



A Research Center of



OPENING DOORS

Welcoming New Audiences with Sensory-Friendly
Performances

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“We believe that every child should have the opportunity to enjoy and be inspired by the arts, but unfortunately many children with autism have faced an unfair barrier to access. This project is about making the theatre welcoming and inclusive for these children and young adults. We already cater for disabilities through audio-described, captioned and signed performances so why not relaxed performances too?”

– Jeremy Newton, The Prince’s Foundation for Children & the Arts¹

Arts organizations seek to serve the community – inspiring and connecting people through arts and culture, providing entertainment while fostering intrinsic growth. Regarding accessibility, most organizations have long considered adaptations for the visually and hearing impaired; yet it was not recently that organizations began considering audiences with sensory and developmental disorders. Since the Theatre Development Fund (TDF) launched the Autism Theatre Initiative (ATI) in October 2011, awareness of such opportunities has grown and many performing arts organizations now consider and implement this type of outreach programming.

Administrative and staff support is key for developing a sensory-friendly program. Often concerns about the risks, complexity, and financial viability add barriers to considering such programming (R. Ideishi 2014). When first implementing Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s program, the education department researched industry trends and developed different selling points targeted towards why development, marketing, and artistic direction should consider an autism-friendly Nutcracker. Developing such a platform helped the organization to have immediate buy-in for the program and a successful implementation (Melby 2014). Building awareness and understanding of the various aspects of sensory-friendly performances can help managers recognize the opportunities present and better advocate for such programming within their own organizations.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

According to the American Autism Association, autism is “a childhood-onset developmental disorder... characterized by a triad of deficits in social reciprocity, communication, and repetitive behaviors or interests, each of which can occur at different levels of severity” (Sucato 2013). The Center for Disease Control reports that 1 in 68 children in the United States is diagnosed with autism and challenges of the disorder lead to problems for children, teens, and adults on the spectrum (Andresen 2014). The disorder is more common in males than in females, but occurs among all racial groups and socioeconomic levels (Ideishi, et al. 2013). As a “hidden disorder,” autism, along with other sensory, social, and learning disabilities, cannot be recognized by looking at an individual, thus there are many common misconceptions about the autism spectrum (Ideishi, et al. 2013). Autism is a neuro-biological condition not related to poor parenting or bad behavior though actions in public may cause people to judge these mannerisms as such. Furthermore, autism does not imply an

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¹ (Potter 2013)

intellectual disability and 25% of children with autism do not have any level of cognitive impairment. (R. Ideishi 2014).

In a theatre setting, these cognitive challenges may cause behaviors deemed not socially acceptable by the general public. For example, those on the spectrum may respond or react to a performance in a loud or sudden manner, and certain aspects of a show may trigger behaviors in autistic children. Children on the spectrum may process internally and look like they are not paying attention while others might need to move around or fidget to process they production, not because they are bored or upset, but as a way of engaging and processing (Graves 2014). “Behaviors may be expressions of stress or joy, or a means of calming oneself” and families may need to take their children out of the theatre for a break away from the crowds (R. Ideishi 2014). Traditionally, judgments about these mannerisms have made it extremely difficult for families with autistic children to fully participate in performing arts experiences. Furthermore, individuals with these disabilities tend to have “difficulty understanding emotions represented on stage or following the sequence of events in the performance” increasing the amount of preparation needed before attending (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 4).

Sensory-Friendly Performances



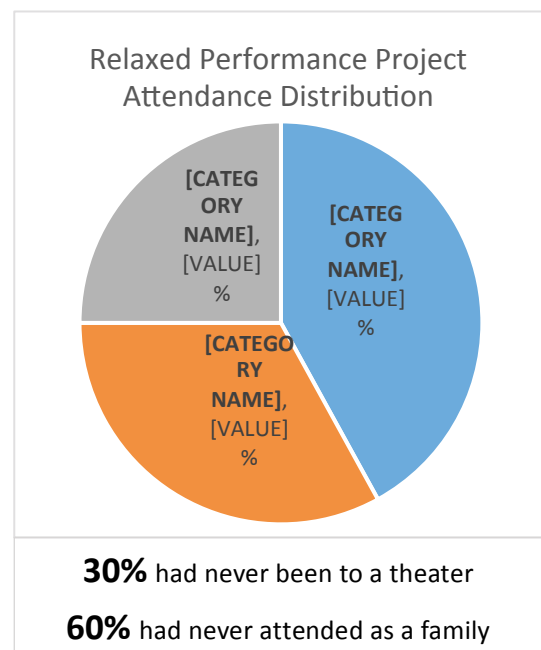
*With sensory-friendly shows such as Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s *The Nutcracker*, families now have a new family tradition.*
(Photo by Shelby Vogel)

