

Comedian Jade Theriault at the Accessible Futures Conference, June 2025

[00:00:00.05] - Jade Theriault

This morning. I was listening into the various breakouts. There's a lot of great discussion happening.

[00:00:04.28] - Interviewer

But right now, we're going to shift gears and just enjoy ourselves a little and recharge. Our lunchtime guest is here to bring both laughter and insight. Jade Theriault is a brilliant interdisciplinary artist and comedian whose work explores disability, embodiment, and identity with biting humor and deep intelligence. Their performances defy expectation and invite us to think and laugh differently. Please welcome Jade Theriault.

[00:00:39.27] - Jade Theriault

Oh, wow. Oh, it feels so good to be up here. I finally get to hold my head with my robot arm in a room full of people I don't have to mask in front of. I could just be disabled. It's great. It's true, I am a comedian, and I could tell jokes today, or I just very coincidentally prepared a 10-page, slightly serious, slightly humorous speech. So by a show a hand and cheers. Let's do this. Jokes. Jokes. Or 10-page speech that I've been working on for a really long time, and I've been practicing every day for the last three weeks. You guys don't have to hear it if you don't want to. We'll do it again. Jokes and speech. Thank you. Damn it. I would love some volume on this mic, but maybe that's fine. Okay, here we go. I am so happy and grateful to be around all of you today. This is definitely a beautiful lesson in comfort zone. I've spent the last 10 years of my life just fully immersed in the art scene. I've spent my days just building this character and posting content or just covered in fake blood on some weird exploitation film shoot.

[00:02:26.23] - Jade Theriault

In the evenings, I'd set him up and knock them down, alternating between crowds of 100 people in the richest parts of San Francisco or a crowd of two in a Soma dive bar that smells like urine. See, those are my favorite because that's when I could really look into someone else's eyes and just find a new meaning there. I am a stand-up comic, but I'm not going to make the sit-down comic joke. The Abels already did that for me. They can have it. I got into stand-up comedy in

high school because I wanted to pick up Hot Babes. I found out that the demand to hear about my sex life was high and the supply was me. That was good. I went to college trying to find the art in myself and just enjoying a freedom that my disabled elders might say that my age group takes for granted. If you listen to this speech without looking at me talking about just trolling the streets of SF alone at 23, smothered in clown face, you might be surprised at who's talking. But you see, I know my audience because we're not surprised because we worked for this.

[00:04:09.29] - Jade Theriault

We came from these roots. We were literally rooted in our beds, rooted in our homes, just installed in iron lungs horizontally without even the freedom to get off the sidewalk, we fought. Then, I have to tell this story, even though we all know this story. Just three years before I was born, disabled activists dragged their tired, rooted bodies up the 83 steps of the HUD building to host the longest sit-in of a federal building in US history. We We have to brag about that every time because it is so, so cool. About 20 years later, when Medicaid was facing its first serious existential crisis, a daft activist upgraded us to a die-in. Because we're having another like that, we got to do it. History always repeats itself Because our bodies were dragged out of our wheelchairs again, this time by violent cops who apparently were more afraid of us than they were 20 years ago. When I look at MAGA with their guns and their nationalism and their fascism, and I look at us and where we've come from and what we've done, I can see why they're afraid. We are one of the most powerful civil rights movements ever.

[00:06:10.11] - Jade Theriault

And unlike MAGA, our movement will never die because We will always have growing numbers across party lines. And the general populace will always support us because we are them. We are their mothers, their brothers, their sisters, their friends. They will become us. It's just this loop that will keep happening. Our motivations have nothing to do with the economy or jobs or weapons or fear or hatred or none of that. All we want is to live and to love. We're not going to give up on that, and that's what scares them. That's why I hope that you'll believe me when Can I say how genuinely happy I am to be around all of you who do this work? I want to bring up comfort zones again because I'm a grungey, X-rated comedian. I don't know why they put me here. I hate to say it, but preparing this speech was not fun for me. It's not because I was bored. Quite the opposite. It's because I was overwhelmed and I was afraid of the sheer amount of activism that we all have to do in the coming years. I've been trying to figure out what my role is in all of this.

