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## The Artistry of Accessibility: Creating Theatre with and for Students on the Autism Spectrum

Sara Brunow  
*University of Central Florida*

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THE ARTISTRY OF ACCESSIBILITY:  
CREATING THEATRE WITH AND FOR STUDENTS ON THE AUTISM  
SPECTRUM

by  
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B.F.A. Shenandoah University, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2015

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## **ABSTRACT**

Theatre is a place where all can come together and have an experience regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or ability. As a theatre maker and teaching artist, how do I create inclusion and augment social awareness by designing and implementing theatrical experiences for a specific audience? In this personal exploration of inclusive theatre practices (Sensory Friendly Theatre, Inclusive Arts Integration, and Multi-Sensory Theatre) I will examine my experience of creating and adapting theatre with and for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. My process has a three-pronged approach: adapting an established production using a Sensory Friendly model; adapting an arts integration facilitation in an inclusive elementary classroom; and collaboratively creating a sensory-based theatrical experience with other artists and students with cognitive disabilities. Through these experiences, I strive to uncover how developing theatre for this specific audience has challenged me to grow as an artist and activist.

For Patricia Ruth Brunow, who would have been very proud to see her hardheaded granddaughter finally find her path and her passion.

For my students, past, present, and future:

In my life, I have never found anything more inspiring, more important, more forceful than the moments I spend with you and the discoveries I make with you. You are why I grow. You are why I dream. You are why I create.

For John Bryan Brunow, the man with the ideas and the passion to change the world.

For Celia Ann Brunow, who encourages me to learn, to grow, to balance, and to breathe.

“If you asked me what I came to do in this world as an artist, I will answer you: I came to live out loud.”

-Emile Zola

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This document could not have happened without the efforts of more than a handful of people. Firstly, I would like to thank my committee members, Kate Ingram, Christopher Neiss, and Kim Peter Kovak, for their guidance on this manifesto. I must thank my mentors at Orlando Repertory Theatre, Gary Cadwallader, Steve MacKinnon, and Jeffrey Revels, who gave me opportunities to grow in my artistry. To my professors at UCF, Vandy Wood, Sybil St. Claire, and Mark Routhier, thank you for giving me the tools I needed to accomplish my goals. To Alex Bailey Hodson, Jason Gerhard, Tara Kromer, Mark Nichols, and Ann Kinnebrew for their support and collaboration over these past two years. To Riley Braem, for being my professional partner in crime and understanding what in the world I was actually talking about. To Alicia Fuss and Rachel Hamilton for their professional guidance and the opportunity to just blab about it when I needed to. To Adam Spencer, who lovingly listened and challenged and supported. And a very special thanks goes to my thesis chair, Dr. Julia Listengarten, for her support and guidance. She has taught me to always look beyond the ordinary to find the extraordinary, to see the challenges and discover the possibilities.

And mostly, I want to give thanks to those who literally made me what and who I am: my family. Without you, I would forget to breathe. Thank you for inspiring me to always inquire.

“Always be arriving.” –Will Davis

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND NOMENCLATURE**

ASC: Autism Spectrum Condition

ASD: Autism Spectrum Disorder

DSM-5: American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition

SFP: Sensory Friendly Performance

SPD: Sensory Processing Disorder

TVY: Theatre for the Very Young

TYA: Theatre for Young Audiences

## INTRODUCTION

Great people do things before they are ready. They do things before they know they can do it. Doing what you're afraid of, getting out of your comfort zone taking risks like that—that's what life is. You might be really good. You might find out something about yourself that's really special and if you're not good, who cares? You tried something. Now you know something about yourself. —Amy Poehler, *Yes Please*

I have never been an overly cautious person. Careful? Sure. Thoughtful? Sometimes. Cautious? No. I have been known to make leaps without looking, and somehow land on my feet, albeit not in the direction I was intending. Sometimes leaping can get you bruises and sometimes it can teach you who you are.

This document is a reflection of two and a half years of my life. Each experience I have had since August 2012 has directly related to its inception. My goal while writing this is to express the deeper meaning of my efforts: to inspire in myself, and others, the desire to reach towards that brass ring of accessibility.

When I first started this journey, I did not have a personal connection with Autism. I had an idea of what it was, and I was fascinated by the efforts that were beginning to be put forth by a variety of artists. But it had not touched my life.

When I came to University of Central Florida in 2012, I did not consider myself an artist or an educator. I had a BFA in Musical Theatre and had worked as an actor for many years in

Washington, DC, but I never called myself an artist. I said I was in the arts. I came from a family of educators, but I had never had the opportunity to teach.

Now, years later, I am writing the story of how I learned to be an artist, how I learned to be an educator, how I learned to be an activist for young people with Autism and other cognitive disabilities.

This project had many lenses over time. At one point, I wanted to adapt a beautiful piece of theatre called *The Ogreling* into a multisensory experience for young people on the Spectrum. This piece, by Suzanne LeBeau, is about a young boy who is struggling with his realization that he is an Ogre. In my mind, it related to the perspective of a young person with Autism, trying to understand his own struggles with himself and with the world around him. I even created a short, multi-sensory adaptation of *The Ogreling* in Spring 2014. The struggle I had was taking a beautifully verbal script and manipulating it for an audience that may or may not connect with spoken words. I was unsure of my own abilities as a director and as an adaptor. I didn't feel like I had the knowledge. This, I reasoned with myself, might have to come later.

I dabbled with the idea of gathering a group of students of differing abilities and creating workshops with them where we would devise a story. Together we would develop a short theatrical piece about whatever these students wanted. It could have ended up being fifteen minutes about what it is like to feel different. It could have been an expression of what Autism feels like, looks like, is like to those who are experiencing it. It could have been about bunny rabbits, I don't know. But the fact is that, no matter who I talked to about it, teachers, parents, students, there was a wariness to their reaction. Sure, Ms. Sara, that sounds cool, but what would



we actually be doing? I needed to be more definitive. I needed to be surer of where I wanted to go.

With all of the ideas floating around my head, I felt a little lost. I didn't know how to communicate. I didn't know which direction to turn. That's when I got lucky enough to get a chance to work with Oily Cart Theatre and Rose Bruford College, in the week-long intensive *Dream: The Joy of Creating with Oily Cart*. During this week, artists, educators, and activists who were also yearning to create accessible experiences for this audience surrounded me. The experience challenged my perspectives and got me truly thinking about who I was as an artist. It made me think purposefully about who this audience was and how I could create and adapt to suit both them and myself. I realized that I didn't need to develop yet another project, create yet another experience; I was already doing things that were important to this work.

This manifesto, as I jokingly like to call it, is my journey of discovery. Through opportunities that I have taken, I have learned volumes about working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other cognitive disabilities. I have learned how to adapt already realized productions to suit this audience. I have taken classes that have grown my awareness of teaching methods for these students. I have observed and taught with educators who have the personal knowledge as well as the theoretical knowledge about this population. And, through the Dream intensive, I was given the opportunity to take what I had already learned and purposefully apply it to a creative process. I didn't need to create a project: the past two years had been one huge study on accessibility and inclusion.

All I can hope for is that my writing represents my own feelings, my own learning, and my own journey. I think of theatre as a way to make connections and to raise awareness. I think of accessibility and inclusion as a way to ensure that we are making theatre open to all who want to participate. Is it a direct path to acceptance? No, but as Petra Kuppers states in the preface to her book *Studying Disability Arts and Culture*, “We are moving, with curved strength” (Kuppers 1).

## **CHAPTER ONE: THEATRE FOR ALL AUDIENCES: THE POSSIBILITY FOR ACCESSIBILITY**

As a practitioner in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences, I consider myself an artist, an educator, and an activist.

As an artist, I make theatre for me; to fulfill a need inside me to imagine, create, and grow. As an educator, I make theatre as a gift for young people and their families; to give them imaginative experiences that inspire learning and create community. As an activist, I make theatre to build awareness; to examine the status quo, challenge perspectives, and provoke change.

I strive to make theatre meant for All Audiences.

But why? Why is it important to me, as a theatre maker, an educator, and an activist, to reach as many people as I can? I guess it's because I have learned how theatre can be a healing art. It can help us to understand each other by sharing communal experiences, creating collaborative moments of pure imagination, exploring the social constructs of our world. I want to share as many perspectives as there are people in this world. I want to participate in a Theatre for All Audiences.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem is that there is no such thing as Theatre for All Audiences. It is an ideal, a possibility, a wish. Creators of theatre want to reach as many people as they can, but personal perspectives, interests, economics, social standing, and so many other factors get in the way of

total engagement. So how do we, as theatre-makers make our work more available to different perspectives?

I became passionate about working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder over time. It was an audience that I was unfamiliar with until just a few years ago. The young people I get to work with constantly amaze me. Their perspectives are often quite different from mine, and I like that. With every student with Autism I meet and every experience I have, I am reminded of the beauty of individuality.

I think it is important at this point in this document to make a note about the language that I use surrounding the term Autism as a mode of disability. In the next chapter, I will discuss the specific term Autism Spectrum Disorder and how it is viewed both in the educational and social models. At the present, a focus on the term disability is needed. This is not an easy feat, as the definition of the word “disability” can have derogatory undertones. But perhaps that is because of the culture that we live in. How can we make the term less negative and more reflective of individual personalities?

The word disability itself can have negative social intimations, partially because the prefix dis- can mean “indicating negation, lack, or deprivation” (“Dis-“). If this is true, then the term disability literally means without ability. The World Health Organization puts forth this definition of disability:

Disability is an umbrella term, covering impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is a problem in body function or structure; an activity limitation is a difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task

or action; while a participation restriction is a problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations. Thus disability is a complex phenomenon, reflecting an interaction between features of a person's body and features of the society in which he or she lives ("Definitions of Disability").