Sensory-friendly programming enables families with autistic children to “enjoy live theater in a warm, judgment-free environment” (Andresen 2014, 12). The traditional theater rules are relaxed and families are free to move around as needed and children can react to the performance without disrupting other patrons. Lisa Carling, Director of TDF Accessibility Programs comments, “Nobody was bothered if a child was kicking the back of their chair or lying in the aisle” (Andresen 2014, 12). Organizations implementing such programming have seen consistently positive feedback from families who are able to experience the event as an entire family unit, rather than dividing with one parent caring for the special needs child while the other children attend a show. Consultant and occupational therapist Roger Ideishi explains that cultural experiences are particularly challenging during the holidays, but with sensory-friendly shows such as Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre’s *The Nutcracker*, families remark that they now have a new family tradition (R. Ideishi 2014).

Organizations must also consider the intrinsic values presented by the experience beyond the engagement with the art during a sensory-friendly performance. Diane Nutting, Director of Access and Inclusion at Imagination Stage, comments, “The warnings and suggestions for surprising events prepare children to know how they will be able to react when watching a conventional show in the future. Going through the experience also prepares them for life” (Pohlman 2013). A study conducted by the Society of London Theatre recognized additional values for children and families including “increased confidence and self-esteem; enjoyment, inspiration, and motivation” (Potter 2013).

The Autism Theatre Initiative (ATI) was developed through Access for Young Audiences through TDF, a program designed for children with low vision and hearing impairments. The organization had begun to receive inquiries about opportunities for children with autism, which led to research and initial discussions with the theater and autism communities. The Kennedy Center faced a similar situation where they would receive phone calls and inquiries from patrons. Jessica Swanson, Manager of Accessibility, would work with these families to help them find seats and explain what types of supports they could bring, such as headphones; yet she recognized that they were not as open and welcoming as they could be (Swanson 2014). This initiated discussions with the Smithsonian and the Ivymount School and the development of a pilot performance. Following the success of the free pilot event, and in recognizing a need for this type of performance, The Kennedy Center decided to schedule more sensory-friendly programs into the regular ticketed season.

Sensory Friendly programming is more developed in European countries particularly in England with national initiatives across eight different theatres. The Relaxed Performance Project was evaluated and studied throughout the 2012/ 2013 season. “The project aims to develop a model of best practice for dissemination at a national and international level, in order to share its learning outcomes with audience members and theatres across the UK and beyond.” During that time, 4,983 children and family members attended performances in 8 venues. Through the project, 24 professional development sessions were held with 300 staff members including senior management, artists, and volunteers. Of those who attended, 42% were families with autism, 33% community group, and 25% were other individuals. Furthermore, 30% of families in attendance have never been to a theater and 60% of those who attended shows during this time had never before attended as a family. (Potter 2013)



Program Development Practices

As sensory-friendly programming continues to develop in the US, there are some best practices that have been consistently recognized across the performing arts industry. These include:

- Retaining artistic quality with minimal adjustments to the actual performance;
- Providing supplementary materials to prepare families and children prior to the event;
- Incorporating opportunities to connect with the performance across the spectrum; and
- Developing the support of a group of professionals, community members, and cultural partners.

Still, several important considerations vary in preference, often regarding ticketing and communications involving all aspects surrounding the event from building prior to the visit, during the performance, and following up afterwards. Philip Dallmann, ATI Coordinator for TDF Accessibility Programs, recommends

planning a sensory-friendly program 6 months to 1 year in advance to allow time for fundraising and building an audience (Dallmann 2014).

Retaining Artistic Quality

Minimal adjustments to the actual performance sustain the integrity and quality of the work while making a more comfortable environment for families with autistic children (R. Ideishi 2014).

The majority of changes occur in the audience as opposed to on the stage, for instance the audience sound levels will be adjusted and the house lights will be kept dimmed. The staff at Imagination Stage borrowed the concept of “glow-sticking” from the Broadway shows, such as *The Lion King*, which involves stationing volunteers around the auditorium to hold up a glow stick if an element in the show is going to be surprising. This warns the audience so children can hide their eyes, cover their ears, or leave the auditorium if necessary. Nutting also points out that there is an adjustment curve to the performance, so if a potential problem occurs earlier in the show, it is more likely that it will need to be addressed or changed (Nutting 2014).



