

MEET YOUR SEAT:
PERFORMING ARTS ACCESSIBILITY
FOR AUDIENCES ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM

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**MEET YOUR SEAT:
PERFORMING ARTS ACCESSIBILITY
FOR AUDIENCES ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM**

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DEDICATIONS

Dedicated to my supportive and inspiring family and friends.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis encourages theaters to develop productions for children on the autism spectrum and their families. Interviews with potential audience members and an analysis of recent sensory-friendly performances demonstrate that an accessible show, with slight modifications to the production and circumstances, can enrich the audience's social and emotional life while allowing theaters to form a relationship with a new constituency. Theaters should plan a sensory-friendly show in accordance with a mission to provide experiences for diverse sectors of the community and to offer quality accessible productions for an otherwise neglected audience. Administrators must recognize that the program's financial profitability is unlikely to match the investment made by the theater to produce it. Interested theaters can follow their predecessors' guidelines and suggestions, making a commitment to serve the autism community and treating this programming as an integral part of their overall program planning process, rather than as an audience development tool.

INTRODUCTION

This paper investigates the significance and intricacies of sensory-friendly programming in the performing arts. My thesis is that performing arts organizations should consider developing programs for children on the autism spectrum and that the field should form a consensus on how to implement and offer these programs successfully. My research looks at the benefits the autism community receives from performing arts options geared towards its children's behavioral, social, and familial needs. The results show that sensory-friendly performances provide attending families with a stigma-free environment that they do not experience elsewhere.

This topic stems from the increasing understanding of the importance of accessibility in all public settings as well as the prevalence of autism spectrum diagnoses in the United States in recent years. Not only are diagnosis rates now approximately 1 in 88 children (Muchmore 2012), but support groups call for recognition in many areas of society. Today's audiences, advocates argue, should include children on the autism spectrum, for whom a night out at the theater might normally seem like a daunting experience filled with possible sensory overload issues (Mohn 2013, Kennedy Center 2013, Grey 2013).

Ultimately, this thesis attempts to prove that increasing accessibility can, in the best scenario, lead to two positive effects: the ability to educate and inform new audiences and patrons and, at the same time, grow an awareness and acceptance among performing arts administrators of the reason for them to make a commitment to this

potential audience base. While the autism community may not be a typical target audience that can be expected to turn a real profit through ticket sales, the community can nonetheless benefit from sensory-friendly programs. If theaters can move beyond typical audience development when thinking about inclusion, diversity, and accessibility, they should be able to situate this audience within the context of their larger goals of reaching the local community and providing arts experiences for a broad range of sectors of society.

THE DIAGNOSIS: BEING ON THE SPECTRUM

Autism Speaks, Inc., a national support organization for the autism community, explains that both “autism” and “Autism Spectrum Disorder” refer to a “group of complex disorders of brain development . . . characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication and repetitive behaviors” (Autism Speaks 2013). The American Psychiatric Association, which recently released the latest version of its *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual of Mental Disorders*, has begun grouping several previously separate types of developmental disorders into one ASD diagnosis to account for a spectrum of disorders. “People with ASD tend to have communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions, or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment, or intensely focused on inappropriate items” (Autism Speaks 2013).

The Association underscores that symptoms of affected individuals will vary according to their levels of severity and amount of support required. However, the use of a consolidated diagnosis will “allow clinicians to account for the variations in symptoms and behaviors from person to person” (American Psychiatric Association 2013). The current diagnostic criteria provided by the *DSM-5* for Autism Spectrum Disorder posit that a diagnosis be given if the patient presents with “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction,” as demonstrated by difficulties in sharing feelings or emotions and in forming typical relationships with peers (American Psychiatric Association 2013). Furthermore, the patient should have “restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities,” as shown through stereotyped and self-stimulating behaviors such as rocking in place, flapping one’s hands, or echoing a sound heard elsewhere. The effects of this restricted pattern of behavior include an “insistence on sameness [and] inflexible adherence to routines,” which the diagnostic manual suggests can lead to distress for an affected individual upon small changes to his or her everyday routine. Another effect of the resistance to spontaneous behavior is a patient’s tendency to display “hyper- or hyporeactivity to sensory input,” a trait that can lead to the type of overreaction or discomfort that often leads to the avoidance of normal performing arts experiences. To complete the autism spectrum diagnosis, a doctor should be able to determine that the symptoms began early in life, that they impair one’s current functioning in multiple areas of everyday life, and that the symptoms cannot be better attributed to a separate disability involving intellectual or global development, even though such disorders often exist concurrently (American Psychiatric Association 2013).

ADA: GETTING RID OF BARRIERS

For the purpose of this paper, I will situate Autism Spectrum Disorder as a condition that causes a barrier to proper participation in the arts. Although the specific characteristics of and diagnostic criteria for this disorder present challenges that vary a great deal from certain more common disabilities, those with autism possess the same needs. The National Endowment for the Arts, in a publication entitled *Design for Accessibility*, provides a thorough history of the place of accessibility in the United States' civil rights efforts (National Endowment for the Arts 2003). The publication explains that disabled people should be treated as part of the audience intended for any arts program, rather than as a separate group:

Cultural organizations and agencies must move beyond old concepts that define people with disabilities and older adults as a “special” group of people. The focus of cultural organizations needs to shift to a policy of inclusion, a way of ensuring that people with disabilities and older adults have the same opportunities as other participants. Accessibility leads to inclusion and should be viewed as an organizational asset that creates a larger audience by engaging everyone in the arts and humanities. (NEA 2003)

Disabled people will, further, choose to attend the arts only when they feel comfortable and welcome, the NEA explains.

Following a number of legal actions promoting the democratic inclusion of people with disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 went further by addressing not only public places but also private companies by placing the responsibility of ADA accommodations on individual organizations, both public and private. All cultural

organizations, according to the law, “must not discriminate against individuals with disabilities,” regardless of federal aid received (NEA 2003).

Above all, the NEA explains that all types of accessibility should be a core part of an organization’s planning process. This is because providing access to cultural programs is legally required according to the ADA. Since access is considered an asset, the NEA suggests that provisions for it should be “integrated into all facets and activities, from day-to-day operations to long-range goals and objectives,” which also means including such services in budget planning. Ultimately, those with disabilities fall into an organization’s social goal of diversity while also helping the cultural sector support civil rights (NEA 2003). Providing performing arts options that accommodate audiences with Autism Spectrum Disorder supports the spirit of the Americans with Disabilities Act and goes hand in hand with organizations’ missions of providing diversity and broadening their audiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Jonathan Mandell, of *American Theatre*, sets the stage by identifying the “small irony that the growing number of shows about the disabled, or featuring disabled performers, are not themselves fully accessible to audience members who are disabled. It has been more than two decades since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the world’s first civil rights act for the disabled, which mandated that theaters (among other ‘places of public accommodation’) stop discriminating against the disabled and allow them ‘full and equal enjoyment’” (Mandell 2013). Here, the author points out a

common issue that I believe encompasses a great deal of the existing literature on sensory-friendly theater: the idea of a lack of accessibility.¹

At its core, the literature – which seems to reflect actualities among cultural organizations – tends to align autism with other, more physical or outwardly obvious disabilities, such as the need for a wheelchair or hearing aid. Authors assert that those on the spectrum (i.e. affected by Autism Spectrum Disorder in any of a variety of ways) must be fully entitled to ADA treatment. Since they are not provided full accessibility right now, the performing arts have a responsibility to welcome this audience using new techniques. Mandell explains in his article that accessibility is seldom intentionally ignored by theaters; instead, it is overlooked as a result of a lack of knowledge or interest and a propensity for multitasking. However, the need for a welcoming environment does exist for parents to bring overly sensitive children, and new technology can be incorporated to make this type of accessibility more available (Mandell 2013).