As someone who has worked with, researched, and known several individuals with disabilities, this definition feels negative. Disability is not a problem to be solved but a different perspective and, therefore, a form of diversity. And if the complex phenomenon is a reflection of the interaction between an individual and society, is it possible that we, as a culture, need to adjust our own perspectives?

An idea that was posed to me was to think of disability not as meaning a lack of ability, but a different perspective of what ability can be. If you look at the Latin derivation of "dis-," it can mean "apart, in a different direction, between" ("Dis-"). A different direction of ability sounds entirely more positive than a lack of ability. Between ability sounds almost as if there is a perspective that is straddling the views of two worlds: the so-called "normal" world, and the "other."

I use this term because it is how I have been taught. Every book I read, whether written by scholars with a disability or without, used the word disability. The medical models that I researched, the educational journals that I read, and the social and political articles all used the term. Is this because we are used to it, or because it is a definition that lay beyond the possibility of words? Maybe instead of creating new monikers, such as exceptional, differently-abled, impaired, special, etc., the word can be reappropriated to mean what we want it to mean; maybe

it has the possibility to simply mean a different direction of perspective or a foot between two worlds. Language shifts depending on the culture in which it lives, so why not shift the culture to shift the meaning of the word?

The term accessible can also be difficult to define when speaking in terms of disability and theatre. Something that is accessible is “able to be reached or approached: able to be used or obtained: easy to appreciate or understand” (“Accessibility”). In other words, it is an entryway to understanding. In terms of disability, the word is often used to describe accommodations that are made to aid those with physical or cognitive disabilities. Within the theatre, I use the term accessibility to mean a way of creating opportunities of understanding for a variety of perspectives, regardless of race, creed, gender, age, or ability. Making something accessible is making it open enough to be within grasp for all people in order to create bolder, more significant art.

### Statement of the Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between artistry and accessibility. What tools do I have as a theatre artist that can directly apply to the creation of an environment that is accepting of all people, regardless of culture, class, race, gender, and ability? First, I will examine my own creative focus, as it gives the reader a view into how I think of the term accessibility.

My artistic focus has shifted to making theatre more accessible by creating a place where everyone is invited to play and to have extraordinary individual experiences. I strive to include more perspectives, more stories, more experiences, more people. In my work, I have centered on

the examination of disability as a form of diversity, and seek to create theatre with and for that population. Specifically, I seek to make theatre with and for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. In order to generalize, my scope has actually become narrower.

In the journey towards Theatre for All Audiences, how do we create theatre that is accessible for all audiences? How do we open our doors and make this art with everyone in mind?

### Methodologies

#### **Theoretical Methodologies**

In order to create an environment of accessibility in the theatre community, and specifically the community of Theatre for Young Audiences, my primary lens will be Inclusion Theory, or the idea that all young people, regardless of ability, race, gender, class, creed, etc. should have the opportunity to be integrated into generalized settings. To support the use of this theory within the creation of theatrical experiences, I will also explore the ideas of Intentional Design, Piaget's Developmental Play Theories, and Audience Participation as Engagement. I believe that these three notions will support the idea that theatre can be designed as a communal space, where any person can learn, grow, and experience.

#### *Inclusion Theory*

I looked at the two high school boys sitting across the table from me and sighed. I was conducting a quick interview with a few people for my class about Autism in Education. The interview was only one question: What is Autism? I was getting variety of answers from these two, none of which made a lot of sense to me. They uncomfortably chatted about it back and forth, questioning each other. Weren't those the kids in wheelchairs at our school? Or the ones

who yell out all the time? Not sure how much I wanted to get into political or diagnostic arguments with young people who I didn't know very well, I shifted our conversation to how well they knew some of the students that they were talking about. And it became pretty clear that they didn't know them at all, they weren't in the same classes. And I thought to myself, aha! These guys may not have been given the opportunity to learn about their fellow students. How do we change that?

My over-arching scope for this study is the theory and implementation of Inclusive Practices in theatrical settings. I like to think of being inclusive in terms of being "open to everyone: not limited to certain people" ("Inclusive"). My favorite way to state this is to say that everyone is invited to play.

As an educational theory, Inclusion is the idea of creating an environment where students of all abilities are incorporated into a generalized education setting (Fennell). According to Kids Included Together, an organization that specializes in this kind of training for teachers, parents, and the community, "Inclusion provides opportunities for socialization and friendships to develop. It provides a sense of belonging and appropriate modeling of social, behavioral, and academic skills. Including children with disabilities in general education classes models acceptance of diversity. It teaches children how to relate with others of different abilities" ("Inclusion in the Classroom"). Inclusion, in this view, allows for greater social and emotional connection for all of the students involved. It also can create a more collaborative environment for teachers and, in the case of this study, theatre makers and teaching artists.



As a theatrical theory, Inclusion can be used as a method to incorporate a variety of learning styles, developmental abilities, and perspectives into a sociodramatic experience. An example of this approach could be the implementation of a theatre workshop with students of varying abilities. In this scope, Inclusion can also be the creation of a theatrical experience specifically designed or adapted for students with disabilities, such as Sensory Friendly Performances. This model focuses on increasing awareness and enjoyment for this specific audience as well as creating awareness for the community about this particular population.

In the world of Theatre for Young Audiences, theatre companies often take their cue about inclusion from schools and from the community. Programming is structured around the needs and interests of the students and families in the area. By embracing this theory, theatre companies are saying to the community at large that they are rooted in the acceptance of diverse experiences. In addition, by adopting Inclusion companies are challenging their artists to look beyond their typical creative processes to suit the needs of their audience, often needing to adapt practices to enhance engagement.

In her article “Thoughts on Inclusive Arts: An International Approach,” Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) Artist and Disability Activist Talleri McRae, argues that, “inclusion is, ultimately a wildly and radically creative art” (McRae). By casting actors with disabilities, directors may need to adjust their usual creative methods to incorporate the different skill set of their actors. By gearing the performance towards an audience with disabilities, the production team needs to think about how the story can be told in different mediums. The possibilities are endless and challenge theatre makers to step out of their comfort zone to have the conversation

with the audience about what ability can be. The growth of artistry, accessibility, and awareness are all beneficial outcomes. In the words of Ms. McRae, “If artists and audiences alike were transformed by inclusive TYA...Who would be the next generation of artists and audiences? What barriers of today would be forever broken?” (McRae)

As a social theory, Inclusion can be used as a method to increase awareness of a particular form of diversity. It allows for people of different perspectives to share a space, a moment, a story. By creating situations of inclusion, it is possible to enhance the conversation about disability, what it means, what it can be, and what perspectives can be gained.

I believe that Inclusion Theory opens up the possibility of greater accessibility. My focus will be on how Inclusion techniques and practices used within theatrical settings enhance learning possibilities, community awareness, and my own artistry.

### *Intentional Design*

In order to support Inclusion Theory, either within an educational or a theatrical environment, the audience’s needs ought be examined. I wanted to find a method that focuses on both the audience’s perspectives and the possibilities for greater artistic creation.

Intentional Design was introduced to me when I read Bethany Lynn Corey’s Thesis, *The Many Forms of Theatre for the Very Young: A Look into the Development Process*. Corey uses the phrase as “a way to define a practice where the theatre-makers account for the developmental, social, and emotional needs of a very young audience” (Corey 46). This spectator-centered view of the creative process is intriguing because it makes the spectator and artist active partners. They are creating the experience together.

In order to adapt this definition to support my goal for Inclusion, I define Intentional Design as a process where theatre-makers account for the developmental, social, and emotional needs when creating experiences for people with cognitive and social disabilities and their caregivers. By adjusting this wording, I am taking ownership of the theory within my own practice of developing theatrical experience for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a variety of settings.

When implementing Intentional Design, important factors are the needs and interests of the audience members. This requires intensive research about perspectives of the individuals and their community. Throughout this study, I will demonstrate how various methods of theoretical and practical research regarding this specific population have aided in my creative and adaptive processes.

### *Play and Development*

In the development of my own process as a teaching artist and theatre maker, I have connected with the idea of play as a method of creating audience engagement and furthering creative development.

Within my lessons, I encourage play as a method of discovery, and then challenge students with my favorite question: “WHAT ELSE?” For example, in a Kinderdrama lesson that I created, we used our observational skills to discover items that were hidden in bags. Without looking, just by using their other senses, the students had to take a guess as to what lay inside. When the objects were revealed, the class and I took time to play: blowing feathers, tossing pompoms, smelling oranges. When we had determined what each item was and what it could do, I asked them “WHAT ELSE” the items could be. Feathers became money, pompoms became

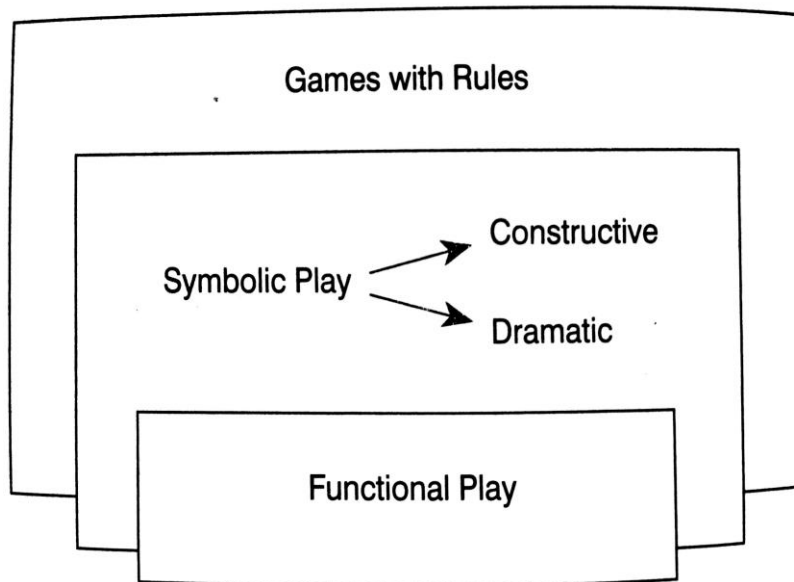
poisonous rain, and oranges became tiny planets with even tinier inhabitants. Play allows for ownership of discovery, solidifying the “what.” By then reflecting with the question of “what else,” I am challenging my students to think beyond what they know, to use their imaginations to create and to make connections.