Entering the Theatre at Imagination Stage

An important decision for sensory-friendly programming is considering the performance itself, as the content of certain productions is more conducive to adaptations, though musicals, plays, and dance productions have been equally successful. Recruiting audience members for less-familiar shows is more challenging, even when the shows have natural qualities that support sensory aspects. Family members need familiarity with the story and content to better support their child and feel comfortable during the event. As the first major dance company to create a sensory-friendly program, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre was unsure if it might be more challenging for the audience members to follow without a spoken language cue. However, the rise and fall in the noise level amid the audience indicated that they were able to follow the show and understand the story (R. Ideishi 2014).

Providing Supplementary Materials

Supplementary materials are a valuable best practice for developing sensory-friendly programming.

Preparation materials help families and children know what to expect and add a level of comfort to this new and unfamiliar experience. Materials include:

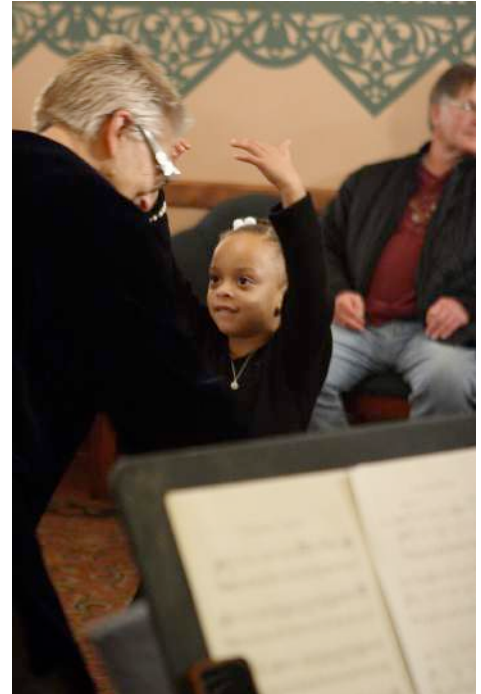
- Social stories, told from a first person perspective to introduce the elements of going to the theatre;
- Picture schedules to help anticipate events and plan for what will happen in the theatre space; and
- Tip sheets with environmental mapping to help families to locate bathrooms, water fountains, exits, quiet spaces, and “escape” routes.

Another popular strategy for preparing the audience is a “meet your seat” day prior to the show when families can bring their children to the theatre and allow them to adjust in their own time and own way to

the theatre space so there is more familiarity on the day of the performance (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 7-8). The Kennedy Center tested this type of event prior to their initial programs and did not have a big turnout. Knowing the importance of adjusting to the venue, but the challenge of scheduling, the organization is exploring options for personalized, docent-led, “meet your seat” tours where families could come at their convenience (Swanson 2014).

Connecting Across the Spectrum

The autism spectrum encompasses a wide range of disabilities and challenges from minimal to severe and affect children of all ages – from youth to adults. Ideishi points out that it is important for organizations to consider how to reach the full range, not just the middle ground. One popular strategy, which Ideishi refers to as the “à la carte method,” involves offering opportunities across the entire spectrum to allow children at whatever level to connect with the experience (R. Ideishi 2014). For example, many theatres incorporate quiet areas to allow children to take a needed break from the crowds and active areas to aid sensory-motor learning processes. At Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, children were able to try on costumes and dance around in order to connect with the events on the stage. A new online features enables Kennedy Center visitors to customize pre-visit stories for different spectrum levels.



Dancing at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre
(Photo by Shelby Vogel)

Developing a Support Group

A supportive community is key for sensory-friendly program development, and there is an apparent benefit for organizations in cities where inclusion in the arts already supported by a collective group. Pittsburgh is particularly supportive of cultural arts enrichment and inclusion programs backed by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, and organizations regularly work together to schedule programs and share information. Alyssa Herzog Melby, Director of Education and Community Engagement at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, worked closely with the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust, and is beginning to talk to the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and Pittsburgh CLO as these other companies begin researching and developing sensory programs (Melby 2014). Likewise, several organizations in the DC metro area work to collectively develop and support inclusion programs. The Kennedy Center sends a monthly e-blast featuring all sensory-friendly programming in the area, which in turn helps build awareness while enabling them to work with colleagues and understand what is best for the community (Swanson 2014).