Existing research not only looks at the idea of accessibility but also explores the physical and aesthetic changes required of venues that offer “special performances.” Kevin Berry looks at the efforts of London’s West End group of theaters. Mousetrap Theatre Project’s efforts understand that “[autistic] [c]hildren in a relaxed performance audience will have sensory and communication needs. They may make a sudden, involuntary noise or want to stand up or go out - but at a relaxed performance, all of that is accepted” (Berry 2012). By exploring the intricacies of a sensory-friendly performance, many journal and magazine authors have examined the very definition of “autism accessibility,” differentiating its details from those of other types of accessible

¹ Since most of the sources featured here provide examples from the United States and the United Kingdom, I cannot comment knowledgeably on any equivalents in other areas of the world.

theater. As such, I view much of the existing literature as exposition on the state of this type of accessibility today – as examples of what can be done and why it is required, with perspectives offered primarily from caregivers of autistic children and with nonprofit service or advocacy representatives (Kennedy Center 2013, Berry 2012, Sucato 2013).

Another branch of literature takes a look at sensory-friendly offerings in other genres. These examples help make the case that sensory-friendly entertainment and outings prove essential for families' well being and help many types of destination organizations to demonstrate accessibility initiatives and goals (IMAX'd 2010, Bagnall 2013, Boston Children's Museum 2012, TNS 2013). This set of articles offers many interviews with families that are fed up with ordinary systems that do not accommodate their autistic children's needs and differences and show the role that advocacy groups can play in arranging for accommodations. "The sensory-friendly trend," explains a representative in a National Public Radio article, "started two years ago, after a mom in Maryland got kicked out of a movie theater when her autistic daughter became overwhelmed and disruptive at a showing of 'Hairspray.' The mom got in touch with the Autism Society, a national advocacy group, which in turn contacted the AMC theater chain," resulting in the creation of an IMAX screening schedule meant specifically to be sensory-friendly (IMAX'd 2010, Feldsher and Stein 2008).

An article in *The Exceptional Parent* looks at programming offered to families of disabled children by Sesame Place, a theme park based on the popular children's show *Sesame Street* (Feldsher and Stein 2008). This article serves as a good example of a widespread sector of literature that focuses on accessibility for children as an overall idea, without specific regard for the autism diagnosis. Although autism's specific behavioral

and sensory needs require their own set of unique accommodations, many authors group autistic children together with children disabled in other ways, often attempting to underscore the idea of overall family-friendliness and acceptability over accessibility for one disorder. According to the article, “camaraderie” is the take-home point of the day, since “[e]ach parent and sibling shares a special bond as they all have family members with disabilities and understand the special needs of their children” (Feldsher and Stein 2008). Articles of this type describe programming that prioritizes community integration above the development or benefit of those specifically facing stigma from autism: the kids on the spectrum should be practicing to “navigate the ‘the real world,’” the article argues, while those in the ‘real world’ become more enlightened (Feldsher and Stein 2008, Calcutt 2011, Mandell 2013, NEA 20013).

Along with the perspectives of performing arts groups and other sensory-friendly groups, some literature exists that explains how classes in the performing arts can help teach or model behavior, often by including autistic actors in theater or on teaching them through theater workshops and academies (Hunt 2012, Horwitz 2009, Zimmerman and Enid 1997). Unlike many articles about other genres or even articles about sensory-friendly theater, those about the art take the unique perspective that children’s learning and development is the main goal, despite any existing disabilities or differences (Zimmerman 1997, Hunt 2012). In contrast, many genre examples and theater articles emphasize the inclusion of an entire family that might not normally experience art. In the latter case, the autism community can enjoy the same benefits as a mainstream audience thanks to simple changes in the presentation of the art and a safe viewing experience; in

the former, the art is by nature different as a result of the child's differences, but the resulting growth will allow for individual development.

In looking at these discrete angles on autism research related to the arts, I find intersections that could prove useful for my own research. Although the articles about other genres help demonstrate the idea of accommodation and its use for assimilation, they do not deal directly with audiences or the impact on behavioral growth (Feldscher, Stein 2008; NPR, 2010; Freed-Brown 2012). At the same time, articles about teaching autistic children social behaviors through theater education do show behavioral or emotional benefit (Horwitz 2009), but they do not touch on the use of the autistic-art relationship for those working on the administration side of the arts. Finally, the articles about theater geared toward autistic children seem largely expositional so far, dealing with definitions of possible types of sensory-friendly offerings (Mozes 2011, Berry 2012).

In combining the available data through these areas of the literature, I find both useful techniques and gaps. Useful techniques include interviews with families of autistic children and case studies of theaters that have already tried to offer sensory-friendly programming – showing that these types of qualitative research could be equally helpful in my own research (Broadway World News Desk 2013, Mohn 2013). As for the gaps, I see a definite need for research that looks not only at what sensory-friendly theater has done so far or what it looks like but also what its use could be in terms of long-term benefits for theaters and for children.

This research attempts to fill the gap that could account for benefits of *attending* art for those with autism. In other words, though research exists on the benefits of

making art by participating in classes as artists, I would like to expand the literature to include a sense of how an audience of autistic children and their families can be expected to benefit from arts programming as audience members. That said, I have asked arts administrators what they want to give the audience (and what they get in return) – and then asking that audience what they actually get from the experiences.

This leads to the largest gap, as I see it, for arts administration research: why this audience matters and how the performing arts community will know once it is on the path to success. Since the expansion of ADA laws, many theaters have strived for accessibility, but often as a reaction to issues with audience members not feeling welcome. I believe now is the right time to ask those in charge of communicating to audiences and funders alike just what they think they can and should get out of programming, marketing to, and accommodating an audience consisting of autistic individuals and their families. Moreover, how does sensory-friendly programming impact theaters' attempts to fulfill their overall missions, and does it play any part in their audience development goals?

This paper intends to explore the ways that an audience that includes children on the autism spectrum, each with varying levels of functioning and presenting widely different behaviors, can find a safe place to see theater as a family and avoid ordinary social stigma. What kind of symbiotic relationship exists between this audience and the theater community attempting to serve it?

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

To answer these questions, I conducted interviews with three groups: theater

administrators in my local area (New Jersey); service organizations and support groups in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and New York; and parents of autistic children in the vicinity. The theaters with which I spoke have already introduced their efforts to program shows for an autistic audience, and the person I interviewed was generally the one referred to me for his or her experience in this type of offering. Service organizations tended to offer insight into how to connect those theaters to their intended audiences. The families provided a personal angle on why they would want to take their children to these events and what it meant for them to attend.

