

## ***Susan Nussbaum, 68, Who Pressed for Disability Rights in Her Plays, Dies***

In a wheelchair after being hit by a car in her 20s, she became an advocate for people with disabilities in her writing for the stage and as a novelist.



The playwright, novelist and activist Susan Nussbaum in an undated photo. “If the dominant culture was saturated with backward concepts of who we were,” she once said, “I would answer back with my own collection of disabled characters.”Credit...Suzanne Plunkett

By [Annabelle Williams](#)

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Susan Nussbaum, a playwright and novelist whose work reflected her concern for the rights of people with disabilities, died on April 28 at her home in the Lakeview neighborhood of Chicago. She was 68.

Her sister, Karen Nussbaum, said the cause was complications of pneumonia.

Ms. Nussbaum began using a wheelchair after being hit by a car at age 24 and soon became an integral part of Chicago’s burgeoning disability-rights scene.

Incensed by a lack of accessibility in the city for theater people with disabilities, she wrote her own plays, starring herself and other disabled actors.

“If the dominant culture was saturated with backward concepts of who we were, I would answer back with my own collection of disabled characters,” she wrote in a 2012 [essay](#) published in The Huffington Post.

Ms. Nussbaum began her playwriting career with “Staring Back,” which was performed on the Second City’s E.T.C. stage in 1983. She then collaborated with Mike Ervin, a disability activist who writes a column for Progressive.org, on a series of satirical sketches about disability. Titled “The Plucky and Spunky Show,” it was presented at the Remains Theater.

The first reading of her acerbic comic play “Mishuganismo” was in 1992 in Chicago. The Chicago Tribune, in [an article about that reading](#), called it “a mad-sad-glad whirl of politics, activism, love, need, sex and other items.”

Directed by her father, Mike Nussbaum, an actor, and based on her own letters, the play took its title from a term that one of Ms. Nussbaum’s friends coined, meaning “a syndrome when a Jewish woman goes crazy for a Latin guy.” The play was later published in the 1997 anthology “Staring Back: The Disability Experience From the Inside Out.”

Her last major play, “No One as Nasty,” which documented the relationship between a disabled woman and her paid caretaker, was performed in 2000 at the Victory Gardens Theater in Chicago.

As a member of the Chicago-based disability rights organization Access Living, Ms. Nussbaum campaigned to make theaters more accessible to wheelchair users and participated in other protests, including efforts to make public transit in the city accessible.

After decades of work in theater, she turned to fiction. Her novel “Good Kings Bad Kings,” which follows workers and residents in a Chicago care institution for people with disabilities, earned acclaim for its candor and sensitivity and won the 2012 PEN/Bellwether Prize for Socially Engaged Fiction.

The book’s title came from [reporting](#) in The New York Times about Jonathan Carey, an autistic boy who was killed by an employee of the Oswald D. Heck Developmental Center, near Albany, where Jonathan was living. “I could be a good king or a bad king,” the man told the boy as he asphyxiated him, according to court documents.

That line stuck with Ms. Nussbaum, she said in a 2013 [interview](#) with the website Bitch Media. “It became the title because it reminded me how, when it comes to kids, the adults have all the power. And when the adult in question has no emotional connection to the child, and the child’s welfare is turned over to that adult — as is the case in institutions — terrible things can happen.”

She continued: “The disabled characters we’re presented with usually fit one or more of the following stereotypes: victim, villain, saint, monster. The fate of the disabled character is usually miraculous cure, death or institutionalization.”

In writing the novel, as in her other work, Ms. Nussbaum said, “It was really important to me to give disabled characters — more than one — their own voices, and the agency to represent themselves and their own perspective on what happens.”

Susan Ruth Nussbaum was born on Dec. 2, 1953, in Chicago to Mike and Annette (Brenner) Nussbaum. Her mother worked in public relations. She grew up in Highland Park, a suburb of Chicago, and attended Highland Park High School, graduating in 1972.

Interested in theater from a young age after running lines with her father, she began writing plays in high school. After graduating, she took drama classes at the Goodman School of Drama (now The Theatre School at DePaul University) in Chicago.

She was on her way to an acting class when she was struck by a car. She spent seven months in the hospital.

She then navigated through life as a wheelchair user, becoming angry at the lack of accessibility. At one job, as she recounted in a 2013 *Psychology Today* [article](#), the workplace did not have accessible bathrooms. Finding no ramps on public transportation, she and other wheelchair users began taking an ambulance to and from work. These experiences galvanized her to join Access Living and begin writing plays.

Her activism extended outside Chicago as well. A longtime leftist, Ms. Nussbaum visited Nicaragua and Cuba as a member of coalitions on disability rights. Later in life she founded Empowered Fe Fes, a Chicago organization for disabled young women seeking to explore their sexuality.

In addition to her sister, she is survived by her father; a brother, Jacob Nussbaum; and a daughter, Taina Rodriguez.