Play can be characterized by one or more of these features: active engagement, natural self-motivation, attention to process rather than product, nonliteral behavior, and freedom from external rules (Van Hoorn et al. 5). Those aspects are intrinsically part of theatre. Play is used to break away from the rules of reality to create worlds, explore characters, and to find ways to solve logistical problems. In creative play, process, rather than product, is the emphasis.

Play is also a way to level the playing field in a world that is becoming increasingly more diverse. Play-centered educational programs are built around the strengths of the students, rather than the weaknesses, and invite all to participate with their own unique perspectives (Van Hoorn et al. 8). In this way, it is the perfect theory to support Inclusion, allowing those with all backgrounds and abilities to experience, learn, and grow together.

The primary lens that I am using in terms of play is Piaget’s Developmental Play Theories. Jean Piaget (1896-1980) was a constructivist educational theorist who believed that the development of knowledge is “a gradual process of restructuring earlier ways of knowing into more adequate and more generalized ways of knowing” (Van Hoorn et al. 28). In other words, when humans learn, we are constantly adapting our previous understandings to fit new experiences. Our perspectives fuel our learning.

In his writings, Piaget created a three-pronged, progressive structure for child development, based in play. The Stages of the Development of Play include Functional Play (or Practice), Symbolic Play, and Games with Rules (Van Hoorn et al. 32).



**Figure 1 Piaget's Stages of the Development of Play (Van Hoorn et al. 32)**

Functional play, the base level for this process, is a linking of understanding environment through kinesthetic, or active means (Van Hoorn et al. 33). An example would be using the senses to explore and observe an object to see what it is like and what it does. In theatre, an example of functional play would be exploring body and facial movements as a method of creating a character. In this process, an actor would practice moving in different ways to discover how each type of movement connects their body to their own emotional understanding.

Symbolic play, the next level, “involves the mental representation of pretend that one object stands for another in play or to take a make-believe role in play” (Van Hoorn et al. 33).

An example of this would be using a simple toy, such as a block, to represent a car or a phone. In other words, the mindset is not “What is this and what is it like?” but rather “What can it be?” This is where the imagination begins to emerge. Symbolic play can extend beyond the self and objects to create situations and environments, sometimes with complex themes (Van Hoorn et al. 33). In the theatre, we use symbolic play in almost everything that we do. To follow the prior example, this would be the actor now applying the kinesthetic and emotional connections in order to step into role as a character.

The third level of Piaget’s theory is the creation of Games with Rules, which is where social constructs begin to affect play. There is an external set of agreed upon rules that governs play (Van Hoorn et al. 34). An example of this would be a metacommunication between children playing house, deciding who is playing what role. In the theatre, an example would be the character that was created by the actor may live and move in their environment but must never step out of their world by breaking the fourth wall.

In my mind, Piaget’s Developmental Play Theories coincide directly with the practice of theatre and the theory of Inclusion and are the perfect lens to apply to this study. Play is a natural part of development and, therefore, applies to all students; it can be a connector, a portal into the world of imagination. By focusing on theories of play in my work with students with cognitive disabilities, I am acclimating myself with their individual learning methods and personal interests.

#### *Participation as Engagement*

As I finished up a short workshop with a group of students with cognitive disabilities, I was feeling stumped. I used every tool in my kit, from Teacher in Role to Soundscape, from Call

and Response to Sensory Exploration. It felt as though the students were not connecting to the information that I was serving. I wasn't sure what tactics to use. Their teacher had another point of view. She was excited with how engaged each student had been at different moments of our lesson. When I put on my performer hat and asked the students to create and implement movements based on the book that we were exploring, there were moments for each student that they participated and helped to tell the story. They became creators of the experience, rather than simply spectators.

How does the level of audience involvement change the way the audience perceives an experience? If they are simply spectators, are they able to engage in the stories and messages in the same way they would if they were active participants in the exploit? I will explore the idea of engagement and how different levels of interaction with students can further their connection and ownership over materials.

As Moses Goldberg stated in his book *TYA Essays on the Theatre for Young Audiences*, "The artists stimulate, but cannot control the audience's mental processes" (71). It is not possible for theatre-artists, either during the creative process or during a performance or facilitation, to know the immediate perspective of every individual. A child who is sitting with an audience of classmates may get a different meaning from a performance than one who is sitting with family. A spectator who has an aversion to loud noises may need to cover their ears, losing focus of the story being told. An audience member sitting in front of someone who is talking loudly will not have the same pleasant experience as the person surrounded by attentive onlookers.

The audience is not a backdrop of faces or a wall to be ignored, but a gathering of individual minds with individual needs, beliefs, and emotions. Part of the beauty of live theatre is the audience, but the audience will not always view the production in the same way as the artist. We can see reactions and gauge responses, but we cannot climb into the mind and force our intentions. I think one way to better understand this problem is to examine how levels of participation define the role of the audience in the creative process.

The purposeful use of interaction in Theatre for Young Audiences can greatly further the story, solidify the artistic intention, and enhance didactic moments. When using Intentional Design, the audience is the focus of the design. By examining specific methods of interaction and relating them to our specific audience, we are ensuring greater levels of engagement. In this study, I will examine the use of audience participation as a means for engagement, using an adapted spectrum of audience engagement.





**Figure 2 Spectrum of Audience Engagement (Corey 67)**

The first level of audience participation is that of Viewer, or Spectator. This is a role that is common in traditional, non-participatory theatre styles. In this role, the audience is receiving a finished artistic product, digesting its meaning and creating their own perceptions from their experience. It was the belief of theorists Augusto Boal and Bertolt Brecht that spectating is passive and is therefore an inferior method of audience engagement (Nicholson, 201). However, simply viewing can be considered a method of interpreting information, as Michael Rohd's puts it, a "leaning forward and engaging in participation by interpreting your own experience" (qtd. in Lord 41). Viewers are not directly part of the creative process, but their interpretations and reactions are still part of the collective creation. I will be examining this level of interaction when diving into Sensory Friendly Performances in Chapters Three and Four.

Prescriptive Engagement is the next level, and is when the audience is asked to participate in a guided activity in a theatrical setting (either classroom or onstage). An example of this is the use of call and response, asking the audience to contribute through repetition of words, song, or movement while still playing the role of spectator. This is a common tactic in Theatre for Young Audiences. Plays like Richard Scarry's *Busytown* and Larry Snipe's *Jack and the Wonder Beans* have moments of actor-to-audience interaction where the audience is asked to repeat a phrase or pretend to be an animal from their seat. This method of engagement asks the audience to pay attention and participate but it does not affect the ongoing story or environment. The audience does not drive the story, but they have been acknowledged.

Interactive Moments are the next step in employing engagement tools. Interactive Moments activate the autonomy of audience members by asking them to choose or contribute toward the product. In this stage, the artist provokes audience perspective through questioning. These events last for only a moment, acknowledging the audience, noting their perspective, and then continuing on. In their 2010 model of the Audience Involvement Spectrum, Alan Brown and Novak-Leonard refer to this step as "Crowd Sourcing" (qtd. in Lord 41). A game I love to play with my students is the "Cha Cha." It is a repetitive song and dance that gets them to experiment with their bodies and voices in a structured way. As we play this game, I always ask them what kind of character we should embody to do the dance. Always, I am greeted with cries of, "A Cat! A Dog! A piece of spaghetti! An octopus!" We then try-on these characters as we sing and dance. Afterwards, we reflect on how our voices and bodies changed. We didn't actually change the song or dance but we voiced our own opinions and interests.

Exploration and Open Engagement allows for participants to contribute to the artistic endeavor while being guided. This method of participation is a form of guided play, where the audience is given a framework in which they can create. Audience members can impact the experience but within the constructed boundaries of the artist.

I will be relating these three models of participation (Prescriptive Engagement, Interactive Moments, and Exploration and Open Engagement) to the creation and adaptation of Inclusive Arts Integration Residencies, in Chapters Five and Six of this document.

Finally, the last stage in the Spectrum of Audience Engagement is that of Co-Creator. In this model, the story or experience could not happen without the audience. When acting as Co-Creator, they are fully engaging and collaborating with the artists, and bringing their own perspectives, needs, interpretations into the process. I will examine the idea of Audience as Co-Creator in Chapter 5, Multi-Sensory Theatre and the Artist as Co-Creator.

Each of the practical methodologies that I will implement investigates a different level of participation, ranging from the audience as viewer/passive spectator to the audience as a co-creator. By examining the role of the audience in a variety of situations, I, as an artist, can further understand how to fill the needs of the individuals for and with whom I'm creating.

### **Practical Methodologies**

The three practical methodologies that I will examine throughout this document are Sensory Friendly Performances, Inclusive Arts Integration Residencies, and Multi-Sensory Theatrical Experiences. These three examples are common experiences that theatre companies, teaching artists, and theatre-makers are developing in the effort to connect with young people

with cognitive and social disabilities. My intent is to explore my involvement in each process through chosen theoretical lenses, in the hopes of discovering how I as an artist can further accessibility practices in theatre.