In all cases, the questions I asked related to how the interviewees found out about or began to participate in the sensory-friendly theater programs, what they expected, how their experiences went, what they would change, and what they need for their children or theaters. I tried to see what was unique, beneficial, or surprising about the experience for those attending as well as what made producing the shows a different than normal experience for the theaters. After transcribing the interviews, I looked at what those I interviewed offered in terms of insights beyond what existing literature had suggested, in addition to how the examples of sensory-friendly theater in New Jersey demonstrated effective ways to program for this audience.

The scope of my study and the lack of a large body of existing data on the subject meant that I could not compare today's offerings to those that might have been conceived of or even discussed prior to the last five years. Similarly, the limited geographic diversity of the theaters I spoke with resulted from my lack of connections with those in other areas. I tended to use snowball sampling by learning names from one interviewee and then reaching out to those he or she mentioned in order to find out more. I also had

only a limited amount of time in which to interview families, which leaves my first-hand data from parents more limited than intended.

Despite these challenges, however, and the time constraints involved in this thesis process, I have tried to situate my own research in the context of recent publications provided by larger service organizations or performing arts centers in the United States and the United Kingdom, while also including published anecdotes from parents I have not personally interviewed. I have also gathered enough useful information to be able to form preliminary conclusions to offer the field regarding the challenges and potential benefits of sensory-friendly programming. In writing the paper itself, my goal was to synthesize my research by seeing how the theaters were responding to the needs of the children and their parents and finding threads of agreement between the two sides.

CHAPTER ONE - BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

The parents and families that care for children diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) face a number of unique challenges. Autism presents most recognizably as a developmental disorder, which not only makes learning difficult but also severely impacts social growth and behavior. These children typically have difficulty learning and applying appropriate language and communication skills; this can lead to extremely disruptive tantrums. They do not easily take another person's point of view. Levels of interest in social interaction vary, but in general lower-functioning autistic children react to social stimuli with confusion, fear, or anger. To comfort themselves, they often perform self-stimulating behaviors, such as rocking in place or flapping their hands (Autism Speaks 2013, Kennedy Center 2013).

The combination of odd behaviors and inability to conform to societal norms leads to special needs in school and makes everyday leisure outings that other families enjoy much more difficult. Going out to an expensive social event such as a live play is a huge challenge and a risk, given the fear of an outburst that might ostracize the family, upset the child, or disrupt the show itself.

Sociologist David E. Gray explains the feeling of stigma even among families of high-functioning disabled children. He explains that parents have to “confront the problem of limiting their exposure to the stigmatizing reactions of others in different ways, [including] restricting public encounters (Voysey 1972), selective disclosure (West 1986) and restricting their socializing to friends who would show ‘consideration’ for their

child's condition (Birenbaum 1970).” Grey goes on to explain that “[t]hese techniques, either singly or in some combination, provide parents of disabled children with some degree of protection [for their families and themselves] against the stigmatizing reactions of others” (Grey 2002).

Due to this stigma and the unpredictability of any live event, attending a public outing (especially one with the structure and typical atmosphere of a play) can be a challenging experience that involves risk for the family. The perceived risk may be even higher than the reality, since parents tend to be reluctant to take these kids to a show in the first place, in light of the ticket expenses, travel, and social fears. A mother writes on her blog, “Once J’s autism came to light . . . it seemed less likely that he would enjoy a West End show with me. J has hyper-sensitive hearing, can be overwhelmed by large crowds, and does not seem to grasp the need to be quiet in certain situations” (ThroughAcceptingLimits.com 2013).

Given the behavioral issues and social stigma that affect autistic children and their families, it is not surprising that these families are not members of a typical theater audience. However, many parents, autism support groups, service organizations, marketers, and educators have recognized the potential benefit of exposing these children to a live show. The benefit does not affect the child alone; it can provide a respite for families needing a leisure activity and a sense of social inclusion.

PARENTS’ PERSPECTIVE

Margot Stein, a Pennsylvania mother, describes her experience taking her ten-year-old high-functioning son to a children’s theater in Pennsylvania in terms of his need

for flexibility. “He likes to sit in the back row [of the orchestra] at those sorts of things so that he can stand up during the performance . . . where he can sort of stand up and flap his hands if he wants to, it's been that way, or stand up or sit down or whatever he wants” (Stein 2013). For her, sensory-friendly theater appealed to her goal to “expose him to a higher-quality theater, a big theater, and a magnificent and magical performance” that would provide a memorable growth experience for her son.

Her son also felt a sense of freedom and safety when she took him to see a sensory-friendly performance of *Spider-Man* in New York. As with any special needs environment, she explains, “he instinctively understands in those settings that his behavior is not an issue. And he actually relaxes – he's not as anxious in those settings, and this is true for sports and for school and for theater, everything. It's just, when he's in a setting where he knows that flapping or simming [self-stimulating] or standing up or needing to talk are not an issue, he is much more relaxed.” As a parent, Stein appreciated the affordability of the ticket prices made available through the program geared toward families with children on the autism spectrum (Stein 2013).

While she does not think her son took heed of those around him, she describes a time when she and her partner looked at one another and simply laughed: “It was just so noisy in the audience that you could barely hear what was happening on the stage!” But she says that is all part of the point of the experience. “I think that the basic gift of these programs is that our kids do not need to conform to behavioral expectations of a disapproving outside world” (Stein 2013). As a result, both the parents and the children can relax, given the understanding that children can react naturally to their environment without worrying about others’ reactions.

What Stein refers to as “the immediate interactive and magical quality and the total experiential immersion” of theater makes live performance especially beneficial for a child with autism and provides “a growth opportunity and enculturation opportunity that they don't necessarily get any other way. For example, he's not a huge reader; it's not like he's read these stories. It's not like he reads *Spider-Man* comic books or read *The Lion King*. He's, you know, because of his delays and his processing issues, reading isn't his favorite activity.” Her son does not have any interest in television or movies, either, which makes seeing *Spider-Man* on his birthday a “full-body immersion in the story” and a unique opportunity for him to grow intellectually and enjoy himself socially (Stein 2013).

Gabby Kaplan-Meyer, another parent, has not yet been able to take her son to a sensory-friendly show, but the idea appeals to her for many of the same reasons. Not only is the performance altered, but ushers are also trained to avoid stigmatizing the audience. She explains that “kids with autism – they have behaviors that look odd and it's about their body – them not being able to organize their body. So some kids rock, some kids jump, some are moving around in their seat. So I need it to be not only sensory-friendly but I need the staff and [other audience members] to be accepting and make our family feel good and not like weirdos” (Kaplan-Meyer 2013).

A theater professional herself, Kaplan-Meyer appreciates the idea of being invited to attend quality theater as a family. “I think the number one benefit,” she explains, “is allowing families to have that option of doing something like going to the theater together -- that's first and foremost . . . Two, I think just like any child that's enriched from the arts, each child will take away something different, so whether it's hearing a song that

they love that they will sing for months after they see the show, or a character that they identify with, or a story that touches them, I think children with autism have a full range – they have a rich inner life; they're just not always able to express what people without that disorder have. So basically all the things that I think enrich human beings about theater, I think apply to this population” (Kaplan-Meyer 2013).

