

An Industry Inspiration Day

Monday 10 October 2011
10:00am - 4:30pm
Unicorn Theatre, London

AUTISM AND THEATRE

A REPORT





Jane Asher, President, National Autistic Society

Autism: An Industry Inspiration Day: Report

Chrissie Tiller

Introduction

Autism: An Industry Inspiration Day was exactly that. Introduced as a day of “offers and requests” its aim was to increase awareness of autism alongside sharing some of the exceptional work that already exists in offering access to theatre performances. Organised by Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG), the Unicorn Theatre, National Autistic Society (NAS), Action for Children’s Arts (ACA), Theatrical Management Association (TMA) and the Society of London Theatre (SOLT), with support from Ambitious About Autism (AAA) and the Institute of Entertainment and Arts Management (IEAM), the event brought together over 200 delegates from right across the industry, as well as organisations working directly with autism and representatives on the autistic spectrum.

Delegates were given the chance to find out more about the disorder from those working in the field as well as discovering how autism impacts on the people themselves, their families and carers when visiting the theatre. An exemplary model of the value of creating space for real cross sectoral conversations, the day offered opportunities for different groups to address a shared concern, learn from each other’s experience and explore ways in which real cultural change might happen.

David Wood OBE, children’s playwright/director, Chair of Action for Children’s Arts, set the tone by placing the issue firmly within the agenda of inclusion and the framework of Article 31 of the UN Convention and the right of every child to have access to arts and culture. A spirit of openness, honesty and a real desire to engage positively with the issue marked the debate that followed. A mix of panel discussions and individual speakers allowed opportunities for a rich diversity of interventions from individual delegates and thoughtful and responsive facilitation from co-chairs, Jodie Myers and Jonathan Meth, moved the conversation forward in an inclusive and productive way. Final reports from the afternoon’s breakout groups were focused,

purposeful and full of practical proposals for ways in which theatres could begin to address the needs of families, performers, frontline staff and audience members. As Jane Asher, actor and President of the National Autistic Society, noted in her keynote speech, even small adjustments can have huge impact in making *“the magic of live performance available to as wide a range of children and adults as possible”*.

It was hoped that the day would also serve as a launch pad for similar regional venue awareness days and establish future ongoing engagement between local theatres and families affected by autism. The impact of the day on delegates is evidenced by the resulting offers that have come from theatres, arts organisations and charities throughout the UK to continue sharing experience and knowledge.



The Theatre and Autism Inspiration Day brought together 200 industry people at the Unicorn Theatre

The Day

Opening Panel

Opening the day, Rosemary Squire, Chief Executive Officer at Ambassador Theatre Group, introduced delegates to the importance of recognising that the theatre experience of young people with autism and their families has too often been characterised by frustration, panic and hurt. Whilst acknowledging the tensions that exist between respecting the comfort of the general audience and addressing the needs of the young people, she alerted us to the fact that autism now affects over 500,000 young people and their families in the UK. Ensuring their access to theatre is something that can no longer be neglected.

A message of support from Robert Buckland MP offered a very real example of the kinds of problems that can face parents, when he was asked to take his own child out of a theatre where her response to a “magic piano” on stage had included making noise and dancing in the aisle with pleasure. At the same time, we were also told of an Ambassador Theatre Group employee who had been so upset by the treatment of a young person with autism by fellow theatre staff that he had felt obliged to leave the company. Finding ways to make the experience more enjoyable for everyone was what was needed.

The importance of including all theatre staff in the conversation, from front of house to managers, producers and performers, was further emphasised by National Autistic Society Chief Executive Officer, Mark Lever, who praised initiatives already happening whilst arguing for theatres to share and build on them.

David Wood asked us to consider what inclusive theatre really meant, when issues such as that of noise, in particular the often involuntary sounds made by young people with autism enjoying themselves, have become so problematic for us as audiences. Referring us back to the lively heckling

and banter of a Shakespearean audience, he accepted that silence has become part of the unspoken contract of the contemporary theatre spectator. Were, he asked, soundproofed boxes such as those used for babies in some theatres therefore the right solution? Or might such initiatives only serve to confirm the image of the young person with autism, isolated from others, looking at the world as if through a pane of glass?

What Is Autism?

Heather Wildsmith, of the National Autistic Society, offered a practical and important insight into the day-to-day challenges faced by young people with what is often referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Explaining some of the different ways in which the disorder affects people she offered those less familiar with the condition an insight into the “triad” of impairments and the ways in which these might present themselves in difficulties with social communication, social interaction and social imagination. Some of the characteristics of these difficulties, such as not being able to pick up clues of facial expression and body language, respond to other people’s emotions and feelings or understand metaphors, she pointed out have clear implications for ensuring a visit to the theatre is a rich and meaningful experience.