Regions such as Philadelphia and Boston, where this community element is not yet present, are just beginning to explore this initiative, but full programming implementation is likely 3-4 years away (R. Ideishi 2014). Programs should reflect the specific needs of the community. In New York, “autism-friendly” productions is the preferred terminology as this is a very vocal community and the highest concentration of those diagnosed with autism is in New Jersey. TDF then reaches out to other special needs communities to let them know they are still welcome at the production. Vermont has a small autism population, but a large

concentration of those with cerebral palsy, and have found “sensory-friendly” to be a more inclusive description (Dallmann 2014).

Organizations that successfully implement sensory-friendly programming work with an advisory group consisting of professionals in the local community and in the cultural industry. Occupational therapists, special educators, and speech therapists are valuable to understanding the disorder and in analyzing the preparation materials (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 6). This advisory panel could also include members of local autism advocacy groups, parents of children on the spectrum, and individuals on the autism spectrum (Sucato 2013). Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre recognizes the importance of working with the community they are trying to reach, and greatly relies on its community partners with close to 100 connections working towards developing a successful program (Melby 2014). Many organizations work with a consultant who previews the original show, offers suggestions for minor adjustments, and helps the organization through the implementation process (Nutting 2014). ATI works with a consultant who is a 16-year-old boy with autism. He previews the shows and gives modifications along with a speech during training sessions about his experiences with theatre. He has become an essential part of their program is able to bring the exact perspective needed and can speak first-hand to both communities (Dallmann 2014).

ATI works closely with the New York presenters to preview the shows, suggest technical adjustments, and perform house and staff training. To control ticket sales and provide marketing support, ATI buys out all of the seats to handle ticketing internally. When these Broadway productions then go on tour, Dallmann will work to consult with the presenters who wish to include this type of show. As a partner with Autism Speaks, ATI is able to direct these presenters to local chapters to find specialists and volunteers as this company is closely involved with developing the resources and are aware of how to help with implementation. (Dallmann 2014) Similarly, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre has found a valuable partnership with Autism Connection of PA (Melby 2014).

Important Program Considerations

Budgeting, marketing, and training components are particularly important, and organizations have found different strategies equally successful. Such considerations include:

- Building the budget into overall goals and spreading costs across departments;
- Determining the date, ticket limit, and communications for the show;
- Working with front of house and volunteers to create a welcoming environment; and
- Communicating program changes to the artists and production staff.

All of these decisions produce significant value, and Dallmann of TDF enforces that sensory-friendly performances are about audience building as the families come with siblings, grandparents, and caretakers who are also potential future ticket buyers. Each performance presented through TDF averages 40% first-time attendees, and the organization has already seen several repeat buyers as well as crossover into “traditional” performances. (Dallmann 2014).

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Budgeting

One concern for organizations is the financial expense and added cost of time, materials, and extra rehearsals. It is also important to recognize that these families already face constrained budgets and studies show it costs \$2.6 million to raise a child with autism (Dallmann 2014). Organizations must also discuss discounting, refund policies, and whether exceptions will be made for sensory-friendly performances as these can be other barriers to attendance (Theatre Development Fund 2014). Thus, there is great value in making these performances as affordable as possible so that the entire family can attend.

One small additional cost is the purchase of sensory tools including earplugs, headphones, seat cushions, and manipulatives or “fidgets” to provide greater comfort to the children in attendance (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 11). Other costs are associated with the planning, preparing materials such as social stories and tip sheets, and coordinating volunteer staff. Some programs build costs into existing infrastructure or work with other organizations to cover these costs. For example, the Kennedy Center uses existing resources for tip sheet photos and TDF works with local schools for supplies for activity areas (Swanson 2014), (Dallmann 2014). Added costs for actors and designers have been minimal. Any adjustments to the performance are built in to existing rehearsals, and even with added time for training, have not required overtime costs.

Many organizations have found that funding and grants readily available for accessibility and inclusion programs, which helps support ticket subsidies and other costs. Imagination Stage budgets the shows so that they do not count towards revenue, but reflect the purpose as a mission-driven activity. The greatest cost is the ticket subsidy, but the program is mostly funded through grants and donations (Nutting 2014). Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre builds its sensory-friendly programs into its overall goals for the particular show. The organization then spreads expenses across departments and seeks funding for work with the Autism population (Melby 2014).

Marketing

Date Selection

Determining the date is particularly important, and simply scheduling a sensory-friendly performance does not imply that the audience will take whatever measures necessary to come. Accommodations must be made to serve this audience equally. (Melby 2014) The timing and scheduling of the performance should work around days and times with less traffic or potential external problems. Audience feedback suggests the need for a weekend matinee, but for many companies, it is challenging to meet budget goals by replacing a typical high-selling weekend matinee with a limited-ticket or discounted sensory show. Some have tried weeknights, but face a challenge of gathering audiences. When looking towards weekday matinees, there are limitations for parents who work, but also opportunities to reach out to school groups (Nutting 2014), (Dallmann 2014).