OPENING THE DOOR

To bridge the gap between families’ needs for leisure activities and theaters’ desires to provide proper accommodations for a wide range of audiences, several performing arts organizations have joined in sensory-friendly programming efforts. Although many service organizations nationwide deal with disabled individuals in general, programs geared specifically toward a community with Autism Spectrum Disorder have fewer precedents or guidelines for long-term evaluation.

Pockets of several local arts sectors have embraced the need and the opportunity to program for this audience base. Nationally, San Diego, Boston, and Washington, D.C. have all begun the movement. For the purpose of my research, organizations in the Mid-Atlantic region proved most accessible for me. The Theater Development Fund (TDF), an organization in New York that works with education representatives to provide services in the city, has created a specific Autism Theater Initiative. Working primarily with for-profit theaters on Broadway, and with the help of partners such as Disney, TDF has become a leader not only in providing a regular season of shows for audiences with ASD but also in creating guidelines for such performances and spearheading training campaigns to enable continued success and consistency.

While nonprofits in New York most likely offer a number of other examples, my ability to reach nonprofit theaters in New Jersey more easily allowed me to find out about efforts in the vicinity. Since 2011, New Jersey theaters have begun offering similar programming, beginning with Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, which followed the path of TDF in terms of designing its first few shows but also had to deal with the financial and organizational challenges associated with a nonprofit. Other mid-sized theaters soon followed suit, and those that spoke with me allowed me to see how they worked together and individually to set the path for growing opportunities for audiences with autism in the state. Conversations with a representative from the New Jersey Theatre Alliance also helped demonstrate the desire of service organizations to help bridge gaps between theaters, researchers, and developers, potentially leading to more collaboration among interested organizations in the near future.

Examples of sensory-friendly programming in Pennsylvania and among nonprofit arts service organizations have been more difficult for me to readily identify. I interviewed Marion Young, the managing director of Art-Reach PA, a service organization for those with a broad range of disabilities. Her input outlined how the organization emphasizes classes or treatment programs and does not touch as much on reaching the autistic community in particular or on exposing disabled people to live performance. Young explained that Art-Reach serves those with physical and mental disabilities as well as those with a low income or facing other adversities such as domestic abuse.

Art-Reach functions as a member organization, like the Theatre Alliance does in NJ, with dues-paying members benefiting through the connections Art-Reach provides to

constituent groups: “Instead of having a staff that is going to kind of do all of this outreach to all of these individual [support or school] organizations with us, they're bringing those organization very easily into their spaces. So that's a key piece of what the arts partners get,” Young says. “The other piece of it is just, by working with us, we can provide what they need to do for accessibility” (Young 2013). She clarifies that Art-Reach does not work, for the most part, with groups that are seriously intended to become fully paying audience members, especially since a core base of the constituents Art-Reach serve is an adult population with severe disabilities, sometimes caused by brain trauma or retardation. This means that the groups affected vary even more than the specific ASD population. For theaters involved, she says that the theaters must be interested in having a truly diverse audience represented in their theaters and not be insistent on gaining revenue.

Yet Young does see options to create new audiences: “We do have a program called Independence Starts Here, and that is actually focused on building paying audiences from those individuals with disabilities that could become ongoing new audiences if they understood that there was in fact access.” The Independence Starts Here program is one in which Art-Reach works directly with families, whereas most of their other programs reach out to organizations representing the disabled populations, pointing out to them great opportunities (often free) to attend appropriate events. “It's really exciting,” she says, “and so again, how do we promote that here in Philadelphia, and then once it's promoted, how do we actually publicize it? Because the worst thing that can happen is you convince the cultural organization to do this new and exciting thing and no one comes” (Young 2013). Perhaps efforts in the Philadelphia area will

gain stride once organizations like Art-Reach or Very Special Artists begin working specifically with the autism population and the performing arts community, by connecting schools or families with performing arts groups and convincing the arts groups that this particular audience will actually attend.

SETTING THE STAGE: GUIDELINES FOR PROGRAMMING

The Kennedy Center's *Sensory-Friendly Theater Guidebook*, published in 2013, offers useful advice for performing arts organizations that want to join the accessibility effort. "When individuals with these disabilities participate in the community, the benefits include greater community, civic, and social participation as a person transitions from childhood into adulthood with the potential of creating a long-standing patron," the guide explains (Kennedy Center 2013). The guidebook explains in simple terms that a sensory-friendly performance might require a theater to change the house rules for the performance and provide "pre-theater preparatory activities" that can help acclimate an audience member to the expectations of the event beforehand.

The guidebook explains why modifying or minimizing sensory stimuli can help make a performance more accommodating: "Sometimes, people are overly sensitive to sensory information such as lights, sounds, smells, or touch . . . They prefer predictability and benefit from knowing the expectations . . . [or] may look for opportunities to increase sensory stimulation." After explaining the sensitivities of some audience members with Autism Spectrum Disorder, this publication outlines a number of modifications that can make the experience "more successful" for those attending. Specifically, a theater's staff

should meet with stage managers, lighting designers, and sound crew to keep sound levels consistent, avoid sudden surprises from loud changes in noise, and help prepare the audience for any potentially unpredictable stimuli. These modifications also translate to lighting changes, which should be minimized, with sudden flashes or strobe lights limited and house lights kept up at some level whenever possible to avoid putting the audience in total darkness. The guidebook also suggests that tools, such as pen lights, be provided to parents in the audience in order to help their children practice using “their own sensory behavior strategies” (Kennedy Center 2013), applying techniques they may have already learned in school or therapy to a new experience at the theater. To help highlight the features that make a performance sensory-friendly and encourage audiences to feel safe when attending, the Kennedy Center suggests that a theater list any specific lighting or sound modifications as well as any changes to ordinary house rules in its marketing and communications materials.

The Kennedy Center experts provide a list of those who might be able to advise a theater in creating sensory-friendly programming. These include those with autism and related disabilities, their family members or friends, occupational therapists, special educators, speech and language therapists. “Pre-theater preparation” can include such tools as Social Stories, which describe exactly what the person should expect to do at a certain event; these can be individualized for each person if necessary and can be broken down into specific activities, including when to use the restroom. Behavioral expectations, such as applause after the performance, can also be depicted in these stories so as to help the autistic individual know what is expected of him or her as an attendee (Kennedy Center 2013).

Audiences may also benefit from the “Meet Your Seat” process, which many theaters use as a way to allow unfamiliar audiences a chance to visit the venue prior to the day of the show to allow children to become comfortable in the space, as well as the idea of providing audiences with a map of the entire theater environment, from exits to water fountains. The Kennedy Center also points practitioners to concerns specific to theaters, such as limiting capacity, removing an intermission, and providing ticket discounts. Places designated as quiet spaces or calming areas can also be used as modifications to help control the environment and provide ways for children to remove themselves from an uncomfortable situation without necessarily leaving the event altogether (Kennedy Center 2013).

