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Andy Kempe

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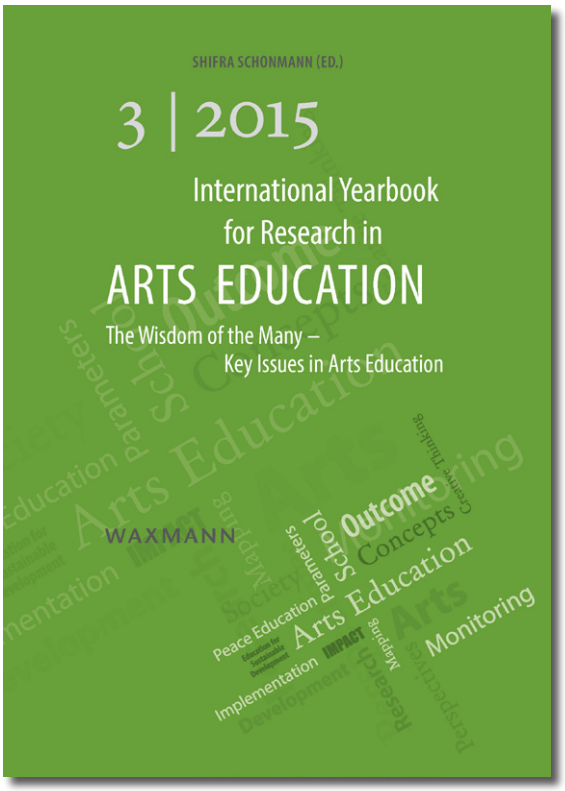

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Introducing Children with Special Educational Needs to Theatre through 'Relaxed Performances'

Introduction

The Autism Theatre Initiative, which built on the success of 'autism friendly' cinema screenings, was launched in New York with a performance of Disney's *The Lion King* on October 2nd 2011 (Theatre Development Fund, n.d). Subsequently, following a complaint regarding the treatment of a boy with autism and his family at a show in London's West End (London Evening Standard, 02.08.2011) The Society of London Theatres, the Theatrical Management Association and the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts instigated the Relaxed Performance Project in 2012. The project culminated in a conference aimed at sharing best practice at London's Lyceum Theatre on September 2nd 2013. The outcomes of the project were collated in the Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation (2013).

'Relaxed' or 'autism friendly' performances have been defined as:

> creative, safe and inspiring public theatre performances for children with special needs, including Autistic Spectrum Conditions and/or learning disabilities and, crucially, their families. Performances are specially designed to give those who otherwise might feel excluded the chance to experience live theatre. (Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts, 2013, n.p.)

Approximately one in 100 people have an autistic spectrum disorder (Rosenblatt, 2008) and many families living with autism are wary of visiting the theatre for fear of disrupting the performance or upsetting other audience members. This means that a significant number of people feel excluded from the theatre. However, the appellation 'autism friendly' is problematic in that it suggests a very specific target audience which excludes other people with learning disabilities, sensory or communication needs. Conversely, the term 'relaxed performance' may be interpreted as suggesting that the professional integrity of the performance itself has in some way been compromised. In fact, a key aim of a relaxed performance is to make as few changes to the show as possible but rather make adjustments to the organisation of the front of house and auditorium in order to reduce anxiety and stress for those attending. Feedback on the Relaxed Performance Project was overwhelmingly positive. Its aim of attracting new audiences to the theatre was considered to have been met, the comment of this parent being typical:

There are a lot of people who won't be autism friendly, so families feel more comfortable coming to a performance like this with their autistic child. The importance of these events is that they open a door to get a child into a theatre. My son has come for the first time today to a big theatre. It wouldn't be as hard now to get him into another theatre. (Relaxed Performance Conference Evaluation, 2013, p. 28)

Learning through Engagement

People with a disability have significantly lower rates of attending the theatre than those without. Family members of children with a disability are similarly less likely to take part in cultural activities (Shah & Priestley, 2011). Some children with learning, sensory or communication disabilities lack an awareness of the thoughts and feelings of those around them. Their responses to a performance may lead other audience members to be negative or aggressive towards them with the result that what they learn is that theatre is a place to avoid. In a relaxed performance the audience is invited to engage with the action however they wish; that other members of the audience are doing likewise ideally leads to the recognition that theatre is a good space in which feelings can be physically and verbally expressed. Grandin and Barron (2005) insist that children with autistic spectrum disorders learn by doing and so need direct experience and live interaction in order for social skills to become 'hard-wired' in their brains. Promoting theatre as a positive social experience may contribute to the development of social skills by, for example, utilising the concept of 'joint attention' whereby one person draws another's attention to something through gazing and otherwise physically pointing to it (Oates & Grayson, 2004). Bundy's research into young people's first encounters with theatre recorded that some, 'indicated that they experience pleasure when their own responses were affirmed by other people's apparently similar reactions' (Bundy, Ewing & Fleming, 2013, p. 156). In the theatre, the art of the performers and the use of stage technology are focused on drawing the attention of the audience to the action and heightened emotions on show. Hurley notes that 'witnessing another's actions and emotional experiences can create the same neurological imprint as doing or feeling them oneself' (2010, p. 76). Thus, the act of jointly attending as an audience member, along with the object of that attention may, for children with social and communication difficulties, be an aesthetically rewarding and reassuring way of participating in a cultural event, the safe environment. In this it may actively facilitate the development of social and communication skills.