General or Reserved Seating

There are many options organizations must consider with regard to ticket sales. Some recommend general admission to allow more choice and flexibility for families, but having reserved seats allows families to be sure of their preferred location should they arrive late. The Kennedy Center used general admission during the pilot test of its program, but found that people still moved towards the front, even when that meant

sitting closer together. For subsequent performances, the Kennedy Center moved to reserved seating and found families felt more confident without the need to arrive early to claim their preferred section or find an aisle seat (Swanson 2014). Along these lines, some organizations prefer to limit the number of tickets to allow for more space for movement, while other companies prefer to sell more tickets to enable more families to experience the performance (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 9), (Theatre Development Fund 2014).



Peeking into the theatre at Imagination Stage

Communication Strategies

In addition to finding strategic ways to reach the specific audience, developing materials and communicating about the performance with the local community is an important consideration. In the UK, companies found traditional marketing tactics to be ineffective and moved towards focusing on word of mouth, direct contact with organizations, and personal networks (Potter 2013).

Many families may not have visited the theatre before, so it is important to prepare them as well with links to information for parking and transportation (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 12). Particularly for the Broadway productions, companies must clearly notify ticket buyers and mark tickets and purchase sites to avoid problems with scalpers (Theatre Development Fund 2014).

Organizations also recognize that while it is valuable to offer many opportunities for such programs, it is important to recognize that they are working with a finite population. The Kennedy Center works with other organizations in the DC area to communicate about schedules, recognizing the limited demand and risk of oversaturating the market (Swanson 2014). Two companies presenting sensory-friendly holiday productions in the same year, such as *The Nutcracker* and *A Christmas Carol* would not be as valuable. This reinforces the need for organizations to work together to present to the community rather than competing for this audience (Melby 2014).

Focused or Public Performances

Some companies suggest targeting the specific audience for the performance, such as reaching out to the autism community, rather than marketing to the general public (Sucato 2013). In its first year, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre focused exclusively on the autism population. This introduced other challenges with controlling ticket sales and balancing promotions, but allowed for focused program development (Melby 2014). This year, Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre opened performances to the public by adapting prior communication wording and focus by keeping messages simple to welcome anyone who prefers this type of performance (Melby 2014).

The Kennedy Center supports fully public sensory-friendly performances and found that the majority of ticket sales go to the general public. The organization has established a “SF” label built into the existing ticketing system with notifications to inform ticket buyers about performances. Even with more popular productions, the Kennedy Center has not had any issues with someone not being able to purchase tickets to sensory-friendly shows (Swanson 2014). The audience is made aware of the different aspects they will encounter with this performance and that children may be moving, making noises, or using communication devices. As long as they understand these alterations, they can still purchase a ticket (R. Ideishi 2014).

Staff and Volunteers

Staff members are key for the successful implementation of the programs, thus training is a valuable aspect. Despite any initial concerns or nerves about the uncertainties with this programming, staff members at every organization were eager to get involved. Many could personally relate already with knowing someone on the spectrum. Educating the staff about autism and social cognitive disorders prepares them to communicate and interact with patrons. “Staff may encounter persons with a social or learning disability and not realize a different approach to communication and interaction may be warranted,” thus, they need to be introduced to general knowledge about autism, interaction strategies, performance adjustments, and the value of presenting such a performance (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 10). Training for the Relaxed Performance Program in the UK involved a 2 ½-hour professional development workshop for all staff members including front of house, production, and management (Relaxed Performance Project 2013).

Box Office / Patron Services

As those most likely to answer questions about the programming and policies, it is important for box office staff to be equipped with information to help families make informed decisions about attending a sensory-friendly performance (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 9). At Imagination Stage, patron services were very supportive of the programming and understood the need to sell fewer seats and clearly communicate information about the performances (Nutting 2014). The Kennedy Center holds regular training with box office staff for accessibility programs, making it easy to build in sensory-friendly performance features. Often, there are internal concerns that people might purchase a ticket for the show without understanding the modifications. The Kennedy Center built in several automatic platforms to ensure awareness. Within the website, ticket buyers are alerted upon selecting a sensory-friendly show with a pop-up box that explains the different features, and welcomes them to decide if this type of performance is right for them. After purchasing tickets to a performance, patrons are then sent an email explaining the performances again and providing supplementary resources. (Swanson 2014)

Front of House

Interactions between front of house staff and special needs guests is of particular importance. Often sensitivity and accommodations are the barriers to why families have not attended traditional performances (R. Ideishi, Informational Interview on Sensory-Friendly Programming 2014). Melby recognizes that it is not just the performance, but everything surrounding it that creates the sensory experience. While most organizations cannot physically change the space, they can consider how to alter the environment, particularly with front of house (Melby 2014).