### *Sensory Friendly Performances*

Sensory Friendly Performances are a new movement within the past six years, developing out of a need to connect with an ever-growing audience. The phrase “sensory friendly” is a common term for events that specialize in creating a welcoming and engaging experience for young people with sensory sensitivities and their families (Ideishi et al. 2). In current theatrical practices, a Sensory Friendly Performance is an event where an already existing production is adapted to better suit the needs of a specialized audience. This is done by making environmental accommodations and technical adjustments. For this process, I will refer to myself as an Artistic Adaptor, because I am making purposeful modifications to a production and the environment, while still keeping in mind the artistic intent. Further information regarding this performance style will be laid out in Chapter Three: Sensory Friendly Performances and the Artist as Adaptor. My role in this process and its development at Orlando Repertory Theatre will be discussed in Chapter Four: The Process of Adapting for Sensory Friendly Performance.

### *Inclusive Arts Integration Residencies*

Arts Integration is “an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through as art form. Students engage in the creative process, which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both” (Silverstein and Layne 1). As a teaching artist, I have been trained to develop Arts Integration lessons that equally explore my art (theatre) and a core subject (language arts, science, math, history). The goal is to use both

the art and core competency to deepen the students' understanding of both subjects. Often, I am asked to implement this type of workshop in a school classroom setting, usually over a period of 3-5 sessions. These situations are called residencies, as I am in the classroom for an extended period of time.

In relation to the creation of accessible practices in both educational and theatrical settings, there are circumstances when I am working with students in an inclusive setting. When that occurs, there is a need for me to examine my audience and adapt the lessons in order to make them more accessible. Further information regarding Inclusive Arts Integration Residencies will be laid out in Chapter Five: Arts Integration and the Artist as Creator/Adaptor. My process in creating and adapting these residencies for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder and other cognitive disabilities is laid out in Chapter Six: The Process of Creating and Adapting a Lesson.

#### *Multi-Sensory Theatre for Students with Complex Disabilities*

Multi-Sensory Theatre is a brand of immersive theatre, where the audience is invited to explore, invent, and adapt the theatrical experience primarily with the aid of sensory diversions. Artists have used the knowledge of their audience to develop a world in which both performers and audience members will collaboratively create. The goal of this type of experience is to further creativity, deepen social and communication possibilities, and to learn from each other's perspectives. Further information regarding this performance style, and its inception will be laid out in Chapter Seven: Multi-Sensory Theatre and the Artist as Co-Creator. My process in the creation, adaptation, and reflection of Multi-Sensory Theatre will be discussed in Chapter Eight: Dream: The Joy of Creating with Oily Cart.

### Organization

I purposefully organized this thesis to follow my timeline of discovery. I first began with a question, did extensive research, asked myself more questions, and then began to practice. My first opportunity was to help adapt productions for the Sensory Friendly Performances at Orlando Repertory Theatre. Those experiences had me questioning how to bring what I had learned into the classroom with Inclusive Arts Integration Residencies. Finally, I realized that I wanted to extend my theoretical and practical knowledge to create multi-sensory, interactive theatre for students on the Autism Spectrum. Each chapter is another piece in the puzzle. Each piece in the puzzle brings me more questions. Each question helps me to close in on my first question: How do we create theatrical experiences that are accessible for this audience? It is a puzzle that may never be completed, but it is a puzzle that I cannot help but continue to build.

### Limitations as Possibilities

This study is designed to examine the practice of theatre with students with cognitive disabilities, specifically Autism Spectrum Disorder. It must be said, however, that my perspective is that of a theatre maker and teaching artist, not a neurologist or special education expert. I am not a diagnostician, nor am I privy to specific conditions or perspectives of the students with whom I am working. That being said, I have learned a lot from my research and observation. My hope is that my theoretical knowledge will feed my practice, allowing me to continue to grow as an artist, educator, and activist.

It is important to note that the three Practical Methodologies employed in this study are processes that are in flux. There is no one prescribed way to modify Sensory Friendly

Performances, no defined method of adaptation for Inclusive Arts Integration lessons, no correct method of creating multi-sensory theatre for a specialized audience. The experiences that will be examined are my own, as I wade through the possibilities of what this type of work can be. My hope is that my own quest for accessibility will inspire others to explore their own approaches, therefore spreading the movement towards accessibility.

## **CHAPTER TWO: UNDERSTANDING OUR AUDIENCE: AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AND SENSORY PROCESSING**

In order to develop theatre experiences and practices for a specific audience, it is necessary to learn more about the audience themselves. This chapter is an attempt at using my neurotypical point of view to understand a condition, a system of educational practices, and a community in order to create art that connects with and spreads awareness about the population. For this purpose, I have sifted through medical books, read extensive journal articles on the efficacy of educational interventions, and fallen down the rabbit-hole of language, best practices, and etiological controversies. And where did I end up? With more questions than I began.

I can't help but think that giving a definition to something like cognitive ability is just too big for me: a theatre maker and teaching artist. I am not a neurologist, nor do I have a personal connection with ASD itself. My view has come from extensive theoretical and practical research and, therefore, I must state that whatever definition, explanation, and approach that follows is much larger than I have the ability to fully convey. Personally, I have learned from each child I have met and I appreciate the struggles of each family, each teacher, and each person associated with this condition. Let this chapter, and all subsequent chapters, be a celebration of awareness and a quest for further knowledge.

Throughout this chapter, I will be employing quotations from the book *The Reason I Jump* by Naoki Higashida. My choice to include these quotes is thus: I can throw all of the statistics, research, graphs, and charts in the world into my writing, and what would be missing would be the human element. Naoki Higashida wrote a collection of his experiences in 2007,



when he was just thirteen years old, on that delicate line between childhood and adulthood. *The Reason I Jump* is his message to the world about how ASD has affected his life. It is written in a straightforward, sometimes comical, intensely emotional way. Translated from the original Japanese in 2013, this book gives power to the individual story of Autism Spectrum Disorder, rather than to the scientific statistics of the diagnosis.

You can't judge a person by their looks. But once you know the other person's inner self, both of you can be that much closer. From your point of view, the world of autism must look like a deeply mysterious place. So please, spare a little time to listen to what I have to say. And have a nice trip through our world.

(Higashida 16)

### The Language of Autism Spectrum Disorder

It was common in the classrooms of my childhood to hear the phrase, "That's retarded." My generation, especially, still uses the phrase to describe something that is utterly ridiculous or stupid. What was never really explained to most of us growing up in the 90s, is that the word "retarded" was, at the time, a word used to describe people of a certain ability.

Intention of language is something that I strive to teach my students. I try, as a human being, to understand that the words we use are not always meant to be harmful, but having a lack of knowledge of what they mean can make them offensive. It is an idea with which I constantly struggle, and can only hope that my intentions come out clearer than my own muddled words. This next section is my journey through the language that surrounds disability and ability, specifically Autism Spectrum Disorder.

Words are powerful. How we name and describe elements of our world can adjust other's opinions, and the language surrounding disability is an especially sensitive topic. A lack of public awareness, the colloquialization of medical descriptors as derogatory terms, and inaccurate labels of diagnoses "perpetuate negative stereotypes and reinforce a significant and incredibly powerful attitudinal barrier" (Snow 1). It is important to be aware of the words that are used when discussing physical and developmental ability. That being said, there are several opinions as to what vocabulary should be employed, and there is no scripted right or wrong choice.

I will be employing the use of "person first language," which is a model that is used by educators and administrators when discussing ability. In this model, rather than saying that a person is Autistic, the person first language example would be "person with Autism Spectrum Disorder." This places the spotlight on who each person is, rather than what they have been diagnosed with (Grady 146). On the flip side of the "person first" model, a movement exists towards the use of "Autistic" as a label for those who identify as being on the spectrum ("What is Neurodiversity?"). The belief is that autism significantly influences who individuals are as human beings. Because of differing opinions regarding labels, best practice is always to ask the individual or their support system what the personally preferred term is.

In certain communities, a shifting trend towards the term Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), rather than Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), has been growing. When looking at the definitions of the two words, disorder and condition, there is no surprise why the Autism community especially would want to encourage this development. As defined by Merriam

Webster, a disorder is “to disturb the order of something” (“Disorder”). In medical terms, the dictionary denotes it as “a physical or mental condition that is not normal or healthy.” This particular interpretation of language does not feel positive, nor does it feel intentionally hostile. On the other side, the definition of condition is “a way of living or existing.” By adjusting the vocabulary to Autism Spectrum Condition, the interpretation opens up the possibility that those who are on the Autism Spectrum are living with cognitive qualities that are not negative, but are different. This is more of a social model of the language of Autism, and it is now the term I prefer to use in my everyday life. However, because the scientific and educational communities in the United States use the term Autism Spectrum Disorder I will continue to do so in this paper.

What is normal? In Sharon Grady’s 2000 book, *Drama and Diversity: A Pluralistic Perspective for Educational Drama*, the author reminds the reader that the term “normal” can be difficult or even offensive. By using that phraseology, the implication is that people with disabilities are somehow abnormal (Grady 147). In its stead, the term “neurotypical” has become the accepted terminology for individuals who are not categorized as having a cognitive condition or disorder. This term was coined by the Autistic community, and has been adopted by both the Autism community and the scientific community alike.

Everyone is on a journey. This statement by Diane Nutting, Director of Access and Inclusion at Imagination Stage in our March 2014 interview, is a wonderful guide when discussing ability. Every person joining the conversation surrounding disability and ability has had their own experiences that influence the language that they use. The notion of personal journey is a reminder to concentrate on the intention of language, rather than the words

themselves. The focus is the conversation, and that through discussion, debate, and compromise, awareness can be enhanced.