Preparations and Adjustments

Hurley argues that theatre sets out to provoke internal and external feelings by offering 'super-stimuli' that will concentrate and amplify the world's 'natural sensory effects' (2010, p. 23) yet people with sensory disabilities or autistic spectrum disorders may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours. A relaxed performance must therefore consider the extent to which effects should be amplified or muted and what facilities will be available to either help avoid or ameliorate

any adverse responses to over- or under-sensitivity which would cause people to be disturbed or distracted in a negative way. Reaching out to new audiences in this way may be construed as a move towards social justice. Social justice can **only be fully achieved though when society is conceptualised as being made up of individuals who have equal rights, opportunities and privileges.** However, the social conventions, perceived or actual, that surround how audiences are expected to behave in the theatre can be alienating. Ball (2013) argues that in order to avoid the embarrassment of contravening unknown or misunderstood codes many people simply don't go to the theatre even if they'd like to.

Relaxed performances tackle this obstruction by informing the audience what the event involves through a 'visual story' sent out in advance. The stories contain directive, descriptive and affirmative sentences which identify the commonly shared values and characteristics of the event and suggesting appropriate actions (Shore & Rastelli, 2006). Such stories can be sent in advance electronically as both PDFs and Word documents so that parents/carers can edit them and print out only the parts they feel their children would benefit from. A story that deals with visiting the theatre might show pictures of the front of the building, the foyer, smiling assistants in the box office and the auditorium etc., and answer questions such as what will happen when the show is about to begin, what happens in the interval and how audiences might behave, for example, cheering bits they like and clapping at the end. The story could explain where the lights come from in the show and why; warn that the chairs flip back; and mention any loud sounds or special effects (for example, dry ice has a slight odour to it that many people would not notice but some who are hyper sensitive to smells might). In a visual story accompanying a pantomime it was emphasised that it is 'OK' to call out because in a pantomime this 'is NOT being rude'. Sometimes, the story explained, the cast would come into the audience. Each child attending this performance would be given a green card and by holding it up they would be signalling that they didn't mind being talked to.

Another visual story may focus on the show itself, introducing the characters and outlining the action in words and photographs. They might mention any theatrical conventions that could otherwise be confusing. For example, a visual story accompanying a pantomime included the following:

> This is **Dame Darcy Trott**. It is a Pantomime tradition that this role is played **by a man, dressed as a woman**. This is supposed to be funny! The Dame has lots of costume changes.

Theatre staff are trained so that they understand the purpose and nature of relaxed performances and gain some understanding of the diverse needs of the audience, what sort of incidents might arise and how these should be dealt with. Providing a quiet break out space with a monitor showing what was happening on stage; turning off hand driers in toilets (the sudden noise of which can be very alarming); and offering a 'touch tour' so that children can go onto the stage to explore the set with a member of the company are all useful adjustments as is the provision of a 'list of surprises' separate from the visual story so that parents/carers have the option of whether or not to share these in advance. For the performance itself some light is left on in the auditorium; the use of strobes and

pyrotechnics is reduced or removed; volume is lowered; and an assessment of what impact any direct engagement with the audience might have is made.

Responses to the Relaxed Performance Initiative

Relaxed performances are reported to have had an effect on the behaviour of many children; simply knowing that they could go in and out of the auditorium without bothering others resulted in greater attention being paid to the performance (Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation, 2013). As part of a case study I made of the relaxed performance one parent told me:

> There's no two ways about it, taking Ella to a relaxed performance was an incredible liberation because to be in a place where you know that if she runs about no one's going to be cross … If we get anxious because we think people are cross, she'll get anxious and she'll play up more. So actually the whole thing of everyone just being chilled is great.

Some parents thought relaxed performances might stop their children recognising and learning to adjust to the harsh realities of life but agreed that attending gave an opportunity to observe their responses to different sensory and social experiences which would subsequently help them to manage their condition.

A primary aim of theatre is to generate experience and sensation and Freshwater (2009) acknowledges that children's memories of visiting the theatre can last a lifetime. The aesthetic pleasure induced does not negate the possibility of valuable social and cultural development arising from the experience. Relaxed performances thus provide an opportunity to enter the world of the theatre that Shore and Rastelli (2006) note is attractive to many people with autistic spectrum disorders but one from which they often feel debarred.

A problem yet to be resolved with the initiative is that by dedicating particular performances as being 'relaxed' or 'autism friendly', other members of the public may be dissuaded from attending for fear of their engagement with the show being disrupted: by attempting to be more inclusive relaxed performances could themselves be exclusive. The same criticism may of course be levelled at any theatre event aiming to cater for a particular under-represented sector of society. The counter argument is that providing for under-represented groups draws attention to them and helps promote greater acceptance of diversity. The motto of the National Autistic Society in the UK encapsulates the philosophy that underpins the relaxed performance initiative: 'accept difference, not indifference.'

Conclusion

The tolerance and understanding fostered by the relaxed performance initiative was certainly appreciated by one parent who said to me:

> I don't think you can underestimate how excluding it can be to go to things and just worry about people disapproving of your child. Every parent with a kid with autism will tell you. Because they don't look different, people just look at them being cross. It's really debilitating.

Accusations of commercial theatres' involvement in the initiative as being financially driven fail to recognise the real terms cost of mounting a relaxed performance. Staff training, re-setting technical effects, under-selling the house in order to allow freer movement in the auditorium and often reducing the prices of tickets mean little or no profit is made despite a new audience being reached. Nonetheless, Heather Wildsmith (2014) from the National Autistic Society has reported that as a result of communicating the successes of relaxed performances, a growing number of theatres, including amateur companies, are now programming them into their schedules. By doing so, they illustrate that the cause of social justice is furthered by members of society actively working to ensure that others in that society also lead fulfilling lives.

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