural legitimacy as mirrors of society, then their representational scope must extend to all categories of social existence, including disability. The absence of such inclusivity suggests not only a gap in representation but also a deeper ideological positioning that determines whose stories are worth telling. This underscores the need to reconceptualise theatre beyond the passive metaphor of mirroring, towards an understanding of performance as an active site of ideological production and contestation. Only through such a reorientation can Kenyan festival theatre move from selective representation towards a more truthful and ethically grounded engagement with the realities it seeks to depict.

5.3 Institutional Structures and the Reproduction of Exclusion

Institutional arrangements within festival theatre emerge as a primary site through which exclusion is normalised and reproduced. The categorisation of performers into “special” groups, while often presented as a progressive gesture, operates within the logic of the medical model of disability, where impairment is constructed as deviation from a presumed norm and, consequently, managed through separation. Such arrangements do not simply organise participation; they encode a hierarchy of bodies and experiences, positioning disability outside the realm of the “ordinary” stage. In contrast, the social model of disability locates exclusion within the structures, practices, and attitudes of society itself. From this perspective, it is not

impairment that necessitates separation, but the failure of institutions to accommodate diversity in integrated ways.

The findings of this study demonstrate that segregated categories in Kenyan festival theatre limit meaningful participation by confining performers with disabilities to parallel, rather than shared, creative spaces. This separation undermines both artistic collaboration and social visibility, reinforcing the perception of disability as “otherness” rather than as an integral dimension of human diversity. Such dynamics echo Mburu (2022), who shows that Kenyan media frequently frames disability through restrictive and marginalising narratives that sustain distance rather than familiarity. Similarly, Namayi (2021) demonstrates that theatrical texts often reproduce dominant ideological formations, even when they appear to engage progressive themes. In this regard, festival theatre does not stand apart from broader cultural systems; it participates in the same representational economy that privileges normative identities while relegating others to the margins.

What is at stake, therefore, is not merely inclusion in numerical terms, but the quality and location of that inclusion within the theatrical process. A genuinely representative theatre cannot sustain parallel structures that isolate difference while claiming inclusivity. Instead, there is a need for a deliberate blending of character dynamics, where persons with disabilities are incorporated into mainstream narratives as part of the ordinary social fabric. Such integration would allow theatre to more accurately reflect real societal demographics, in which diversity is lived rather than compartmentalised. It would also challenge entrenched assumptions about ability, normalcy, and performance, opening up new aesthetic and narrative possibilities.

Reconfiguring institutional practice in this way requires a shift from accommodation to transformation. Festival frameworks must move beyond the symbolic recognition of difference towards structural inclusivity, where casting, scripting, adjudication criteria, and performance design are reoriented to support integrated participation. Only through such a reconfiguration can Kenyan festival theatre move from reproducing exclusion to actively dismantling it, thereby aligning its practices with the social realities it purports to represent.

5.4 Historical Continuities and Representational Constraints

The study situates these representational patterns within the historical evolution of Kenyan theatre, demonstrating that contemporary exclusions are deeply rooted in institutional and ideological legacies. As shown by Komu (2016), the structure of Kenyan drama festivals derives from colonial frameworks that privileged Eurocentric aesthetics, themes, and modes of participation. From its inception, festival theatre was shaped by exclusionary logics. The Kenya Schools and Colleges Drama Festival (KSCDF), established in 1959, largely catered to European and Asian students, with minimal African involvement. As Mumma (1994) observes, its structure and storytelling conventions closely mirrored the British drama festival tradition, thereby entrenching imported aesthetic standards and narrative priorities. African participation only expanded after independence, yet this transition did not fundamentally transform the underlying frameworks that governed representation.

The findings of this study suggest that, despite increased access, post-independence developments have not sufficiently disrupted these inherited structures. Characterisation within festival productions remains insufficiently reflective of Kenya’s social diversity, often privileging homogenised or “safe” narratives aligned with institutional expectations. In this

regard, the marginalisation of disability can be understood as part of a broader continuity in which certain experiences are systematically excluded from theatrical visibility. The persistence of what may be termed “imperialised themes” limits the scope for engaging with complex, lived realities, including those associated with disability. Yet, as everyday social contexts reveal, each household embodies diverse experiences and challenges that could enrich theatrical narratives if meaningfully incorporated. New theatrical institutions such as KUPAA have also copied from old institutions that have existed and continued with ignorance of the role of the special people in theatre productions. As indicated by Oyugi an oral source, KUPAA has not done much or differently from what had been happening in other institutions since its inception in 2018. (Oyugi, May 1, 2026 personal communication).

This historical perspective reinforces the argument that representational gaps are neither incidental nor merely aesthetic choices; they are structurally embedded within the evolution of festival theatre in Kenya. Consequently, addressing the marginalisation of disability requires more than incremental reform. It demands a critical re-examination of inherited institutional frameworks, narrative conventions, and evaluative criteria that continue to shape what is performed, how it is performed, and whose experiences are legitimised on stage.

5.5 Audience Reception and the Production of Meaning

In addressing the second objective, the study demonstrates that audience interpretation is integral to the construction of meaning in performance. Reception theory posits that audiences actively interpret texts based on their social positioning and cultural frameworks. The findings indicate that limited and stereotypical representations of disability tend to reinforce existing prejudices among audiences, while inclusive portrayals can challenge and reconfigure these perceptions. This aligns with Hill (2025), who emphasises the relational nature of performance, and with Hutchison and Loots (2026), who highlight the transformative potential of embodied encounters. The study therefore underscores that representation and reception are mutually constitutive processes, and that meaningful change in audience perception depends on the availability of inclusive narratives.