In being helped to understand ways in which sensory sensitivity might impact on young people with autism, we were also able to see how not only the performance but also the theatre space itself might present challenges. For young people hypersensitive to external stimuli this could mean being disturbed by the bright lights and hubbub of noise in the foyer whilst for others who are under, or hypo, sensitive a dimly lit auditorium might be harder to manage. The introduction of music, of lights going up and down, of people applauding loudly can also be disturbing. As can the notion of an interval when people may leave their seats, lighting states may change, the stage emptied, but the performance may not be over.

At the same time, we were reminded there are aspects of autism that can make for a very responsive audience: rapt attention when something is of real interest, a fascination with detail and an ability to give total concentration when engaged with the subject.

Discussion Forum

Ways in which theatres might respond to these different challenges and help young people with autism and their families and carers prepare for the whole theatre experience was taken up in the discussion forum that followed. Valuable input came from the panel, including Cian Binchy, Youth Patron of Ambitious about Autism, who was not only able to describe his own experiences but also contribute some very concrete suggestions of ways in which he felt young people might be enabled to make the most of their theatre outing. He and Kerry Harris, teacher from Queenshill School, introduced those less familiar with current practice to the benefits of providing young people with ear defenders and sunglasses, but also to the value of introducing sensory rooms or chill out spaces into a venue. These spaces, where young people can retreat should the noise, lights or generally hectic nature of a live performance become overwhelming, have proved very successful. Providing young people with fidget toys or games to play with should they became distracted during a performance was another practical suggestion.



Rosemary Squire OBE, Joint CEO, Ambassador Theatre Group and David Wood, OBE, Chair, Action for Children's Arts

Kerry Harris' introduction to the role that can be played by "Social Stories"* in preparing young people for their theatre visit was especially helpful. The value of each venue offering prospective visitors their own "social picture story", that begins with the path from the bus/tube to the entrance of the building and then goes on to guide young people through the foyer, cafe and bar areas, auditorium, stage and performance was quickly recognised. Whilst realising that producers of individual shows might not find this quite so easy if some aspects of staging were not set until late in rehearsals, most delegates felt the generic 'social story' was something every theatre could, and should, make part of their regular offer.

Delegates were then introduced to the concept of "relaxed" or "autism friendly" performances. Features of which might include a pre-show walk around the theatre, actors coming on to the stage to introduce themselves, houselights kept up, music and other sound effects lowered and noise and audience participation not only being tolerated but actively welcomed.

A number of delegates, including those with ASD, underlined the fact that the spectrum nature of the disorder meant that these approaches might not work for everyone but what was important they felt was that a range of offers was made and new possibilities opened up for young people and their families and carers. It is also very important that theatres engage with their local audience to find out what they want and to build and strengthen community relationships.

The importance of educating frontline staff at all venues to the breadth of needs involved in ASD was noted: they were the ones often placed in the position of explaining behaviour to other audience members. A number of delegates working in these roles also felt it might be incumbent on parents, teachers, carers of young people with autism to alert theatres to their specific difficulties when booking tickets, although they did acknowledge the complications of negotiating some box office systems.

* please note that Social Stories is trademarked in the US, 'visual stories' is a useful alternative.

Parents of children with autism on the panel mentioned the value of being able to know what might happen in a play before they brought their children to the theatre. In this way they could make an informed decision: this was felt to be particularly important where sudden noises such as gunshots and fireworks or sudden lighting changes might occur during the performance. At the same time it was accepted that not all audiences would want to know the dénouement of a piece before they saw it, so care would have to be taken about where this information was placed on websites.

One of the important issues raised in this part of the day was the question of responsibility. Whilst theatres were happy to ensure their staff were trained, they were concerned about where the responsibility lay as far as other members of the audience were concerned. Many delegates recognised that their own lack of knowledge and understanding might well have led to them, in the past, being one of those "tutting" or disapproving members of the audience mentioned. But finding ways to ensure all audience members were alerted to ways in which a young person with ASD might behave in a performance, and therefore be tolerant, was felt to be more of a challenge. In the context of responsibility, Kerry Harris also touched on the notion of schools and parents deciding when exposure to unknown experiences might sometimes be beneficial for children and an important part of their development: this might include letting young people know something of the etiquette and codes of "ordinary" audience behaviour where relevant.