Like box office staff, ushers and security need to know how to make patrons feel welcome and understand how to communicate with people with disabilities. As those directly dealing with the children and families, there may be additional aspects to explain, especially as “disapproving body language or facial expressions from others can create additional parental or child stress” (R. Ideishi 2014). Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre rents its performance venue, but works with the venue manager to hand-select ushers with more experience, training, or a greater understanding of how to work with special needs patrons (Melby 2014).

Volunteers

As with front of house staff, volunteers will have the most direct connection to the audience members and need proper training. Theatre Development Fund recommends having the same number of volunteers as front of house staff, with about 25% autism professionals. Volunteers are responsible for setting up the lobby and carrying bags with fidgets and earplugs to hand out to the children as needed. They should be clearly visible and easily identifiable with matching t-shirts (Theatre Development Fund 2014). Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre recognizes the importance of having the right people to welcome the families to the theatre and focuses on having qualified occupational therapists, physical therapist, and other professionals who have experience working with this population. Volunteers for the performances come through the Autism Connection of PA and have assisted with other sensory-friendly performances in the region. This allows families to feel a greater level of comfort in trusting the volunteers to assist with expected or unexpected challenges (Melby 2014).

Production Staff and Artists

Artists and members of the production team are likely to have different levels of understanding and experience in working with sensory-friendly performances. This makes it important to communicate and hold open discussions with artistic staff members about what changes will or will not occur and why. They need to understand the performance modifications and altered house rules, recognizing that the house lights will be dimmed and there will be more movement (Ideishi et al. 2013, 11). Nutting explained that all of the staff were scared or nervous for the first time, but they discussed that something unexpected usually happens at a performance, yet this time you are telling the staff that something unexpected is going to happen (Nutting 2014). The amount of time needed depends on the show and whether certain aspects just need a warning or if a change is required. Changes often involve use of strobe lights and reducing sounds over 90 decibels. For *Aladdin*, only five adjustments were necessary while *Matilda* required several changes (Dallmann 2014).

Special Rehearsals

Holding special rehearsals or training sessions for sensory friendly programming is particularly valuable. Imagination Stage



Sensory-Friendly Rehearsal at Imagination Stage

supplements one sensory-friendly performance rehearsal in place of the understudy rehearsal for that week. The rehearsal then begins with an overview of sensory-friendly performances, an explanation of the autism spectrum disorder, and a discussion of what differences they can expect. The meeting lasts around half an hour with time for the production team and actors to ask questions or express concerns. They then spend about 2 ½ hours in a special rehearsal focusing on the adjusted numbers. The lighting and sound designers work with the consultant to focus on any adjustments such as removing front fill speakers or strobe lights. The actors also give return feedback such as if they are no longer able to hear their cues. (Nutting 2014). Not all productions warrant a separate rehearsal when minimal changes are involved. Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre simply holds an informational session for the dancers, staff members, and all involved with the production separate from other rehearsals (Melby 2014).

Having a strong, existing system in place is particularly valuable when new staff members come on, something identified by Imagination State Production Manager Jenn Schwartz (Schwartz 2014). The rehearsals communicate to staff and artists that they are not trying to change the show, but rather give an opportunity for families to experience the theatre and provide an overview of autism, recent studies, possible reactions, and the adjustments necessary. Actor Matt Schleigh, who has performed in multiple



why we do the things we do, Art becomes a leader in making a difference in the lives of children” (Wilson 2014). Alexandra Kochis, a ballerina at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre, also value of the training sessions. The company specialists and discusses sensory-friendly

Imagination Stage productions, points out the value of these rehearsals helping those involve transition from uncertainties to developing awareness and understanding to creating a desire to help (Schleigh 2014). As a children’s theatre company, actors at Imagination Stage are used to more movement and noise within the audience already and for them, and they recognize that the performance is really just like any other show (Schwartz 2014).

