# Athena Stevens’ Diagnosis confronts society’s dismissal of disabled voices in dystopian near-future



Athena Stevens’ latest play, *Diagnosis*, is a haunting exploration of the existential struggle faced by many individuals living with disabilities. In this thought-provoking piece, which Stevens both writes and stars in, she delves into the heightened reality that these individuals often navigate—a realm where personal aspirations collide sharply with societal expectations. Set in an unsettling near-future, *Diagnosis* presents a dystopian landscape where the very systems designed to protect the vulnerable have, ironically, exacerbated their plight.

The narrative follows a wheelchair user, portrayed by Stevens herself, who is haunted by a series of ominous messages illuminating the heads of those around her. She becomes convinced that a catastrophic flood is imminent, a situation that underscores her isolation and desperation to be heard in a society that frequently overlooks the lived experiences of disabled individuals. The play's chilling atmosphere is masterfully crafted under the direction of Ché Walker, who also takes on the role of an interrogation officer. His direction creates an escalating tension, making the audience acutely aware of both the character's fears and the universal denial of impending disaster that persists even in dire circumstances.

The backdrop of the play is equally compelling; it imagines a world where artificial intelligence is meant to ensure public safety but instead amplifies feelings of alienation. For instance, a program designed to recite legal rights does so in a dispassionate, robotic voice, rendering those rights feel further out of reach. This theme of distortion resonates with Stevens’ previous works, notably her earlier play *Schism*, which addresses the complex relationships that individuals with disabilities have with the people and systems around them. In both pieces, she draws from her experiences with athetoid cerebral palsy, allowing her performances to resonate with authenticity while navigating the delicate balance between empowerment and societal constraint.

Amanda's monologues in *Diagnosis*, particularly poignant as they weave her character's haunting memories of scanning underground tunnels for disturbances, create an almost otherworldly presence, reflecting a profound connection to her environment. This use of monologue is similar to her explorations in *Scrounger*, where Stevens also tackles societal issues, this time focusing on her personal narrative of seeking justice after her wheelchair was damaged by an airline. Both plays require the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about attitudes towards disability, pushing for recognition and change in societal narratives.

Despite the gripping intensity of *Diagnosis*, the pacing at times falters. Walker’s decision to create a rhythm that oscillates between tension and stillness may serve to unsettle the audience, but it can also break the immersive quality of the narrative. Nevertheless, when Stevens fully embraces her character's phenomenological depth, her performance transcends mere portrayal to become an urgent plea for awareness and empathy.

The play not only serves as a platform for Stevens’ immense talent but also as a reflection on the material and societal obstacles that disabled individuals face daily. As the spectre of doom looms, what resonates powerfully is a dual message: the pressing need for societal recognition of disabled experiences and the enduring human spirit's struggle against oppression.

In *Diagnosis*, audiences are invited not just to witness a narrative unfold but to engage deeply with the uncomfortable realities it represents, ultimately compelling them to consider how much of the future remains unwritten, dependent on our willingness to listen and act.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre)
2. Paragraph 2: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre), [[2]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre)
3. Paragraph 3: [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/01/schism-finborough-london-review-athena-stevens-cerebral-palsy), [[4]](https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/schism-review-at-finborough-theatre-london--engaging-and-well-observed), [[5]](https://everything-theatre.co.uk/2020/01/scrounger-finborough-theatre-review/), [[6]](https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/reviews/scrounger-a-new-play-about-athena-stevens-quest-for-justice/)
4. Paragraph 4: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre), [[7]](https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/diagnosis)
5. Paragraph 5: [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre), [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/01/schism-finborough-london-review-athena-stevens-cerebral-palsy), [[5]](https://everything-theatre.co.uk/2020/01/scrounger-finborough-theatre-review/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2025/may/18/diagnosis-review-athena-stevens-finborough-theatre> - In this review, 'Diagnosis' is described as an eerie and powerful play by Athena Stevens, who also stars in the production. The play delves into the dual reality experienced by individuals with disabilities, highlighting the gap between their potential lives and societal expectations. Set in a future where protective measures have been implemented but have worsened conditions, the narrative follows a woman using a wheelchair who becomes convinced of an impending disaster. The production is noted for its intense atmosphere, with director Ché Walker and a pulsating soundscape enhancing the tension.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/01/schism-finborough-london-review-athena-stevens-cerebral-palsy> - This review discusses 'Schism,' a play by Athena Stevens that portrays the complex relationship between a young woman with cerebral palsy and her teacher. The narrative explores themes of ambition, disability, and societal expectations. Stevens' performance is praised for its authenticity, drawing from her personal experiences with athetoid cerebral palsy. The play is recognized for its engaging storytelling and the depth it brings to the portrayal of disabled individuals striving to overcome societal barriers.
4. <https://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/schism-review-at-finborough-theatre-london--engaging-and-well-observed> - In this review, 'Schism' is highlighted as an engaging two-hander that delves into the expectations and ambitions of a disabled woman. Athena Stevens delivers a committed performance as Katherine, a student with cerebral palsy determined to gain autonomy. The play is noted for its well-observed portrayal of the challenges faced by disabled individuals and the dynamics of their relationships, offering a nuanced exploration of ambition and societal constraints.
5. <https://everything-theatre.co.uk/2020/01/scrounger-finborough-theatre-review/> - 'Scrounger' is reviewed as a play that examines the treatment of disabled individuals, inspired by real-life events experienced by Athena Stevens. The narrative follows Stevens' character, Scrounger, as she confronts the aftermath of her wheelchair being damaged by an airline. The play is noted for its insightful commentary on societal attitudes towards disability, though some aspects of the storytelling are critiqued for potentially diminishing the impact of the narrative.
6. <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/reviews/scrounger-a-new-play-about-athena-stevens-quest-for-justice/> - This review of 'Scrounger' discusses the play's exploration of Athena Stevens' quest for justice after her wheelchair was damaged by an airline. The play is praised for its candid portrayal of the challenges faced by disabled individuals and the systemic issues they encounter. Stevens' performance is highlighted as captivating, with the play demanding that audiences acknowledge and confront societal oppression of disabled people.
7. <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/diagnosis> - This article provides an overview of 'Diagnosis,' a new play by Athena Stevens that returns to the Finborough Theatre. The play features Stevens as a disabled woman who pilots surveillance drones through the London Underground and becomes convinced of an impending catastrophe. Directed by Ché Walker, the production is noted for its intriguing premise and the return of Stevens to the Finborough Theatre.