Parents and carers present were clear that what they wanted was to be given the responsibility of choosing for themselves which performances might be suited to their children. Most were happy to undertake the job of letting theatres know about their visit and the young people's specific needs if it offered them the possibility to enjoy both types of experience; "ordinary" performances as well as "relaxed" ones.

The morning ended with a brief but inspirational video report of the successful autism friendly Lion King matinee on Broadway, organised by the US Theatre Development Fund's programme Autism Theatre Initiative.

Current Practice

After lunch, three venues already offering 'autism friendly' or 'relaxed' performances shared their current practice. Kirsty Hoyle, from the Unicorn, described ways in which the theatre regularly adapts suitable shows into ASD friendly performances. This includes sending all bookers (schools and individual carers) a "visual story" of both the theatre and the show, organising familiarisation visits, training frontline staff and offering activity packs and a chill out space where the beaming of the performance into the room allows young people to continue to follow the performance should they wish to.

She and Joanna Loveday, from West Yorkshire Playhouse, both noted how the introduction of "relaxed performance" schemes had not only been a way to welcome new families into the theatre on these specific occasions but had also resulted in many of them feeling confident to come back and attend other performances. They also both stressed the amount of preparation and individual attention that goes into building these relationships.

Both felt the success of the schemes relied on being open to building long-term relationships between the theatre and the young people's families and carers. This might include developing "Meet and Greet" sessions before relaxed performances, offering carers free tickets, or working with creative teams to develop effective social storyboards. Whilst aware that these kinds of schemes might be initiated more easily by venues that were also producing houses or had active Participation/Creative Education Departments, they felt there was no reason why they shouldn't be tried by larger commercial, venues.

Paul Baxter from the Empire Cinema Group, where autism friendly performances are held on a regular basis, brought a pragmatic and practical note to the discussion, arguing that he had found the screenings, now attended by considerable numbers of young people and their families, made sound financial sense as well as addressing the organisations' social responsibility agenda.

Break Out Sessions

Delegates' responses to the possible ways forward presented in this session lead directly into the topics delegates were asked to address in their afternoon breakout groups:

- An Inclusive Approach – facilitated by Danny Braverman (Director, Orpheus Centre)
- Getting it Together: Effective Collaboration – facilitated by Liz Leck (Birmingham Hippodrome) and Richard Hayhow (The Shysters)
- A Personal Perspective on Living with Autism – facilitated by The Goth (Editor, Asperger United), Glyn Morris (parent) and Kirsty Hoyle (Unicorn Theatre)
- Advocating for Access within your Organisation – facilitated by Lucinda Harvey, (SOLT/TMA) and Julia Potts, Head of Learning and Access, Ambassador Theatre Group.

The discussions that took place were stimulating, frank and often passionate. It was clear that delegates felt they were in a safe space where they could be open with their concerns and frank about the difficulties, real and perceived, that might be faced from both sides.



L-R Kirsty Hoyle, Access Manager, Unicorn Theatre, Danny Braverman, Director, Orpheus Centre, and Jodi Myers, Co-Chair

Plenary Session

Keynote

A richly nuanced and timely input from keynote speaker Jane Asher, President of the National Autistic Society, drew all these issues together. Welcoming an initiative that had brought so many people together, she was able to bring a personal understanding of and engagement with autism together with her experience as a performer:

“As an actress, and as someone who has been involved with autism for over thirty years, I hate to think of the profession I work in being unwelcoming to those affected by autism. This potentially devastating condition is serious, lifelong and disabling and can make it extremely difficult for people affected by it to enjoy activities like trips to the theatre.”

At the same time she was also open about the difficulties of being confronted, as a performer, with atypical audience behaviour and highlighted the need to support actors as well as other frontline staff in understanding how ASD might present itself in audience reactions.

In response to comments from delegates, she embraced the idea that offering young people with autism access to theatre was not only about them being offered access to the audience. They should also be able to see themselves represented at all levels in theatre, from backstage to front of house to on the stage itself.

Breakout Groups

Each of the four breakout groups was then asked to capture some of the breath and depth of their discussions in three key action points.

An Inclusive Approach

The group looking at inclusion had examined the question of language and were concerned that the focus be on bringing about real inclusion rather than ways in which to cope with disability.