[00:07:54.25] - Jade Theriault

I went back to the beginning. I thought about growing up how my aunt was very involved in advocacy work and benefits planning for our communities. We are both the only two members of our family who live with muscular dystrophy. So naturally, most people assumed that I would grow up to have the exact same personality, interests, and values as her, of course. No, not so much. But we are very close. But even as I did a 180 away from what I considered the boring social justice world, I couldn't escape that very universal truth. Everything is political. First, it came out in my material. I'd start from the beginning, talk about how when I was four years old, my parents They thought I was going to die, so they gave me a make a wish. Never give a four-year-old a make a wish. They're going to tell a four-year-old they can have anything in the entire world, and they only know four years of the world? I wanted to see Mickey Mouse. Nobody wants to see Mickey Mouse. They took me to Disneyland. I don't know, maybe they could have waited. They could have waited until I was maybe, I don't know, 31.

[00:09:36.19] - Jade Theriault

I would have wish for something good, like a shopping spree for groceries. Some affordable health care would be nice. It's good. It's fine. You know what? I'm really glad. I'm really glad there's no stage here. I don't need a stage. I don't need this microphone. I don't need this wheelchair. That's what my insurance company told me. I don't need it. It was signed by a doctor, Good enough. I swear to God, that was his actual name on paper, and so on and so forth. That was my material. Then my impatience at simply being out in public started to weigh on me. Long stretches of broken sidewalks that ended with no curb cut out, being literally locked in a barred station because there was no agent to help me swipe my card, waiting for the bus. Bus drivers, they see me, they do what they do best. They just keep on driving. Then you get there, shows in the basement, Dead elevators, broken glass, no communication. I was starting to wonder if it was all my fault. I should have went the long way. I should have asked that guy for help. I should have called the venue before leaving my house.

[00:11:38.11] - Jade Theriault

The SF Punch Line is arguably the most popular comedy club in San Francisco. To be considered for an audition, young hopefuls must attend every Sunday for at least a year before getting any stage time. I put my head down and I trekked across every broken sidewalk and in my giant rain poncho that looked like a garbage bag. To be there on Sundays. I did that for about a year and a half until I was finally, finally, I was offered stage time on the ground Next to the stage. Normally, from most shows, I would oblige because agreeableness is how you make it in early showbiz. But this was the SF punchline, and I was tired. So I told the Booker, I want access to the stage and can Live Nation, a multi-billion dollar Willard Company purchase a ramp on Amazon? We had emails back and forth about logistics and dimensions, and it seemed like

just another routine exercise and accommodation request. And then, radio silence, follow-up, nothing. Must have been something I said. I kept going on Sundays for another year. It wasn't until I and fellow comedian, Danielle Perez, were accepted in the SFSketch Fest, the Bay Area's largest Comedy Festival, that the club was compelled to purchase a ramp.

[00:13:54.02] - Jade Theriault

I wish that was the end of the story. But accommodations are always questioned about how reasonable they are. Comics who attend on Sundays don't know whether they'll be going up that night. The booker decides on the spot. So since nobody knew whether I'd go up, the ramp was never up. You know the pain I'm talking about. At a certain point, you start to become familiar with these logical fallacies. At the same time as my little battle is happening, down in Los Angeles, comedian Joe Yarel is waging a bitter war against the Comedy Store for its even more egregious displays of ableism. It's only Joe, and it's only me, and it begs the question, where Where are all the disabled people? They don't go here, so why do we need to make a building accessible if they're not going there? Well, I don't know where all the disabled people are, but I do know where they are not. At the building with four steps at the entrance. This circular reasoning is so easy to miss that I don't even think the people arguing it are aware that they're simply trying to serve a fake bottom line, which is that exclusion saves money.