To give the short version, I've learned that every human being, with or without disabilities, needs to strive to do their best, and by striving for happiness, you will arrive at happiness. For us, you see, having autism is normal—so we can't know for sure what your "normal" is even like. But so long as we can learn to love ourselves, I'm not sure how much it matters whether we're normal or autistic.

(Higashida 71)

### What is Autism Spectrum Disorder?

The definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is ever changing; the identified tendencies and needs differ with each individual. In the past three decades, extensive increases in research and popular press have brought more information to light (Simpson, Myles, and LaCava 20), but there is so much that is not understood, by scientists, educators, artists, or really anyone that is not living in this world. The term Autism Spectrum Disorder is an intentionally broad phrase, intended to capture the similarities in a wide-array of disabilities that share social, behavioral, communication, and imaginative impairments (Simpson, Myles, and LaCava 4). The breadth of the term, and of the diagnosis, is a reminder of the importance of individuality.

Research today shows that ASD can have many different etiologies and should be looked on as a series of manifestations, or a spectrum, that includes communication difficulties, social impairments, focus on ritual, and aversion to environmental adjustments (Simpson and Miles). No individual on the spectrum will have exactly the same tendencies as another individual. P.

Kluth wrote in a 2003 article, “If you know one person with autism, you know ONE person with autism” (qtd. in Simpson, Myles, and LaCava 4). I find this reminder to be important when working with students in a classroom setting, especially. One activity or one tool may work very well with one student, but may not connect with another, and so I must remain pliable and ever ready to adapt.

That being said, there are agreed upon patterns and tendencies that have lead to a basic, seemingly liquid definition of ASD as a whole. The American Psychiatric Association’s Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders frames Autism Spectrum Disorder as a single disorder that pertains to individuals who display communication deficits, attachment to routine, sensitivity to changes in environment, and intense focus on inappropriate items (American Psychiatric Association). These tendencies are ordered upon a continuum, which “allow(s) clinicians to account for the variations in symptoms and behaviors from person to person” (American Psychiatric Association).

The numerical statics detailing the prevalence of ASD in the United States are also somewhat malleable. Official numbers have been adjusted significantly in the past ten to fifteen years, but there are still discrepancies depending on the resource. The ratio of students diagnosed with ASD has risen from 1 in 150 students in 2000 to 1 in 88 students in 2010 (“Autism Spectrum Disorder: Data and Statistics”), to 1 in 68 young people (Baio). There are some statistics that claim that the ratio has grown recently to 1 in 50 children born in the United States have ASD (“Did you know...?”). Autism is considered by the Center for Disease Control to be

the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States, growing 119.4% in ten years (Baio).

I have found through my research that there are a lot of possible factors contributing to this quickly rising number. It is possible that greater awareness of ASD in the population, improvements in diagnostics, and adjustments within the DSM 5 that have changed the interpretation of several of the conditions that are included under the umbrella of Autism could all be contributing factors.

The cause of ASD has not yet been determined, but like the language associated with ASD, there are many differing opinions. As someone with an outside view of this difficult disorder, the desire for pinpointing a cause, for finding blame, for discovering why is completely understandable. As an educator, I am often asked what I believe to be the cause of ASD, and I always say the same thing, “I don’t know.” In my opinion, my purpose as an artist who works with a specialized audience is not to suppose why, but to focus directly upon the individual and to spread awareness of the disorder itself. When asked directly what I believe the causes to be, I simply state, “I don’t know.”

As a teaching artist and theatre maker for young children, my recognition of and adaptation for the shifting audience is my main concentration. Although, it seems like the more knowledge I gain the more tendencies I see springing up in the classroom and in the audience, I am not a diagnostician. It is not my place to label, but instead to find a window of connection between theatre and my audience’s perceptions of the world. Are there more young people with ASD than there were five, ten, twenty years ago? I don’t know. I do know that, if the arts

enhance human connection, then I will use every device I have to create connection and enhance relationships.

### The Science of Sensory and Autism Spectrum Disorder

There are certain noises you don't notice but that really get to us. The problem here is that you don't understand how these noises affect us. It's not quite that the noises grate on our nerves. It's more to do with a fear that if we keep listening, we'll lose all sense of where we are. At times like these, it feels as if the ground is shaking and the landscape around us starts coming in to get us, and it's absolutely terrifying. So cupping our ears is a measure we take to protect ourselves and get back our grip on where we are (Higashida 80).

At a very young age, students are taught about the five senses and how they help humans interpret the world. Experimentation with sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell in the classroom and in play is an important part of the developmental process. The nervous system uses sensory input to help our brains create maps of the world and guides our bodies how to live within that world. The function of sensory processing is to supply our brains with information that is helpful in our everyday lives. But, if intersensory integration, or the method that our brain uses to organize that sensory information, is out of balance, that leads to sensory processing disorders. Often, in students with ASD, this could be demonstrated as an insistent desire to experience certain preferred stimuli, avoid other sensations, and sometimes to not notice other sensory cues altogether (Dunn 1).

Neurotypical people can have sensory processing issues as well. All humans respond to sensory stimulation in different ways, and what we are sensitive to is as diverse as our own individual personalities and perceptions. Personally, I have a low threshold for auditory stimulation and a high threshold for somatosensory stimulation, which makes me averse to loud noises and seek physical experiences. Each individual's central nervous system reacts to the environment in unique ways, using processes such as modulations and motivations.

The world surrounds each of us with sensory stimuli constantly, and, through a balance of excitation and inhibition, the brain determines which factors to pay attention to and which to safely ignore (Dunn 3). This process is called "modulation." Sometimes, students with ASD have impairments or imbalances in their modulation, which may cause distracted behaviors. Beyond this, the central nervous system must meet internal needs, and does so through a system of what neuroscientists call "motivations." These motivations usually are summoned when there is a change in homeostasis, or the typical or familiar state of the body or environment (Dunn 4). The central nervous system wants to return to homeostasis because it is a calm and safe state; however, learning occurs when the body is pushed out of its comfort zone. In other words, our central nervous system sees a need to find practices that will help our bodies adjust to new and unusual environments. In young people with ASD, motivations can be seen as physical calming techniques, such as stimming behaviors and echolalia (the repetition of phrases or words (Carpenter 3)) to calm the body back into a comfortable state (Dunn 4). During these practices, the desire to be in a comfortable sensory state is the primary directive and everything else is



ignored until homeostasis is achieved. These behaviors can be considered self-regulating mechanisms.

The threshold for sensory input is determined by cognitive and emotional learning, genetics, exposure to sensory stimulation, and personal experiences (Dunn 5). To have a low threshold for some sensory stimulation can cause intensive response, while a high threshold means that it is possible that even a great deal of that particular sensory input may not invoke response. For example, a student that has a low threshold for auditory stimulation (a commonly seen issue with students with ASD) may feel the need to cover their ears in order to return to the calming state of homeostasis. On the other hand, a student with a high threshold for auditory stimuli may not notice when someone is saying their name.

Winnie Dunn's 1997 approach to sensory processing marries the theories of neurological threshold and self-regulating mechanisms (Dunn 6) to come up with four possible categories of sensory-processing: Low Registration, Sensory Sensitivity, Sensation Seeking, and Sensation Avoiding. The figure below represents my interpretation of Dunn's synthesis of Sensory Processing in Students with ASD.

**Table 1 Dunn’s Categories of Sensory Processing in students with ASD**

	Neurological Threshold	Self-regulation	Tendencies	Suggested Facilitation
Low Registration	High	Low	Seem withdrawn, disengaged, or even self-absorbed.	Enhance and diversify stimuli to engage.  Intensify tasks and contextual features to reach a higher threshold
Sensory Sensitivity	Low	Low	Hyperactive and distractible.  Easily upset by sensory stimuli.	Flexibly and systematically incorporate stimuli that will develop organizational stimulus, rather than arousal.
Sensation Seeking	High	High	Add movement, touch, sound, and visual stimuli to every life event.  Might lack caution in play, increase sensory input, and engage in impulsive behavior.	Discover preferences and incorporate them into routines.
Sensation Avoiding	Low	High	Actively work to reduce input: ex. not participating in unknown activities  Focus on ritual	Slow and methodical expansion of ritual, with a blending of new and familiar stimuli.

For the purposes of theatrical practices when it comes to sensory stimulation, the trends of both Sensory Friendly Theatre and Multi-Sensory Theatre align with two of the four Sensory Processing models synthesized by Dunn. Students with “Sensory Sensitivity” and “Sensation Avoiding” would thrive best in a theatrical arena that focuses on a Sensory Friendly approach; the theatrical environment is adapted to suit those who may have an aversion to bright lights and loud sounds. “Sensation Seeking” and “Low Registration” students would be more attracted to

sensory-based theatre, which immerses the audiences into the experience with variances in somatosensory, olfactory, auditory, and gustatory play.

### Reflection

So how do people with autism see the world, exactly? We, and only we, can ever know the answer to that one! Sometimes I actually pity you for not being able to see the beauty of the world in the same way we do. Really, our vision of the world can be incredible, just incredible. (Higashida 90)

All of the information stated in this chapter is the basis for development in my own artistic process. In order to have the awareness for whom and with whom I am creating, I must first be aware of the tendencies, preferences, and language of my audience. If I know that I am adapting a Sensory Friendly Performance, it is imperative to recognize the sensory processing issues of students on the spectrum (Chapters Three and Four). To create an arts integration session in an inclusive classroom, I must be aware of the tendencies of the students, and tailor my interventions and aids accordingly (Chapters Six and Seven). To create a theatrical experience for an audience that includes young people with cognitive disabilities and their support system, I must be aware of the words I use, the needs of each individual, and be prepared to adapt accordingly (Chapters Seven and Eight). By focusing on research and knowledge gained from practical experience, I will be better able to adapt and adjust my artistic process in order to better align with the needs of my audience.