- Their first recommendation, in that light, was that every theatre become not only “autism friendly” but take up the flag across all disabilities, emphasising that that might mean thinking about integration rather than segregation and revisiting our notions of what comprises an audience. They recognised this would include educating the current audience as well as the industry but felt this could be done in a number of ways, for example using electronic media and websites as information tools.
- In tackling the hostility and panic that parents had mentioned, they felt it important that each theatre develop a visible policy appropriate to the venue, which could then be used as a reference tool by frontline staff. (Noting that parents/carers are often more upset than the children). Although it was accepted it was impossible to get it right every time having such a public policy might offer staff ways in which to deal even-handedly with issues such as a noisy autistic child in the audience.
- The ultimate goal, they felt, should be the removal of all barriers to access and the notion of inclusion as a policy being embraced both sides of the stage.

Advocating Within Organisations

This group identified clear steps towards engaging organisations with the question.

- As access is fundamentally about the relationship between performers/creatives and the audience there is a strong need for everyone in the theatre, from Chief Executive Officer down, to take ownership of the challenges presented and work together to find ways to tackle them.
- In doing this it is important for organisations not to start from scratch and create new training and initiatives but to make themselves aware of what existing resources are available and take advantage of them.
- This training can then be tailored and shaped according to individual venues and productions by the managers/policy setters within each organisation. What matters is offering those working in the organisation a basic confidence and understanding so that staff can be helped to appreciate how to respond to different situations.

Getting It Together: Effective Collaboration

This group also pointed out the importance of engaging with others in order to develop shared solutions. Central to this was building on each other's expertise and finding ways to enhance/develop the communication between organisations in order to develop the creative as well as the audience experience. At a local level this might include:

- Asking for guidance to come from the top down so that it is built into the policy of the whole organisation.
- Accepting it's a long process and keeping the dialogue open by talking *to* people not just *about* people. Recognising it might take time for experiences to change but that in the end it would be worth it.
- Taking advantage of initiatives such as the Shape access audits, including the Mystery Shopper concept.

A Personal Perspective On Living With Autism

This group focused on actions that might be taken to improve the theatre experience for everyone. These included:

- Examining the rules of the game and considering whether we might want to change some of the values of the auditorium. Even to the extent of re-visiting, as David Wood had suggested, the notion of the noisier audience.



Liz Leck, Birmingham Hippodrome, and Richard Hayhow, The Shysters – Getting it Together: Effective Collaboration break out session

- Working out the best ways to communicate with each other when things do go wrong – as a parent or carer, as a theatre, as a member of the audience.
- Being clear, if we are going to ask audience members to provide information about young people with autism, how we will then act on and use this information to improve the theatre experience.
- Also in this session Glyn Morris discussed the incident involving his son Gregor at a West End show which was one of the catalysts for this event taking place.

And additionally:

- Working to ensure there are role models at every level, so that young people with autism, as with other disabilities, could see themselves reflected in theatre.

In Response

As official “listener” and rapporteur I felt this day offered all delegates, from those who knew a great deal about autism on a personal and/or professional level to those who knew much less, a unique opportunity to both share their knowledge and challenge their thinking.

The fact that David Wood reminded us so early in the day that what we were speaking of was something that is a *right* for all young people contextualised our conversations. At the same time it was clear that this is an issue that elicits emotional responses. The feelings of the panic, frustration and hurt caused by bringing young people with autism to the very particular experience of theatre were tangible. As also was the fear of those needing to deal with the situations that might arise, without feeling they had enough knowledge or understanding. The complications of a spectrum disorder, where there will never be a “one size fits all” solution, undoubtedly adding to people's nervousness about getting things “right”.

At the same time, just as autism can be described as a triad of impairments, it seemed that some of the answers might lie in investing in further developing the triangular relationship between young people and their families and

carers, the theatres themselves (from Chief Executive Officers to performers to frontline staff) and those of us who make up the rest of the audience. Each being allowed to explain their own needs but each being prepared to take a certain amount of responsibility in order to improve everyone's experience.

Increasing people's awareness of the disorder is central to this, as is the sharing of knowledge and expertise. Running more days like this across the country is one of the ways in which this could be enabled to happen. A growing body of experience exists within childrens' theatre and some regional venues that is matched by a willingness to share: examples of good practice can be drawn down by any theatre wanting to engage with creating real inclusion.

There is also strong argument for holding the same kind of high profile event that took place on Broadway; thus reaching and educating the wider theatre audience in a more immediate way than any amount of information and advice on theatre websites. "Both... and..." would, I have a feeling, be the preferred option of all those who attended "Autism – an industry inspiration day".

In the meantime, this was a day that offered not only bucketsful of inspiration but also specific advice and pointers for anyone concerned with improving access and enhancing the theatre experience, from Chief Executive Officers of large theatre groups to box office staff in a small venue.