5.6 Towards Integrative and Inclusive Theatre Practice

The study advances a clear shift from tokenistic inclusion towards genuinely integrative practice, anchored in both performance theory and disability studies. Drawing on Augusto Boal’s conception of theatre as a space for social transformation, inclusion must be understood not as mere visibility but as the meaningful incorporation of agency, participation, and narrative centrality. In this regard, the findings indicate that disability within Kenyan festival theatre remains largely peripheral, appearing sporadically and often symbolically, with minimal integration into the core fabric of storytelling and performance. This pattern reflects what Mburu (2022) identifies in media contexts as the persistence of reductive and marginalising portrayals, and what Namayi (2021) observes in drama as the reproduction of dominant representational logics.

However, the study also recognises emerging trajectories of change. Work by Njoroge (2026) points to evolving efforts towards disability-inclusive practice within Kenyan performing arts, particularly through innovations that foreground accessibility and participation. These developments resonate with broader scholarly positions that emphasise the need to normalise disability within everyday narratives rather than isolate it as exceptional. Consequently, integrative approaches, encompassing inclusive scriptwriting that embeds disability within ordinary social interactions, equitable casting that ensures the presence of diverse bodies on

stage, and adaptive staging that expands rather than restricts aesthetic possibilities, offer viable pathways for reconfiguring theatre practice.

In practical terms, institutions such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association, Kenya National Drama Festival, and Kenya Music Festival, alongside other Kenyan theatre platforms, should therefore move beyond segregated categories and tokenistic gestures by institutionalising inclusive policies within their frameworks. This entails revising festival guidelines to require integrative casting and storytelling, investing in capacity-building for practitioners on inclusive performance techniques, and creating accessible infrastructures that enable full participation. Such measures would not only enhance representational equity but also reposition Kenyan festival theatre as a dynamic space capable of reflecting the complexity and diversity of lived experience.

5.7 Reframing Theatre as a Site of Social Transformation

Kenyan festival theatre continues to operate within enduring structural, historical, and ideological constraints that circumscribe its capacity to function as an authentic mirror of society. As Komu (2016) demonstrates, the institutional foundations of Kenyan theatre are deeply rooted in colonial frameworks that privileged Eurocentric aesthetics and selective participation, a legacy that continues to shape contemporary festival practices. Consequently, theatrical production often reproduces narrow representational regimes in which disability remains marginal or symbolically framed. This observation is consistent with Mburu (2022), who notes that Kenyan media frequently constructs disability through restrictive and stereotypical narratives, thereby reinforcing social exclusion rather than challenging it. Yet, scholarship across global and African performance studies underscores that theatre is not merely reflective but generative. Hill (2025) conceptualises performance as a relational space in which meaning is negotiated between artists and audiences, while Hutchison and Loots (2026) emphasise the transformative potential of embodied encounters in destabilising normative assumptions about ability. Similarly, Lipenga (2014) and Kimani (2025) illustrate that African cultural texts possess the capacity to move beyond stereotypical constructions of disability towards more enabling and agentic representations, even if such shifts remain uneven. These perspectives collectively affirm that theatre, when reconfigured, can actively reshape social meanings and identities.

Realising this potential, however, requires more than symbolic inclusion; it necessitates a fundamental reorientation of institutional frameworks, creative practices, and audience engagement. As Namayi (2021) argues, dramatic texts often reproduce dominant ideologies unless deliberate efforts are made to disrupt them. In this regard, integrative approaches, such as inclusive scripting, equitable casting, and adaptive staging, become critical in challenging the entrenched logic of exclusion. Emerging work by Njoroge (2026) further points to the possibilities of inclusive artistic practice within the Kenyan context, particularly through innovations that foreground accessibility and participation. Through such shifts, platforms such as the Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association, Kenya National Drama Festival, and Kenya Music Festival can move beyond the condition of the “absent mirror” towards a more expansive and ethically grounded representational practice. In doing so, they would not only enhance their artistic integrity but also fulfil, in more substantive terms, their cultural mandate as spaces for critical reflection, inclusive dialogue, and social transformation.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to interrogate the representation of disability in Kenyan drama festivals and to examine how such representations are interpreted by audiences. The findings demonstrate that disability remains marginal within festival theatre, both in terms of narrative inclusion and performative practice. Where it appears, it is frequently framed through limiting tropes that emphasise difference, dependency, or symbolic function, rather than being integrated as a normal aspect of human experience. In this respect, the study confirms that Kenyan festival theatre operates as an “absent mirror,” reflecting society selectively while omitting critical dimensions of social reality. From a theoretical standpoint, the study affirms that representation is an active process shaped by cultural, institutional, and historical forces. Drawing on representation theory and the social model of disability, it becomes evident that the marginalisation of disability is not merely a question of absence but of structural exclusion embedded within dramaturgy, casting, and festival organisation. The persistence of segregated performance categories further reinforces this exclusion, reproducing notions of otherness rather than fostering meaningful inclusion. These findings underscore the limitations of conventional assumptions about theatre as a neutral mirror of society and instead position it as a site where social meanings are constructed and contested. The study establishes that meaning is co-produced through interaction between performance and spectatorship. Limited and stereotypical portrayals of disability tend to reinforce existing perceptions, while inclusive and integrative representations hold the potential to reshape audience understanding and promote social acceptance. This highlights the transformative capacity of theatre, not only as an artistic practice but also as a cultural force capable of influencing social attitudes. The study therefore, calls for a deliberate shift towards integrative and inclusive theatre practices within platforms such as the Kenya National Drama Festival, Kenya Music Festival, and Kenya Universities Performing Arts Association. Such a shift requires rethinking scriptwriting, casting, staging, and institutional frameworks to ensure that persons with disabilities are not merely visible, but meaningfully included as participants and subjects of representation.

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