

# Theater company gives look 'Back/Stage' at life with special needs

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Tilt Performance Group is unlike other theater companies in Austin. Their mission statement states they are committed to “providing adults with special needs and unique abilities the opportunity to participate in the creation and performance of professional theater” as well as “providing audiences the opportunity to enhance their understanding of those with unique abilities.” The company’s latest production, “Back/Stage,” tackles that part of their mission head-on, with a play that explores the meaning of stories, and of performing, to the show’s cast members.



Contributed by Dave Hawks

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As director Nick Mayo explains in his curtain speech, “Back/Stage” evolved out of a workshop that exposed company members to the rehearsal process of a Broadway show. From there, Mayo worked with the cast through extensive discussions and rehearsals in order to put together an all-new play that explores company members’ tragedies and triumphs as adults living with special needs. The result is an inspiring cabaret that is filled with humor, warmth and insight. The center point of “Back/Stage” is a discussion of why stories are important. As the show progresses, that exploration goes from the most general, such as the narrative experiences of enjoying sports, to the most specific, as the cast members get to explain why they enjoy telling stories on stage and the ways in which doing so interacts with their needs and disabilities. Along the way, cast members engage in comedic skits, musical performances and toasts of support for one another. But “Back/Stage” is not a saccharine talent show. The most moving moments come when the entire cast assembles on stage in order to frankly discuss what it’s like living with special needs and how frequently they feel misunderstood or unheard. “Back/Stage” gives them the opportunity to be listened to; to share their stories, both their joy and their pain, with an audience that wants to hear what they have to say. It is a direct, honest, firsthand look at living with a disability, and how those disabilities do not hinder creativity, artistry or a desire to bring joy to audiences. It is easy to see why Tilt has received funds from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Texas Commission on the Arts. The work they create, as embodied by “Back/Stage,” is a vital part of an important national conversation, and there is nothing else like it on the Austin stage.