Actor Chris Wilson has performed in sensory-friendly performances at both Imagination Stage and the Kennedy Center. He regards that the most valuable aspect of these rehearsals is the time spent discussing why the changes are made and building a foundation for understanding the meaning of sensory-friendly. “You can even give an actor a list of changes to be made in a Sensory Friendly Performance, and they can technically implement them without any rehearsal... But I think our goal should be to understand. If we

“You can even give an actor a list of changes to be made in a Sensory Friendly Performance, and they can technically implement them without any rehearsal... But I think our goal should be to understand. If we understand why we do the things we do, Art becomes even more of a leader in making a difference in the lives of these children”

understand even more of these principal discusses the brings in programming

by building awareness of what other companies are doing. Kochis remarks that the training has been more important to her as a person, “to know about the spectrum and be that much more aware and open” (Kochis 2014).

Production Staff

The production staff are key for understanding how to best adapt the performance. At Imagination Stage, Diane Nutting emails the production staff and actors with information about the performance and possible changes prior to a rehearsal. The production manager assists in identifying over-stimulating moments along with what can change or where changes in the audience are sufficient. Schwartz explains that her role is to ensure the artistic quality, that certain production elements are maintained, and that requested changes are manageable. She is responsible for watching that the changes do not involve taking “liberties” with the work of the design team, which would adjust the integrity of the show and involve copyright and unions issues. When adjustments are necessary, Schwartz recommends thinking in “broad strokes” and adjusting lights or sound across the whole rather than re-writing specific cues, which is more labor intensive. (Schwartz 2014).

Artists

Actress Megan Graves, who also performs with Imagination Stage, mentions that working on the sensory-friendly programming has been “really fascinating,” though she confesses she was scared in the beginning. Yet, following the training, she was able to understand more about autism, how to work with children on the spectrum, and what to expect in the performance (Graves 2014). Schleigh identifies that the natural reaction for any performer is “How much do we as actors need to change?” Yet upon seeing the rehearsal and process, they realize that they are not changing their performance at all, but rather becoming more aware of how the audience might react (Schleigh 2014).

Understanding What to Expect

During the performance, artists might see a variety of responses to the stimulation on the stage which may cause a child to push more into him or herself while another child may be compelled to move closer to the stage or make moaning noises. Schleigh and Graves both recognize that in these moments, they are able to know that the child is actually completely engaged in the performance (Schleigh 2014), (Graves 2014). Performers must consider adjusting the intensity of the performance without adjusting the energy. Suggestions include toning down “sudden or over the top vocalizations” by scooping into the sound rather than starting at a high timbre such as a scream or shriek of delight. For example, in a “shopping spree mayhem” scene, the actors would gradually move into sounds rather than sudden screams (Schleigh 2014), (Nutting 2014). Nutting discusses the amount of engagement with the audience and creating a “lens shift” for the actors with their performance. She also discusses that there may be bodies in the aisles and the children may over or under react to the different scenes. Both artists also recognize that the elements in the audience such as glow sticking are never distracting and help prepare them as well with a reminder to tone down.

Many of the Imagination Stage productions involve actors interacting with the audience during the performance, and adjustments include choosing adults as opposed to kids and being more “gentle” with an invitation to engage as opposed to “in your face involuntary engagement.” (Nutting 2014). *James and the Giant Peach* at Imagination Stage involved a great deal of audience participation including bringing kids onto

the stage and telling them what to do. For the sensory-friendly production, they retained this feature, but explained to the actors the need to be very specific and to not touch the kids as this might be upsetting. Graves describes this as a truly moving experience where kids on the spectrum went onstage, joined by siblings or other children in attendance creating for parents a “beautiful combination of getting to see both on stage together.” (Graves 2014).

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Recognizing the Value

Dallmann explains that this is the “most honest audience you’ll ever have,” which can sometimes be jarring for the performers; yet at the same time, the engagement and excitement from within the audience gives the feeling of a second opening night (Dallmann 2014). With more lighting in the audience, the artists can see reactions from on the stage, which changes the intimacy of the performance giving it a more personal, communicative feel (Graves 2014). Artists at the Kennedy Center tend to enjoy these performances, which enable them to refocus their work and feel a greater connection with the audience (Swanson 2014). Kochis explains that the automatic feedback, being able to make eye contact, and seeing people smiling and laughing “humanizes” the performance, providing a personal connection (Kochis 2014).