The Theater Development Fund’s *Autism Theatre Initiative (ATI) Planning Guide* offers its own step-by-step set of guidelines for other theaters to follow (Theater Development Fund 2011). In terms of methodology, TDF suggests an online ticketing system to allow families to choose seats; a focus on autism above other disabilities in order to meet audience needs; and providing a mainstream experience in terms of making the audience feel entirely welcome even in an atypical environment. TDF runs down a list of budgetary concerns, including ideas for discounts or free shows to promote diversity, which may apply more to its for-profit venues than to the nonprofits in New Jersey that I was able to study directly for this project. Tips on show selection can be useful for all sensory-friendly programming, though, suggesting the use of family-friendly shows that feature music and dance, are very visual and easy to follow, and feature action more than talk in order to appeal to this audience.

The ATI presentation goes on to suggest specific modifications to the production (reminiscent of the Kennedy Center’s aforementioned suggestions to keep the house lights up and minimized unpredictable sound changes), suggestions for the online ticketing system, and ideas for means of marketing the information to the right audience using emails and press releases. Supports suggested for the day of the show include an information table, all staff wearing the same clothing, and volunteers carrying relaxation tools such as stress-relief balls, often known as “fidgets.”

Both of these resources have become available only in the past few years, with the Kennedy Center guide being released online in 2013. These should be essential reading for theaters that want to start looking at their options – what would be involved in this programming in terms of modifications, messaging, and management of the event. I hope that other resources will come out soon to address these ideas in an equally holistic manner. In the meantime, the Kennedy Center and TDF both offer these sources as approachable and thorough guides.

Theaters should also remember to look at the other side of the equation: the benefits for the audience. To gain some perspective on the importance of giving autistic children the chance to see live theater, I reached out to Robert Carr, who manages the Cultural Access Network as part of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance, a service organization for the professional theaters in the state. “By not taking this community to see events,” he explains, “they’re really missing out on something; they’re missing out on opportunities to experience the arts . . . which could be very advantageous for them in their development. You see a lot of stories – there was this one email going around about this little boy who was autistic and never spoke, and he went to go see *Harold and the*

Purple Crayon and he turned around and he looked at his teacher and started to speak. And it was something . . . something reached him; there was some connection that was made between himself and what he was watching. So to afford families and children and adults that are living with autism the opportunity to see things and be a part of this culture . . . is extraordinarily helpful” (Carr 2013). Even though the overall impact of sensory-friendly programming has not yet been documented through substantive studies with quantitative results, stories like this one provide anecdotal support for organizations’ goals in providing such programming. Along with guidelines for the actual programming, theaters should simultaneously take heed of the audience’s needs as another key part of the service offered.

CHAPTER TWO – EXAMPLES OF EFFORTS AND COMMON CHALLENGES

The Theater Development Fund (TDF) in New York City has been a pioneer in developing a sensory-friendly theater program. Known as the Autism Theater Initiative (ATI), the program was instituted as a result of feedback and requests from teachers and principals. TDF Accessibility Programs (TAP) Program Manager Sarah Aziz describes the experience: “In 2007 we launched an audio description program for children who are blind or have low vision, and to reach teachers and principals and ultimately children in the NYC schools, I sent letters to all of the teachers and principals that were part of . . . the special ed arm of the public schools here. The overwhelming response was, ‘This is a fantastic initiative. What do you have for my students who have autism?’” (Aziz 2013). TDF responded to input regarding the seating needs of this audience and created a separate ticketing system just for the sensory-friendly Broadway productions ATI partnered with Disney to offer.

According to Aziz, TDF places a great emphasis on keeping these productions true to those for mainstream audiences. “We want to keep the production changes as minimal as possible to keep it really true to the story,” she explains. “We don't ever cut any songs or add any intermissions. And we want to make it feel like you're at *Spider-Man* or you're at *The Lion King*. We don't want it to be a watered-down version.”

Aziz underscores another potential beneficial outcome from the autism theater program: normalizing the experience and decreasing the fear of stimuli. “We want to make it as true to a typical theater performance as possible because ultimately . . . the

goal of the program is for people to attend the theater as a family with all members of their family, including anyone who might be on the spectrum who couldn't attend a typical performance. But our hope is that some of the people who might be able to sit for longer periods of time and might not be as bothered by the lights and the sound might be able to attend a typical performance" once they attend an autism-friendly performance and understand the social expectations of being in a theater audience. As a result of the Broadway offerings, says Aziz, "We've had some feedback that people have been able to go to either smaller venues or different, some have even taken their families to other Broadway shows once they've seen how they did at one of the autism-friendly performances" (Aziz 2013).

The Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey, started offering sensory-friendly shows due to a parent's request. Lisa Cooney, Director of Education, recalls when a local parent contacted her at the end of 2010. The parent had brought her autistic son to see Paper Mill's *Peter Pan* and found it to be "a pretty big, splashy, over-the-top mainstage show, Broadway size . . . overwhelming for her son" (Cooney 2013). The parent mentioned that she attended sensory-friendly movie screenings and found them effective. She asked Paper Mill if a similar option could be made available at the theater.

Cooney says that the mainstream shows would be too costly to produce for this audience, given that Paper Mill is a union theater with high expenses. The weekend children's theater series seemed like a better option. To actually create the sensory-friendly series, however, Paper Mill had to find resources outside of live theater, since no great models existed in the nonprofit performing arts. Film screenings had set the precedent, however. Cooney convened a group consisting of a full-time staff access

manager, the executive director of Autism New Jersey, and Rutgers' Douglas Developmental Disabilities Center's director of education. This group met with two parents (including the mother who had made the initial request) as well as with the Pushcart Players, a regional touring theater group that presents children's shows at Paper Mill.

In that meeting, the representatives learned about autism and the stress exhibited by families in their "relentless parenting," as Cooney explains. "There is a great, great need for respite for families, and . . . they were, all of them, looking for outings that were family oriented but that were not therapeutic necessarily . . . A lot of their outings revolve around going to therapies or schools. There needed to be some kind of leisure activities for families who will oftentimes hold back, not go out in public, if their child has multiple disabilities that they can't control in public, and they would feel like, 'I can't bring my child to see a play because they'll make sound or be disruptive and I won't be able to relax, no one around us will be able to enjoy the show, it's too stressful, we just won't go.' And that's multiplied by every decision they make in their lives about everywhere they go" (Cooney 2013).

"So what they were really looking for," says Cooney, "was a judgment-free environment. Almost what was happening on stage was less important than the ability to be there and to feel comfortable there and to not feel like they had to get up and leave if their child was making sounds or moving and not to be judged" (Cooney 2013).

To help parents transition their children into the theater and to convince them to pay for tickets even though they feared the risk of having to leave, Cooney says the theater offered families an opportunity to "Meet Your Seat" and spend up to three hours

with their kids at the theater, just getting to know the space. Even if it takes nearly an hour to get from the lobby to their seats, once parents get their children in there, it will be easier once they return for the actual show. I asked Ms. Cooney whether this meant that many parents did not commit to buying tickets in advance, and she said that the fact that some do not buy tickets until the day of the show poses further challenges.