The following chapters are an outline of the theory and practice of three specific theatrical experiences for young people that I have had the opportunity to adapt and create over

the past two years. My hope is that, by relating my theoretical research to the processes in which I have participated, I will be able to gain further understanding of how to continue to make theatre more accessible for young people with cognitive disabilities, specifically Autism Spectrum Disorder.

### **CHAPTER THREE: SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCE AND ARTIST AS ADAPTOR**

It was January of 2009. The actors were gathered in our tiny dressing room, both lamenting and rejoicing the advent of our final showing of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* at Adventure Theatre. Clad in a mixture of brown velour tracksuits and Christmas sweaters, we had been through a long and eventful run of the show and were ready to share these final moments together. The stage manager entered the room and reminded us that today's performance would be a bit different. Today would be a Sensory Friendly Performance.

But what did that mean? It had been explained to us that some technical accommodations had been made: the house lights would stay up, we would not have snow, some of the sound cues had been adjusted to make it a more comfortable environment for students with Autism and with sensory processing issues. As actors, we needed to be more mindful of our audience and may need to adjust our performance: minimizing eye contact with patrons, measuring the loudness of our voices, and being aware that the audience might move around and make more noise than we were used to. I was intrigued, but also unsure of what to expect.

Fast forward to three years later, in a warmer state, in a different theater. I stood in the lobby, awaiting the end of our second Sensory Friendly Performance at Orlando Repertory Theatre: *Ivy and Bean, The Musical*. This time around, I was not working as an actor but as part of the Sensory Friendly Team who had made adaptations to our production. One of my collaborators came up to me and asked if I had seen what had happened at the end of one of the musical numbers. A young man stood up and repeated the last word of the song. Why did this

matter? Because, according to his mother, he rarely spoke. This young man with Autism Spectrum Disorder was normally nonverbal but today he spoke. Whether it was from excitement, the repetition of the words, or some other unknown source he stepped out of his comfort zone and said the word, “Sports!”

I create theatre because it fills a need in me to express myself and connect with others. Sometimes, however, it is possible to fill this need by adapting art for a specific audience. My Sensory Friendly experiences contain some of my most vivid memories of theatre as a healing and expressive art form.

### What is Sensory Friendly Performance?

As stated in Chapter One, Sensory Friendly Performances (SFP) are a purposeful adaptation of an already running production. These special events “are designed to create a performing arts experience that is welcoming to all families with children with autism or with other disabilities that create sensory sensitivities” (“Sensory Friendly Performances”). A team of collaborators works to determine what, if any, modifications need to be made to the performance in order to make it more accessible for this specific audience.

As stated in Chapter Two, often students with ASD have sensory sensitivity or sensory avoiding behaviors. A loud noise, a high pitch, or even something surprising will cause a reaction of discomfort, like hands going over ears or eyes. ASD has also been linked to epilepsy and other seizure disorders, which can be triggered by overstimulation (Simpson, Miles, LaCava 24). By making accommodations to sensory elements of theatre, SFPs are making the experience more accessible for students with ASD.

The accommodations made for these performances focus on the adjustment of the space and of the performance. These considerations often include, but are not limited to: offering comforting and quiet spaces, allowing for movement of the audience during the show, limiting the number of audience members, lowering sound levels, adjusting lighting, and providing staff that can help to accommodate the audience and families' needs (Bobbitt et al.).

### **Sensory Friendly as Inclusion**

Sensory Friendly Performances are opportunities for theatre companies to connect with a growing community. By offering this kind of programming, an invitation is being extended to young people with ASD and their families to join in the fun of experiencing theatre in a more comfortable and welcoming environment. Generally, companies schedule only one or two of these specialized performances, which means that there is a need for massive community engagement efforts to be made to get the word out. But are these performances truly inclusive, or are they just a first step in that direction?

It's important to remember that Sensory Friendly Performances are made with a specific audience in mind. There is awareness, not of individual personalities, but of general needs of a population. Adaptations are made to connect with a blanket idea of what we, as adaptors, think will work best for everyone. This can be problematic, because, as stated before, Autism Spectrum Disorder has a wide range of manifestations. Each individual has different issues and interpretations of the world. Are these performances as effective in reaching this population, as we would hope? Is there more that we can do?

As I discussed in Chapter One, Inclusion Theory is about inviting all to play together. Sensory Friendly Performances invite particular members of the community to experience

theatre, but they may not connect with all points of views. My question is: are Sensory Friendly Performances truly inclusive practices, or are they a first step in that direction? Anyone can play, but will they want to?

### **Engagement**

Sensory Friendly Performances are a great way to introduce young people on the Spectrum to theatre in a non-threatening way. As a form of passive spectatorship, these performances allow the audience members to collect their own perspectives of the production without creating the possible anxiety of one-on-one interaction. Students with sensory sensitivity or sensation avoiding tendencies are given the opportunity to be “at work, interpreting, engaging, and constructing what is going on in front of them” (Nicholson 204). Going to the theatre is, itself, a sensory exploration, introducing new aromas, textures, aesthetic qualities, etc. which allows the audience to construct a narrative of the experience, if not the production itself. Although the audience may not be involved in the happenings onstage, each individual spectator is still creating the memory of going to the theatre. In that way they are passive spectators of the production, and yet are still co-creators of their own experience.

### **Intentional Adaptation for Sensory Friendly Performances**

The process surrounding Sensory Friendly Performances varies from theatre to theatre, but the intention is the same: the focus is on the audience’s needs. In this way, these performances use Intentional Design to further the experience of the audience. However, because this theory is put into effect after the initial creation of the production (as an adaptation), two factors need to be addressed: an adherence to the original artistic intention, and a purposeful adaptation that will both serve the audience and the production.



Adaptation is the process of changing to fit some purpose or situation (“Adaptation”). For the purposes of the study of Sensory Friendly Performances, I will refer to myself as an Artistic Adaptor.

The Artistic Adaptor must look at every aspect of the space and assess what should be changed to suit the audience; then the performance must be examined in order to adapt it to suit a specific audience while still maintaining the original artistic intent. SFPs have a two-step process: the pre-show considerations and the performance considerations. The pre-show considerations help to create a welcoming and comfortable environment for our patrons. The performance considerations are aspects of the show that adaptors look at when trying to decide what, if anything, needs to be adjusted to suit the needs of our audience. The adaptations to both pre-show and performance considerations can be boiled down to four different categories: research, observation, clear expectations, and sensory considerations.

The following chapter is a reflection of my own exploration of the process as artistic adaptor for Sensory Friendly Performances. I have participated as an actor, an assistant director, a technical adaptor, a creator of pre-show materials, a lobby designer, a house manager, and a community liaison. Whether working on the administrative side or the artistic side, I can safely say that these events have shaped me as a theatre maker, educator, and human being.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: SENSORY FRIENDLY PERFORMANCES AT ORLANDO REPERTORY THEATRE**

Orlando Repertory Theatre held their first Sensory Friendly Performance in 2013: *Dr. Seuss's The Cat in the Hat*. Months earlier, the Artistic Director of The Rep, Jeff Revels, created a team that would develop our process of adapting performances. Our goal was to make accommodations that would reflect the needs of individuals with ASD and Sensory Processing issues, the community, and the theatre. The team was comprised of Jeff, Carrie Kasten Smith (Assistant Production Manager and Intern Coordinator), Brian Diaz (Company Manager), and myself (UCF Graduate Associate and Teaching Artist).

I petitioned to be part of the team; the experience at Adventure Theatre left me hungry for more. I researched the population; I read about others' processes; I had experienced what it was like to be an actor on that stage, performing for those kids. I practically begged Jeff to let me join.

Everyone on our team comes from different theatrical perspectives and different personal perspectives; because of our various views, we bring unique qualities to the collaborative artistic adaptive process. We have to regard this process as we would any collaborative event, recognizing that we will not always agree, but we must find a way to communicate and compromise. Together, we have researched, reached out to the community, and developed and adapted a process that has resulted in six Sensory Friendly Performances over the course of two years.

My role in this journey has been as a theorist, an adaptor, an educator, and an artist. I am a valued contributor to this process, but there are certain decisions and goals that are not within my job description. Because of this, I will focus mainly on my own participation and experiences, and the artistry of adaptation for accessibility.

### The Process

#### **Pre-Show Considerations and Accommodations**

##### *Research: Knowing the Audience and Community*

Primarily, the question that an artistic adapter must ask is who are we making accommodations for? Just as in intentional design practices, having an understanding of the audience is integral to planning our process. Sensory Friendly Performances are generally intended for people with Autism Spectrum Disorder and with Sensory Processing Disorders. This means that adaptors need to stay mindful of the perspectives of these individuals, and how they will react to elements of the space. Unlike other practices working with this population, SFPs do not give the luxury of getting to know each individual who will join us; instead we have to have a general knowledge of behaviors, needs, interests, routine, etc. There needs to be flexibility to our adaptations and realistic expectations must prevail.

An important perspective to take into account is that of the surrounding community. There are so many organizations that focus on helping young people with ASD and their families. These range from groups that focus on family specifically and are often run by parents, siblings, and teachers of students on the spectrum, to research-based organizations that focus on finding interventions and support for individuals. Connecting with these groups helps to spread

awareness of the events, and puts the theatre on the map as an organization that focuses on inclusion and community.