[00:15:49.11] - Jade Theriault

But it doesn't. It only saves in the short term. What you're losing in the long term are decades of a demographic of paying customers and just a general lack of human enrichment. You're losing prestige and respect. Luckily, My story had a happy ending, but only because I maintained that happy crippled composure, even though inside my blood was boiling. It took some reconnaissance to find the owner's contact info and a few diplomatically crafted emails. The ramp is now a permanent fixture for the Sunday showcase. Thank you. After five years of fighting, the issue was finally resolved in 2022. Now, fast forward to present all Bay Area Comedy Clubs now have either ADA or rudimentary access to the stage. I tell this story for a few reasons. First, to drive home the fact that whether you're a seasoned career activist or a clown like me, if you are disabled, you will be forced to fight for your right to exist. If someone you love is disabled, you will be forced to fight because you love them. I also tell this story to remind us that despite our anger in frustration, we have to play chess, four-dimensional chess, to take some lingo from the side of evil.

[00:18:00.13] - Jade Theriault

We can't act impulsively. We need to leverage diplomacy when we can and the law when we can't. We need to keep building coalitions with other activist groups like we did with the Black Panthers in the early '90s and find our common ground. Since we live under capitalism, we need to find ways to incentivize to mobilize businesses, not only to increase access, but to lobby, fund, and support DEI initiatives in California. On a more human level, I know how important it is to call out injustice when we see it, but we also need to call people in because disability is non-partisan. It doesn't care who has it. I think we should take a moment to appreciate the ways in which we are continuing to march toward universal design. I think about the pandemic and about how so many of us were driven into our homes and have yet to emerge because the world is still too diseased. In some ways, we become even less visible. But the silver lining is that hybrid remote events and work from home employment have become commonplace, so much so that in 2023, Governor Newsom signed legislation expanding Bagley Keen, requiring state boards and commissions to provide remote access so that everyone can participate.

[00:20:07.13] - Jade Theriault

All of these things are allowing more of us to participate in the world from a place of power and stability. For those of us with the privilege to be able to move about in public, we've seen advances there as well. In the last five years, Uber aggressively expanded its fleet of wheelchair accessible vehicles in the Bay after facing a PR crisis, burned by strategic litigation. Lyft and Waymo were soon to follow suit. In the sky, advocacy groups like AllWheelsUp are fighting for more accessible air travel. Because of its efforts, in 2022, the Department of Transportation adopted its first-ever airline passengers with Disabilities Bill of Rights. Now, we need to take that momentum and focus our efforts. California is the birth marketplace of the disability rights movement. We have some of the most robust social infrastructure in the country, which is just a fancy way of saying we take care of our people. And although Trump and his cronies pose an existential threat to us, we have to fortify California first and foremost. We have to supervise and direct our lawmakers with a fine-tooth comb. Just because they're blue doesn't mean they will always hit the mark.

[00:21:56.03] - Jade Theriault

Recently, Governor Newsom threatened to draft drastically cut from home care services and reinstate the oppressive and dated Medi-Cal asset limit in order to balance the budget. Here we go with the logical fallacies again. I'm such a nerd about that. This one is called the false dichotomy. The idea that cutting social services or borrowing from the rainy day fund are our only options? This is just some weird trolley problem? Well, because of strong advocacy, we did go with the rainy day option, fingers crossed. But what if there was a third choice? Now that we

passed our budget, maybe our next conversation should be about radical campaign finance reform so that we can openly strategize on how to tax the 1%, not just their income, but their companies and assets that they hide behind. Lawmakers, I ask you, are you brave enough to openly have these conversations while your wealthiest supporters are watching? I hope that in this world where the future is uncertain and the truth is just invented by AI, that we remember that as a community, we are powerful and our activism is effective. I want to thank the Metropolitan Transportation Commission for having me, and Representative Latifa Simon for amplifying our voices, and to all of you for attending this conference and helping us keep our infrastructure in place.

[00:24:12.01] - Jade Theriault

Thank you.