Parents coming to one sensory-friendly version of *Cinderella* were disappointed upon seeing a house much fuller than in the past, made up almost halfway of kids without disabilities. “And so . . . [it] was going to be a respite hour for these families . . . then they sort of walked into a nightmare, which was a lot families turning around looking at their [disabled] kids, and not feeling comfortable and thinking, ‘Maybe I need to leave, need to move to the back of the theater.’ So we realized that we need to do a better job communicating. We kept saying to ourselves that the autism community understands what it means to see autism- or sensory-friendly. It's the rest of the public that doesn't understand what that means” (Cooney 2013). This need to convince families without disabled children to pick another performance causes the staff to have to maneuver a delicate balance. Cooney says that she cannot legally prevent typical, non-autistic audiences from attending, “but by having an abundance of typical kids in the audiences, it defeats the purpose of creating the judgment-free zone, and that's what these families are begging for” (Cooney 2013). Marketing and development challenges relate, then, not only to reaching the right ASD audience but also to explaining to mainstream audiences that this is a special type of programming. Attracting the audience that needs the accommodation is only truly possible if that audience need not worry about too many

typically developing kids being in the same room and not understanding the purpose of the programming.

Yet selling tickets is still a real and basic concern. At Paper Mill, a 1200-seat house can only be filled up to about 600 in order to reach the maximum for this audience's comfort level. Since kids with autism often cannot deal with large crowds, Paper Mill walks "a delicate balance . . . with [its] revenue" because, as Cooney says, "the show has to at the very least be able to pay for itself." Gradually, for Paper Mill, this is becoming more possible through new grants awarded to the theater specifically to support autism-friendly programming.

However, identifying and cultivating new funding sources has been a challenge for Paper Mill as it has for other nonprofits. Paper Mill has been able to tap into new funding opportunities that deal with healthcare, such as grants from Merck and MetLife, along with the NEA. Cooney explains, "In order for this programming to continue it does need supplemental support -- we can't just rely on the ticket sales for just those shows. Moreover, the theater can suggest to funders that this diverse audience exists: "When we crunch the numbers, we find that . . . in North Jersey around Paper Mill, we have around thirteen families in every square mile that are coping with autism or have a child or family member with autism. So there's a market . . . and we have to reach them -- we have to program for them. If we do this they will come" (Cooney 2013). Asserting that the market reach exists for this programming can help support the theater in making the case for funding.

For one mainstage performance, underwritten by the National Endowment for the Arts, Paper Mill brought in a group of consultants called Autism Friendly Spaces, which

had also worked on Broadway shows. This group helped Paper Mill train a team of local volunteers to offer what the audiences needed on the day of the show: calming areas, “fidget” toys to help children relax, gender-free bathrooms to allow parents to avoid long walks or lines to get an upset child to a quiet place, and the ability to bring in snacks and drinks. The consultants also created “Time Out” cards from characters in the show, with, for example, Ariel the mermaid advising children to “take a breath.” Even without the ability to hire expensive consultants for every show, Lisa says that she hopes to train volunteers using similar methods. The theater has also worked with presenting troupes, such as Pushcart Players, to adapt their performances slightly. Specifically, Cooney points to the inability of many autistic children to understand sarcasm or innuendos. Given the popularity of pantomime in children’s theater, scripts must sometimes be changed to be more literal.

Following Paper Mill Playhouse’s lead, the Union County Performing Arts Center (UCPAC) in Rahway decided to start a similar program, based on an idea by a county freeholder. The series at this performing arts center is part of a Union County initiative, allowing the county to underwrite the costs. This makes sense particularly because actual ticket sales do not guarantee financial profit to the theater; instead, to offset any loss of ticket sales, the county takes on the cost of UCPAC’s sensory-friendly programming series.

After determining the requirements of the shows, the staff had to find ways to reach the right target audiences. Director of Communications Danni Newbury explains the unique challenges of this programming: “Marketing the program doesn’t encourage people to attend. What I have learned is that this particular audience doesn’t have the

freedom to risk an afternoon outing on an adventure that may not be accommodating to the needs of their families. I have learned that word of mouth builds trust from family to family much more than simply placing an ad and telling people about the program. The way to encourage people to participate is to show them, not tell them, that the environment is truly accessible for their family's needs" (Newbury 2013).

Newbury provided me with the official language that the Union County initiative uses to describe itself: "The Union County community has so much to offer in terms of enriching experiences in the performing arts, and Sensory Friendly Theater helps to ensure that these fundamental enjoyments of life are available to all of our citizens . . . For each of the special performances in the Sensory Friendly Theater series, the theatre environment will be adjusted to provide a sensory-friendly, comfortable and judgment-free space that is welcoming for all families" (Newbury 2013).

In Princeton, the McCarter Theatre Center has begun to offer its own sensory-friendly performance series. Accessibility Coordinator Janet Brown learned from Paper Mill and TDF, representatives from which she had met at the Leadership Exchange in Arts & Disability (LEAD) Conference in Washington, DC. Brown says she was inspired upon hearing about existing programs and started to think about how McCarter could expand upon its existing accessibility efforts (primarily an audio description program) in order to accommodate an autistic audience (Brown 2013).

Brown reiterates the importance of word of mouth in targeting this audience. "It was a piece by piece thing, just finding people and getting the word out and getting people on board, because this is a group of people who have largely been ignored, theater-wise. But these are people who, when they go out to go grocery shopping or

whatever, you have people who make fun of you or tell you you're a terrible parent 'cause your child acts up, and you never know when it's going to happen. So the idea was to create a very safe place for people whose children were on the spectrum” (Brown 2013). A local autism group helped provide trained volunteers for McCarter.

Challenges for a regional nonprofit theater like McCarter differ from those of for-profit groups on Broadway, which Brown says are “a big draw . . . [TDF] tells a story about how someone drove up from Tennessee, didn't even have tickets – but they heard about it. But for us, the motto or the tagline in the advertisements has been, ‘You belong here.’ My own personal mantra is, ‘Theater for all.’ So it very much fits into our focus on accessibility and just expanding theater to make sure that anybody and everybody can come and nobody is excluded. And nobody should feel that they can't be who they are” (Brown 2013). McCarter’s sensory-friendly programming began with *Into the Woods* and does not necessarily draw much of a profit; instead, it helps fulfill the theater’s goals in serving the community. To make the shows available to the right audience, McCarter also cuts ticket rates when necessary, such as for families affected by Hurricane Sandy that received complimentary tickets.

Aside from carefully considering financial viability, Brown says that they offer a survey after every performance in order to gauge their success rate and gather feedback from audience members to assist with future planning. Although Brown did not offer me specific insight into McCarter’s ability to fundraise for this programming, her recognition of this programming’s uncertain financial profitability seemed to indicate that extra grants or a diversification of funding might be as necessary for McCarter as for the other theaters profiled here.

At William Paterson University, the WP Presents series has begun to make certain shows available as sensory-friendly performances. Following in the footsteps of other local theaters, the performing arts department, led by Jane Stein, teamed up with the College of Education and with Special Education graduate students in order to research the best ways to accommodate those with ASD. Stein describes her preparation procedure: “We developed the social narrative. We had an orientation for our staff -- the ushers and house management -- to make them understand that it was okay for students to get up during the performance. We kept the lights at half, and they were allowed to have these two areas -- the calming area in the lobby with toys” (J. Stein 2013).

When it comes to a theater at a university, Stein confirms that the university environment provides helpful resources for the theater staff. She cites the resources available through educators and those involved in special education, along with the relationship with student teachers. Many teachers are being trained in special education, she explains, and are familiar with the needs of kids with autism.