Partnering with an organization to help in the adaptation process just makes sense. Having someone who has an outside perspective of theatre but also has a great deal of knowledge of the audience and the community can unearth aspects that would never have otherwise been entertained.

The political aspects of a community partner are something to keep in mind. Many organizations have opinions that may be controversial. Beliefs about the cause of autism, whether or not there is a cure, and the language that should be used when referring to autism are all common arguments that are part of many organizations' mission statements. This doesn't mean that they would not be valuable references for adaptations, but being aware of political affiliations can save a lot of heartache in the future. In other words, get a partner but be sure that they align with the mission of the theatre.

The Autism Society of Greater Orlando (ASGO) is one of the wonderful community partners that we have worked with in our Rep adaptations. A volunteer family organization, their mission "is that all individuals within the autism spectrum will be provided a lifetime network of opportunities to become fully accepted, included, and actively participating members of our community, through family support, education, and advocacy, and public awareness" ("ASGO About"). ASGO invites their network to join us for the performance, and always has an informational table set up in the lobby during the event. Their support has helped to guide us in our process and has taught us a so much about our audience and their families.

*Observation: Structure and Space*

In her book, *Theatre, Education and Performance*, Helen Nicholson speaks of the importance of the aesthetic space in regards to performance and education. As she regards it, “obstacles to young people’s participation in theatre is that the architecture can be off-putting, particularly to those who feel that the theatre is outside of their cultural experience” (209). This idea got me thinking about how our specific audience regards the theater space as they enter it. How does it affect their comfort level and willingness to participate in our Sensory Friendly event?

With these questions floating in our minds, The Rep team decided to analyze every aspect of our physical space from the perspective of a young audience member and their family. We wanted to develop a structure, a routine, for those who need it. This meant creating a timeline of every aspect involved in going to the theatre. This structure would then be used to determine what, if any, accommodations needed to be made in the space. It would also be used as the basis for preshow materials, such as our social story.

What is the first thing that is seen by every person who steps through the front doors? The lobby. The lobby space of The Rep has several components that are involved in the routine of going to the theatre. Within this space, patrons could go to the box office for tickets, the concession stand for snacks, and the lobby stage. We had to think about what order would make the most sense to our audience and what each looked like and sounded like. Questions began popping up: Would there be a lot of people? Would someone talk to you? Was there a lot of noise in a certain area? As we walked through the space, we tried to answer these questions and tried to imagine what the environment was like when a show was about to begin.

The next step for the patrons was to travel to the Bush Lobby, which was up a ramp. That brought up a conversation about the physical accessibility of the ramp and how the traffic normally flowed when there were patrons. All of these considerations kept bringing up more questions. Was it really this complicated to go to the theatre and why did we take this experience for granted? The Bush Lobby is wide and spacious, with padded benches for sitting. Corners of the lobby are very dark and, unfortunately, those corners are also the entrances to the theatre space. Knowing that the sudden change in lighting and atmosphere may be upsetting to some of our audience, we decided that we would direct people upstairs to the balcony to enter. This guaranteed that there would be constant light, however, it did mean that stairs were part of the equation. After deliberating about the accessibility issue of having everyone use stairs, the decision was made to have it be a case-by-case situation: we would have a volunteer stationed at the bottom of the stairs and at the lower doors. If a family preferred to enter through the balcony, that route would be available. If someone came in a wheelchair, we could use the lower entrances.

Consideration needs to be paid to the theatre space as well. When an audience enters the theatre, what is the first thing that they see? The audience is playing the role of spectator in this environment, and is it a physically accessible place to do so? Having the audience enter from the balcony lobby of the Bush Theatre means that they will automatically be coming into the space at the top of a set of stairs. The audience is raked; to get to any seat, it is necessary to use the stairs. What kind of seating process would be the most accommodating to this particular population? Providing choice for seating (general admission) gives the audience members the

opportunity to think about if they would rather be closer to the action, the exit, or somewhere in the middle. Also taking into account how many people may be in the theatre could be important. Will audience members need to communicate with each other, pass by each other? How can we make that process easier for everyone?

Lighting, accessible seating for those with physical disabilities, and clearly marked exits may also be important elements to consider. In addition, there is a possibility that some audience members may become overly stimulated or need to leave. In this case, how can we direct them where they need to go? Some theatres are lucky enough to have a comfort room. This is a separate space that provides a quiet area for young people who may be having difficulties during the production. The Rep does not have a comfort room, so we had to think about where we could provide this environment outside of the theatre and how we could guide people there if the need should arise.

Knowing the lobby and theatre spaces is important to adaptors, because we can then make accommodations to guide patrons. Having the structure of how one goes to the theatre allowed us to step into the role of a new theatregoer thereby thinking about how we can best communicate these adaptations to our audience.

### **Clear Expectations: Preparation for Show-Day**

Once we had realized the routine of going to our theatre, we had to find a way to relate that structure to our patrons. We needed to express exactly what was going to happen when they came to see a Sensory Friendly Performance. Setting clear expectations prepares young people for the experience, and also lets the families know of any accommodations we have made. The

most effective way to communicate these expectations is through preshow materials: a social story and signage.

Social stories are an educational intervention used with students with ASD that describes a social situation along with appropriate responses (Earle-Vollrath, Cook, Robbins, and Ben – Arie 30). For SFPs, Social Stories are a visual and verbal way to communicate any and all parts of going to the theatre. A social story lays out the structure that we have already determined using pictures and simple, idiom free language. The patrons can follow each step laid out in the social story, and should be able to connect to it visually when they are in the building. Prior to the show, the social story is available online for perusal, and is also sent out via email to ticket-holders.

The current social story for Orlando Repertory Theatre (“going to the theatre: a social story”) was created as an adjustable template for each Sensory Friendly Performance. After reading through examples from other programs and discussing the possibilities with the team, I set out to break down every moment of going to the Rep to see a show. Carrie and I walked from the parking lot through the lobby, etc., and noted exactly what we saw, heard, and experienced. We took pictures of each step, focusing on keeping the perspective of an audience member who may have never had this experience before. The goal was to make a document that could easily be adjusted to suit whichever show we were currently working on.

A challenge in creating and adapting The Rep’s social story is the ever-changing look of the theatre. The building is a living space, and every show brings new banners, new decorations, and adjustments to furniture. With each looming show adaptation, Carrie and I do a walk-



through and discuss what needs to be changed in our story. For example, when we added preshow activities to our lobby, we added a page about the presence of the activities, took a picture of what the activities might look like, and wrote a simple, first person description about the experience. In addition, SFPs can be in either of the mainstage spaces. The original social story focused on seeing a performance in the Edyth Bush Theater (a proscenium stage). Last fall, one of the SFPs was in the Universal Theatre (three-quarter thrust), and the social story had to be adapted to suit that space.

Signage is a secondary visual tool that relates to the social story. Signs are placed in specific areas on the day of the performance as guides to different experiential steps. They use clear language and a pictorial representation of the area, or an arrow that will direct the patrons to their destination. The goal is to use these visuals to reinforce what is laid out in the social story. If an area is called a “quiet lobby” in the social story, then the sign will say the same thing. It is emphasizing the created routine of the social story in the actual space, allowing for structure and clear guidance.

#### *Sensory Considerations: Outside the Theater*

We have examined the experience, broken it down, developed a structural routine, and portrayed it both as a social story and as signage. But there are more detailed aspects of the preshow experience to take into account. Are there any smaller factors that may be a distraction or may be overwhelming before we even enter the theater-space? Little things such as lobby music, televisions, drafts, aromas from other productions, loud noises from yard-work being done outside: these are all elements from the daily workings of a theatre to consider. Not

everything can be changed, but having the awareness about such issues prepares adaptors for possible issues on the day of the event.

A conversation that our team has had is regarding the self-flushing toilets in the bathrooms. This seems like such a silly thing to focus on, but imagine that you are being introduced to a new place, are unsure and possibly anxious. You are doing something incredibly private and there is a sudden huge crash of sound. It's not to say that this would actually be an issue for this particular audience, but we had the discussion. How was this problem solved? We asked our community partner, we looked at what other theatres had done, and then we put it into our social story.

### **Performance Considerations and Accommodations**

#### *Research: Knowing the Show*

Researching a show for adaptation is much like doing table work with an artistic team: you have to pull apart the details in order to grasp the production as a whole. Part of doing research for the show is developing an understanding of the artistic intent: what story are we telling and how are we telling it? Just as a stage manager has the role of keeping up the artistic intention of the production once the directors and designers have moved on, an artistic adaptor must maintain the artistic intentions through the adaptation process.

Luckily, through the majority of the Sensory Friendly Performances at Orlando Repertory Theatre, one or more of our adaptive team was part of the production team. For example, for *Dr. Seuss's The Cat in the Hat*, I was the assistant director. This meant that I had worked closely with the director and had participated in production meetings with all of the designers. Carrie and Jeff had also been in the tech rehearsals and productions meetings. Our goal was to keep what we

knew of the piece, and adapt carefully for our Sensory Friendly audience in a way that would not disrupt all of the wonderful hard work of everyone who had been involved to this point.

*Observation: Problems and Possibilities*

Although being part of the creative process does help to know a show, observing the performance multiple times is often in order to note where modifications might need to be made. This means watching a production several times and taking note of sound, lighting and other sensory issues. As part of our process, members of our Community partner organization come in to give their feedback to the production as well. Adaptors then have a conversation with them about what kind of modifications they think should be made to the space and production in order to best accommodate this population.

I had an epiphany during my first observation with the leader of ASGO. As the assistant director of *The Cat in the Hat*, I had been in the rehearsal process and pretty much memorized the show in its entirety. There were two pages of notes regarding possible adaptations that I made both during rehearsals and during my own observations of the show after it opened.