Following the shows at Imagination Stage, artists can voluntarily meet the kids and families, which Graves describes as a very rewarding experience, being able to talk to the parents and hear first-hand how the performance has impacted them (Graves 2014). She is now teaching at Imagination Stage and being part of the sensory-friendly programs has made a natural transition to teaching kids on the spectrum and with other



Meeting the Actors at Imagination Stage

developmental needs. Actor Matt Schleigh has been in four productions with Imagination Stage. He describes it as “one of my favorite performances to do. You are getting wonderfully and immediate responses from kids that might not happen with other groups” (Schleigh 2014). Kochis describes the value of being able to give back and reach this part of the population. She has performed in special needs shows in the past with the Boston Ballet and is proud to be part of the work going on in Pittsburgh (Kochis 2014).

Conclusions and Ongoing Developments

Schwartz emphasizes that it is incredibly valuable to create a place where families can go, and she states that while organizations may be uncomfortable and much is still unknown, it is important to just try a sensory-friendly performance (Schwartz 2014). The Kennedy Center has found that for some families, the

performances were too relaxed and that the additional movement was more of a problem, but this opened them to the possibility of attending “traditional” performances. On one end of the spectrum, some families need this, but for others, the experience has built their confidence and increased their comfort with the venue. Additionally, many families who used to come are now more comfortable returning to the theater and bringing along their kids (Swanson 2014). Schleigh recognizes, “It almost has a more supportive feel for that performance – everyone there is really excited to see the show and that they can be there as a family” (Schleigh 2014).

“It almost has a more supportive feel for that performance – everyone there is really excited to see the show and that they can be there as a family”

Moving forward, organizations must identify opportunities for these programs to grow and develop these valuable audience members. As families become more comfortable with attending theatre productions, organizations should consider how to help them transition into becoming general audience members by identifying opportunities and strategies for easing this transition and welcoming them beyond the specially-designed production. Additionally, as the children grow older, organizations must be aware of how to continue serving their needs. Furthermore, these sensory-friendly programs might consider how they can adapt to serve other developmental disabilities and create a platform to introduce anyone to the theater.



Conducting Effective Program Evaluation

Evaluation of programming is a challenge recognized by the organizations, particularly on the individual level. After the performance, it is important to follow-up with this group and to meet with audience members to discuss how the experience, pre-visit strategies, modifications, staff knowledge, and behavior might be improved for future productions (Ideishi, et al. 2013, 13). Evaluation can also include survey feedback or focus groups with audience members, volunteers, and consultants (Theatre Development Fund 2014). Yet organizations cannot use just one model to look across all areas. When looking on the family and organizational level, they might consider the functional elements of the event – such as what to change internally regarding ticket processing or planning. Organizations internationally are working to overcome the challenge of measuring on the personal level to understand individual needs,

the intrinsic value created (R. Ideishi

Coloring at Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre
(Photo by Shelby Vogel)

the impact of the event, and
2014).

Advocating and creating a community dialogue

The experience extends well beyond the actual performance and organizations must expand efforts beyond the theater to explain to the community how to serve this population when events occur. This might include reaching out to nearby restaurants or parking garage attendants to build awareness, especially surrounding the event. The theatres and organizations can also work within the community to become advocates for this population. The Society of London Theatre recognizes dual value of advocacy: “whilst this will take time, it

will be worth it in the long run as it will build your community relationships and work as a good advocate for you theatre” (Relaxed Performance Project 2013). TDF has recognized a solidarity that has evolved through the performers. Following a performance of *Wicked*, the actors brought out the red star-shaped, branded fidgets and held them in the air during curtain call along with the audience members. Other productions have held fundraisers during the touring Broadway shows, and artists held a talk-back session following *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*, a Tony-nominated play about a boy on the spectrum (Dallmann 2014).

Expanding Beyond Family Programming

Dallmann points out that there is a common misconception with people interpreting “autism-friendly” as “kid-friendly,” but the Autism Theatre Initiative among other organizations, have recognized that the kids will grow up and there are plenty of adults on the spectrum whom they also must assist. The Kennedy Center has found performances with music and those aimed towards young audiences tend to sell better. Still, the organization is moving performances by the National Symphony Orchestra from its smaller family hall into a larger 2,200 seat hall and has goals of expanding into other genres such as ballet and opera along with shows not just intended for kids (Swanson 2014). The Autism Theatre Initiative focuses on programming to audiences of all levels and ages. *Disney Junior Live* performances were designed for newly diagnosed 3-4 year-olds. They have also expanded into reaching higher functioning adults and older teens on the spectrum in presenting *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*. This production was first produced in the UK and was a greater risk, but brought a completely new audience and opened many new doors for the organization and others across the country.

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