When asked how the theater deals with the wide variety of behaviors among autistic children, Stein says that they make sure everyone knows what to expect. “Of course, we let the actors know also that this is going to make noise, that people might get up . . . We had one kid get up, he was going back and forth in the front row, and we were – I happened to be in the lobby at that moment with some of my staff – and we're watching him on the monitor, and all of a sudden we see him go right under the stage. One of my staff members goes, ‘There he goes.’ So everyone is just very tolerant. And so whatever the range of behaviors is, it's okay. We adapt to it” (J. Stein 2013). Stein’s

anecdote here also demonstrates the need for trained staff and volunteers at the venue for every event, in order to ensure safety and comfort levels despite unpredictable behavior.

Being relatively new to WPU, Stein says that her presence has initiated changes that have allowed WP Presents to offer new programming. “We've gotten state arts council money for decades for our jazz program,” she explains, “and some of the panel criticisms have been, prior to my tenure here, that we weren't doing enough educational outreach, and, seriously, and you know . . . that some of the buzz words [in the state arts council] are ‘serving underserved communities.’ But this is an underserved community!” With this language, Stein suggests that the New Jersey State Council on the Arts may support the sensory-friendly programming efforts at WPU because this programming provides services to an audience that did not previously enjoy full access to the performing arts. Now, a community with ASD can be treated by WPU as a primary audience. As such, this program fits into WPU’s core mission as a presenting organization. “No one objects to it; everyone sees the value in it. Everyone understands it” (J. Stein 2013). Stein told me that WPU was waiting on two grants and actively calling foundations in order to provide new funding for the sensory-friendly programming there. If received, that would be the first revenue source dedicated just to that program.

In terms of promotion, William Paterson has placed online ads in newsletters for Autism New Jersey. However, the staff’s community outreach efforts have been essential to the presenter’s ability to build an audience. Stein points out that the town of Paterson has one school with twelve classes of autistic kids. At some point, she says, the program will grow to such an extent that they will be “maxed out” at 900 seats. One day,

she thinks, some audience members might be able to enter a regular theater after benefiting both from their own therapy and from sensory-friendly performances. “I don't see teachers with classes of kids on the spectrum being able to go in and mix into a theater, but individual family members may get their kids to a point where they understand behavior in the theater and they respond appropriately. They can do that; they can take that chance. Certainly if I were the parent I would want to try it, knowing that I might have to leave the theater. But I'd be willing to do that to socialize my child.” Existing school therapy includes socialization efforts, and the combination could lead to more comfort in mainstream public scenarios.

I asked the Theatre Alliance's Robert Carr how he thought theaters should measure their success in offering theater for those with autism. He responded with frank ideas for a theater's initial self-assessment. “Did you sell any tickets?” he asked. “That's the clearest one. Are people calling, saying, ‘Are you going to do this again?’ Is there further demand past this first event? Are you getting feedback? It's hard to say because, again, access and accessibility is . . . hard to lay typical benchmarks against, because the way that this audience finds out about things is very different. Sometimes it takes longer to find out about them, and you do it twice and then they found out about it after the fact, where they would have gone had they known about it -- it's sort of hard to apply. We were just down at the LEAD Conference down at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, and there were a couple theaters there that did some research about this and got some feedback, and families are clamoring for this sort of opportunity” (Carr 2013).

“So,” Carr confirms, “I think that the need is there, the desire is there, and the audience is there. It's just a matter of being able to stick with it and being able to offer it over a longer period of time” (Carr 2013). Carr’s suggestion here points to the idea, voiced by many of my interviewees, that the autism community may not respond easily to ordinary marketing efforts, since those in the community often view the theater as having too many barriers to participation for children with ASD. Just offering the programming and expecting an audience to show up may not be enough. Practitioners must be resilient by planning properly, offering adequate accommodations, and spreading the word to the community through word of mouth, digital communications, the school system, and other specific means of reaching a community unique in its needs. To reach those who would benefit from the productions, the theater must look beyond its typical marketing techniques and find out how local autism communities – which may not find out about theater performances the same way a mainstream audience would – communicates or receives information about events, whether on a website, in a newsletter, or at a school.

Only once the right programming exists and is subsequently effective and available on a very small scale can it lead to greater attendance, required funding, and the ability of theaters to prove their value to this audience. The audience’s ability and initial willingness to purchase tickets will not be enough to sustain the programming, which instead must be carried out not purely for the goal of increasing numbers but as a means of reaching a deserving audience base that can benefit from it. Tracking the success of these programs can only happen once the programs actually reach their intended audience and have enough of an impact to be measured in the long term.

CHAPTER THREE – EVALUATING PROGRAM SUCCESS

Based on my research, the theater community in the Northeast United States has not yet developed a general consensus on how to evaluate the success of sensory-friendly programming over a long period of time. This stems from the short lifespan of the programming as well as the lack of a singular method of evaluating it over time. Some theaters, such as McCarter, provide audience surveys after the show. Many may be able to track ticket sales. However, most of the representatives I interviewed suggested that verbal or written feedback from audience members had the most impact when coupled with the presence of families and their return for a second or third show.

All of my interviewees agreed that evaluation of a sensory-friendly theater program cannot be limited to an audience development standpoint, since this audience's responses to marketing and its willingness to purchase tickets often differ significantly from the responses of mainstream audiences as a result of families' concerns over accessibility, travel, social stigma, and finances. Compounded by a number of factors that can get in the way of these families' ability to find out about or pay for shows as easily or readily as other audiences, an evaluation of these programs only based on their ability to build and retain audiences would provide too simplistic a view on their success. As a result of the complex nature of the way these programs must be planned, funded, implemented, and sustained, any resulting evaluation must be viewed from a number of perspectives above and beyond audience development and for both the audience and the theater running the show. These perspectives can include financial, organizational,

social, and educational, among many others. Thus far, the theaters I interviewed have determined the worthiness of their programs based on the programs' intrinsic value, the audience's emotional responses, and the ability of the theater to pay for the show – all in addition to or even in place of the number of seats filled. No clear-cut means of determining success over time has resulted from the short period of growth in this area of programming.

A few select publications do, however, offer certain means of evaluation. In determining a program's success, the Kennedy Center suggests that a theater use both "process evaluation," in order to determine the effectiveness of program development or the impact on staff and administrators, as well as "outcome evaluation," to see whether the program was successful in meeting its goals (Kennedy Center 2013).

The Theater Development Fund's Autism Theater Initiative guidelines also provide options for gathering feedback after shows, including sending surveys to the audience via email and debriefing with autism specialists as soon as possible. Results for TDF so far have included feedback such as "joy and relief" felt, "surprised at effect on family member(s) with ASD," and "change in family dynamics" (TDF 2011). TDF's own survey in 2011 showed that 80% of its audience was attending a Broadway show as a family for the very first time (TDF 2011), suggesting that, at least in the very beginning of the spread of the programming, one might be able to gauge a theater's success in reaching a new audience by looking at whether or not the audience has found a unique ability to attend theater that it lacked prior to the programming's availability.