Jamie Crabb, Disability Co-ordinator, Central School of Speech and Drama

Hints And Tips

Chief Executive Officers

Lead from the top in:

- Increasing awareness and offering staff access to trainings
- Advocating for inclusion policies across the theatre industry

Theatres

Taking into account what is possible and appropriate for your venue:

- Create visual stories to help prepare the audience for their visit to the theatre and the show, and have all relevant information available on your website.
- Have at least one designated person at the venue that families know they can go to when planning a visit.
- Consider running a relaxed, or autism friendly performance for every suitable show.
- Consider investing in a chill out space, if possible one where the show could be beamed in so that parents and children could continue watching it.
- Engage your local community and relevant organisations to conduct an audit and give you some honest feedback.
- Regularly update, check and test your practise and procedures so that you know it is working for your audience.

Producers

- Create a storyboard for each production. Include a description of the show that covers elements such as duration, when the interval comes, any sensory features that might impact on young people with autism such as sudden loud noises, deployment of certain lighting effects.
- Consider whether it might be possible to make a DVD of the performance available under special licence conditions, so that audience members could rehearse the experience.

- Consider what else you could do as well as making sound and lighting modifications. How might considering the needs of young people with autism and other disabilities impact creatively on your performances?

Families

- Ensure you let the venue know you are coming in advance and what your needs might be.
- Find out if there is generic support available, such as visual stories about the venue, the journey to it and/or the production in question. If not, ask if there might be next time.
- Ask about the possibility of fidget toys and/or games. If they are not available take your own (and let the venue know about them).
- Be prepared for the fact that other audience members may need to be educated despite the good intentions of the theatre; a theatre audience on any given night is full of people with different expectations and opinions.

Frontline Staff In Venues

- Ask your venue for a written policy that you can steer other audience members towards if there are any problems.
- Ask for training in understanding the difficulties of autism and information about how you will be expected to deal with the different situations that may arise.

Audiences

Whilst accepting that you also need to enjoy your theatre experience:

- Be prepared to widen your notion of acceptable audience behaviour.
- Be tolerant of other reactions to a performance.
- Be open to difference.

Feedback From The Day

What Brought You To The Conference?

“A desire to ensure that our theatre is accessible to everyone, and that we can train the staff into a better understanding of autism and therefore offer autistic patrons a better service. I also wanted practical ideas and advice about how to keep the rest of the audience feeling that they have had a good experience as well.”

“To have a greater understanding of the condition and what measures we can take to make the experience to a theatre easier and more enjoyable for the families.”

“Good opportunity to learn and share experiences with other venues, gain insight into issues around autism (and learning disabilities as I thought lots of the discussion was relevant to both subjects).”

“I'm a Front of House Manager who has to deal with public reactions to involuntary noises and I was hoping for some information to help with the situation.”

“Interest in seeing if the theatrical community could re-educate its audiences into being more accepting of access needs.”

What Information Have You Taken Away With You Today?

“I have taken away more questions than answers but they are all thought provoking. Hopefully they will make me think more in advance and also be more appreciative of certain circumstances.”

“That when dealing with customers who have or are booking for those who have autism, we ask the right questions so that we can give the right advice. That there is advice we can offer on websites and that we should try to set up information pages for customers with autism so that they can make informed choices before they book for a performance.”

“Interested in the idea of ‘autism friendly’ performances – although our venue often only has shows for one night, there is possibility with Christmas runs.”

“General information on autism but also specific things that have deepened my understanding of it and got me thinking about ways of providing accessible performances.”

“Inspiration from other organisations who have this issue at the forefront of their agenda.”



Lucinda Harvey, Head of Employment Relations, SOLT/TMA and Cian Binchy, Youth Patron, Ambitious About Autism

What Steps Will You Take As A Result Of This Conference?

“I would like to prepare more advance information for people with disabilities and put more information on our website access page.”

“I will take some of the pointers to make our venue even more accessible. I will lead on some work that creates a social story for our venue and I will roll out the need for this across our venues. I will be in touch with the local branch of the Autism Society.”

“We will enhance social stories as part of our access materials; we will look at the possibilities of relaxed performances; roll out training and info that was gained at the event to staff members and affiliates.”

What On-Going Support Would Be Beneficial?

“To move forward we need to address the issues such as other patrons rights, organisations and individuals responsibilities.”

“A follow-up day to discuss some of the questions that were raised on the day but which we did not answer.”

“Maintain communication between companies or by member organisations; perhaps a dedicated website with new ideas and sharing of ideas and initiatives; social media groups.”