While statistics from nonprofits would be useful, and while the circumstances of every show will vary based on its participants and facilitators, these guidelines for

evaluating a show's effectiveness are helpful as a jumping-off point for theaters that have already determined the inherent value of the environment they have provided for an audience with ASD and that wish to look at long-term impact. Once more theaters find individual ways to gauge their shows' success, I would strongly suggest that a coalition of performing arts representatives come up with a more standardized means of evaluating and reporting success. This could be useful for new theaters in their programming efforts as well as to the original pioneers when they try to make the case for ongoing funding.

CONCLUSION

When I began my research, I expected those I interviewed to respond positively, if only given my personal belief in the usefulness of sensory-friendly theater and the need for families of those with ASD to find an accepting atmosphere in which to help their children develop. I also expected to hear about the challenges involved in marketing sensory-friendly theater to its intended audience. What has surprised me in the long run, however, is the increasing level of sophistication in theater administrators' understanding of their role in providing an appropriate activity for this underserved population. They did report difficulties in planning, training, promoting, selling, and implementing these programs, all compounded by the need to find new funding sources just to make the programs feasible. However, none of the theaters I talked to say they would not continue expanding their offerings for this audience.

Sensory-friendly theater may not readily provide conventional audience development results, and profit and retention will always be more difficult to gauge when a theater begins providing these shows. This programming takes effort, dedication, money, and time, often outside of a theater's normal procedures or guidelines. Resources involved can be hefty and require a great deal of staff and volunteer training, planning, and skill to execute the program successfully. The commitment pays off, however, in that the parents, service organizations, and theaters agree on the importance of the safe space provided for the children *and* for their families as a whole. Despite the challenges, those I interviewed view the efforts with a sense of vigorous commitment and purpose.

To return to my original question, I do believe that the relationship between performing arts organizations and audiences on the autism spectrum is mutually beneficial and educational. The theaters gain potential new audience members and, moreover, a greater understanding of how to serve their local communities and expand their outreach. Even if a family has never heard of the theater before and may not return for a typical show, the theater's reputation can spread via word of mouth and encourage others to view it as a community resource.

Since this programming is just taking off in popularity, the first few theaters to do it in each region help set the precedent for others. I hope that eventually the proliferation of sensory-friendly theater will allow us, as a field, to compare nonprofit versus for-profit experiences in this genre for both the audience and the theaters. In speaking with service organizations, I have also begun to hope that larger, more comprehensive dialogues might develop, such as the ones begun as the LEAD Conference. I hope the sector as a whole can further embrace its commitment to ADA requirements and to engaging more new audiences, not merely for ticket sales but in order to build relationships and add value to their lives. A larger study that looks at whether or not service organizations or autism support groups can serve as major resources in creating these programs would certainly provide new avenues for thought.

Since my studies have been limited to the nearby region, I also think future research could fill the gap by looking at the subject in a broader and farther-ranging light. What has been done in New England or on the West Coast? How do the latest efforts in this country compare to those in the Europe? Can we draw parallels between that comparison and differences between different areas' special education systems,

accessibility offerings overall, or even societal norms? Does the local rate of autism diagnoses have an impact on whether or not people in the area will attend a show meant for those on the spectrum – or whether practitioners in our field will even be encouraged to develop such a program? How does a sensory-friendly theater experience differ from other sensory-friendly activities for the actual child and for the immediate caregivers that attend with the child?

I noticed in reviewing existing literature that many studies already look at the effect of teaching autistic children social behavior through specialized drama classes and other forms of arts education. I would like to see a comparison someday between the effect of sensory-friendly performances that autistic children experience as attendees in the audience and the classes in which they are taught to perform in their own right. Which might affect them best in the long run, and does the latter affect families' ability to spend time together the way sensory-friendly theater seems to do so effectively?

The overall impact on the parents' or siblings' sense of stigmatization would also be a fruitful source of further research. If a family is able to feel comfortable, safe, and free of judgment in a sensory-friendly performance, will that feeling help the family transition to attending normal theater events or is it a discrete experience? If it does help the child transition to a higher comfort level in other typical outings, how does that impact everyday elements of life such as the child's school, cognitive and language skills, friendships, therapy, health, emotions, and home situation? Can we point to any results down the line when children reach adolescence or young adulthood and must move toward relative independence in their everyday functioning? Adults on the spectrum may also experience benefits from live performance but do not seem to have been targeted as

a potential audience the way that families attending children's shows have been. In looking at actual performance offerings, musicals have been a popular choice, but has any theater attempted to offer the community more serious dramatic performances or nontraditional theater such as improvisation?

Above all, I encourage the field to further examine how theaters will evaluate their programming once they have been offering it for far longer. With only about three years of experience in New Jersey and New York, it is difficult to draw long-term conclusions, especially with so few theaters having begun their efforts, let alone evaluated them in the long term, and even fewer having been involved in my study.

Eventually, with a broader scope, we should be able to look at how this programming fits in with a performing arts organization's departments overall. Does it fall mostly on the shoulders of development, education, marketing, or programming staff, and how can it alter the relationships or crossovers between those departments? Does it provide a good case for new, continued, or diversified funding for nonprofits? What is the best way to incorporate this programming into strategic planning, program plan development, and an organization's ongoing self-evaluation?

Despite raising even more questions for future research, my research has left me with a number of conclusions on its own. In light of my conversations with families, theater practitioners, and leaders of service organizations, I can state with confidence that all families, including those with children on the autism spectrum, need to have leisure activities where they can learn in a nonjudgmental environment and experience the excitement of live theater. Families that do have kids with ASD, who tend to experience stigma in public and who must plan their activities with a special amount of forethought

so as to provide a proper environment for their kids with disabilities, often never benefit from ordinary programming in the performing arts. A typical theater environment can be full of unpredictable stimuli from the show itself and from the crowds of mainstream audiences attending; it can also be especially difficult for families in the autism community to spend huge sums of money on the tickets and travel involved in seeing a high-quality performing arts piece – particularly when they run the risk of having to leave if a child with ASD reacts poorly and causes a scene.

Sensory-friendly programming, which grabs hold of the idea of ADA compliance and applies it directly to the specific issues involved in a theater's environment, can help provide these families with a space free of discrimination, where they can enjoy a professional theater production while also supporting their children's needs. The trained staff and volunteers available at a successful sensory-friendly show help take the guesswork out of attending the theater by minimizing unpredictable stimuli, providing supports before and throughout the show in the form of physical stress relief tools and visual narratives, and limiting the audience to a community of individuals all requiring the same environment and lacking the need to inflict stigma on others. Attending a live show can be a significant learning experience for a child with autism; moreover, the experience of attending as a family can make those in the audience feel welcome to relax and bond while supporting the intellectual and emotional growth of their children.

Providing accommodations such as those for the autism community can lead to greater access and equality overall, both in the performing arts and in other areas of our culture, and help us enrich the experiences of more patrons. In so doing, we may find new ways to educate and inspire a broader group of citizens, including those not normally

thought of as being typical theater audiences. If we can reach more sectors of our community and embrace them in the same light as mainstream ticket-buyers, these new audience's attendance and their recommendations to friends can serve as a testament to the work of those in the performing arts, as well as our field's ability to serve wider community goals.

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