It was a Friday morning school show, and the theater was packed with elementary school students, noisily expressing their excitement. The air was electric, and all I could see were bouncing heads as kids played in their seats. We were sitting in the back row, watching the show with our community partner to see if there were insights she could give us before we had our Sensory Friendly rehearsal the next week.

Before the lights went down, our community partner leaned over to me and pointed down to the fourth row of the theatre. “He’s having a hard time,” she said. A young boy, surrounded by his peers, was sitting rigidly with his hands over his ears and his eyes closed. And I stopped

breathing. There sat someone who was having trouble with the crazy amounts of sensory stimulation all around him. For the rest of the observation, she and I watched both him and the performance, gauging his reactions. Her awareness of the audience helped me to focus, not on what was being presented, but on how the audience reacted to it. Since then, I always watch the audience just as much as I watch the stage.

Although having an outside eye can be beneficial, sometimes collaborating with a Community Partner can introduce elements that are outside of the artistic purview. As theatre makers, the focus of the artistic adaptor is to make modifications while still keeping the artistic integrity of the show; the focus of the Community Partner, however, is on the audience itself and what kind of modifications should be made to suit them. Because of this difference in focus, there have been instances where the Community Partner has watched a performance and given a possible adjustment that would change the show itself. An example of this was a recent suggestion that audience participation be added into a show in order to make a greater connection between the story and the audience members. A discussion about how this would change the intention of the show occurred between the adaptors and the artistic staff. In this particular instance, we all agreed that adding an audience participation element changed the show too much. We had to say no, even though it might have been beneficial for our audience. The already created art had to come first.

#### *Clear Expectations: Production Team, Cast, and Crew*

Awareness for adaptation is not just about the performance and it's not just about the audience. Communication with the artistic and production teams is key. When looking at technical modifications to the production, adaptors have to keep the original artistic intention of

the production intact. There are moments, however, when an aesthetic choice coincides with a needed change. This is when the adaptation process gets sticky. But if clear expectations are set with the director, designers, and actors from the beginning of the adaptation process a conversation can be had about how to solve the problem without changing the artistic intent.

As someone who has experienced being an actor in a Sensory Friendly Performance, it is important to me that the cast and crew are informed of the modifications, and why the modifications are happening. While the director and designers have left the process long ago, the actors are living it every day. They are the ones who will have to make adjustments while performing, and have to keep their focus during the show. Because of this, performers should be given clear expectations about who their audience is, and the significance of the SFP event to the audience and to their families.

#### *Sensory Considerations: Artistic Adaptations*

The next step to consider is the adaptation of the technical life of the show itself, in order to make it as sensory accessible as possible. After watching it several times, and having our Community Partner observe and take notes of possible issues, it's time to take the theory into practice. Light and sound cues may need to be adjusted in order to make elements of the piece less jarring for individuals with sensory processing disorders. This could mean lengthening light fades, eliminating moving lights, adjusting amounts of haze, removing blackouts, adjusting sound volume and pitch. Of course, all of these changes must be done in a way that still keeps the original intention of the designers, and still tells the story of the show.

It is important to note that, as adaptors, our team does not always agree on what modifications need to be made. Just like the wide array of perspectives in our audience, there is

also a wide array of perspectives on our team. We are all coming from different places when it comes to this work, and that's when communication and compromises come to the forefront. There have been many moments where one of us has thought that a sound cue or a light cue needed to be changed in order to be more sensory friendly, and not everyone has agreed. Collaboration can be frustrating, but the communication during these moments and reflection after these moments that help the process grow. After all, we are a team of individuals with one common goal: to make the performance as accessible as possible for those with sensory sensitivities.

The technical process for the Sensory Friendly Performance of *The Cat in the Hat* was daunting, to say the least. The entire show, though not a musical, was completely underscored with rhythmic music. To accentuate stressful moments in the plot, there was a frequent high-pitched whining noise, like that of a Theremin. During our observational session with our partner from ASGO, she noted several moments of high-anxiety that might negatively affect the audience. We had to think very seriously about how any adaptations might hurt the artistic integrity of the show.

Two rehearsals were scheduled, a practice that has now been knocked down to one depending on the sensory intensity of the show. During these rehearsals, Carrie and I worked with a sound technician and a lighting technician to make adjustments. We had to use our knowledge of the show, the artistic intention, lighting and sound design techniques, and the perspective of our audience. The main adjustments for *The Cat in the Hat* were lowering the pitch of the whining noises where possible, and modifying any jarring lighting cues. For this

production, we were lucky to have the director of the show, Gary Cadwallader, in the room to help us maintain the artistic integrity. In other productions, when this was not feasible, we have brought in the Artistic Director, Jeff Revels, to make the final call.

Sometimes the sensory adjustments for a production have to be made by the actors. The cast is asked to maintain the level of their performance, but may also be asked to modify the volume, pitch, or severity of certain reactions onstage. This is all done with the director's blessing, of course. An example of this would be the laugh of Thing 1 and Thing 2 in *The Cat in the Hat*. Both young women playing the roles had high, bright voices, making their demonic character laughs come off like a piercing scream. With Gary's blessing, we asked the actors to practice giggling instead, and possibly lowering their pitch and volume a tad during exciting moments.

After technical modifications and actor modifications have been made, an actor rehearsal is held to iron out any possible kinks in the adapted production. Prior to running through anything, the adaptors go through the Actors Handout, reaffirming the expectations for the SFP. During the run, actors are encouraged to stop if something in their performance goes wrong because of adjusted sound or light cues. This rehearsal gives the actor time to prepare for this performance, and to get excited about the possibility of creating for a specialized audience.

Of course, as with any rehearsal, there tend to be bumps in the road that need to be addressed in order to reach our goal of an accessible performance. One major issue that has arisen on several occasions is having the actors give a full and energetic performance even though there have been adjustments made to the show that they have become accustomed to. In

order to keep the artistic integrity of the show, the actors are asked not to modify their performance unless there is a specific issue that has been deemed possibly disturbing to those with sensory sensitivities. The difficulty then becomes convincing actors that, just because the show is different to what they are accustomed, they still need to continue with the same energy and volume that they usually would. During the Actor Rehearsals, we, as artistic adaptors, often need to stop and remind actors of this fact. It is our job to assure them that the only adjustments that need to be made are those that have already been taken into account. As I am fond of saying, although we are modifying this show for a specific audience, they still deserve to see the same piece of art.

### The Outcome

Even with all of the modifications and accommodations, it is still possible that a Sensory Friendly Performance may not have the desired outcome. Tickets that are sold may not be filled. A young person could become overwhelmed and may have to leave. The person running the technical elements of the show may hit the wrong button. There are so many possibilities for something to surprise us; after all, this is live theatre. During the performance, all that an adaptive artist can do is to stay aware of what is happening, and to be there as a helpful guide. Be aware of the work that has been put into it, and celebrate each and every small success.

I feel as though, as an artist, I have grown from developing an adaptation process. Seeing a production from different perspectives, that of a director, a designer, an audience member and an adaptor, has pushed me to examine my own creative process. A theatre is not just a physical space, but an environment that can be modified to suit needs, to create a communal feeling. A



show is not just a story but the weaving of artistic principles that need to stay intact for it to survive.

A theatre artist is a collaborator. By working with a team of individuals with many perspectives, I learned how to further my communication and awareness in order to sustain art. As I have said before, I didn't have a personal connection with ASD before coming to graduate school, just a desire to learn and a desire to connect with a specific and growing population. Others on my team have those personal connections, and through communication and respect for one another, we learned how to take our different perspectives and make something accessible and inclusive. Are there moments when we have to step back and reassess our goals, putting our own perspectives and passions away to focus on the audience? Absolutely. These moments bring about conversation, which allows us to grow in our practice.

Researching and creating the social story, allowed me to connect with my educator side. The development process of the social story was literally breaking down the experience of going to the theatre, and explaining it in the most concrete of ways. I had to understand my audience, understand their experience, and then adapt it into a language that would engage and educate.

It's not always unicorns and rainbows when it comes to Sensory Friendly adaptation. And it's not always about research and mindfully including all perspectives. At one Sensory Friendly Performance, we decided to have activities in the lobby for the patrons who were waiting for the show to begin. In setting up for this, we grabbed small green tables with tiny stools for a station where young people could color. What we didn't think about was the amount of grown audience members. These tables were entirely too small for them to sit comfortably, and we ended up with

a few patrons who voiced their disappointment. In that moment, we had neglected to think of all of the perspectives in our audience.

After being part of this process and watching it change and grow, I feel as though I have a better grasp as to how Sensory Friendly Performances fit with the idea of Inclusion. We are inviting all to experience theatre, thereby building an awareness of our art. We are reaching out into the community, thereby building awareness of our efforts and of Autism Spectrum Disorder. What I am not sure of, still, is if it really is Inclusion. We are adapting an artistic experience for a specialized audience, but we are not creating something for everyone. In addition, the general needs of the audience are being thought of, but not the individual perspectives of audience members. In that way, we are not reaching all needs. I think that these factors make Sensory Friendly Performances a step toward inclusion, a step toward accessibility. It is not fully recognized, but we are moving with curved strength.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: INCLUSIVE ARTS INTEGRATION AND ARTIST AS CREATOR/ADAPTOR**

He held out his hand, unsure of exactly what was about to happen. I looked up at the instructor, and she nodded. My apprehension was apparent to both her and I, but I hoped that it wasn't clear to the student. Earlier in the lesson, it had been hard for him to sit with us on the rug. He didn't want to stay in his chair, or listen to my story as we, together, created the movements and sounds of clouds. But now he had his own cloud (a cotton ball) in his hand. It was soft, and could fly up into the air with just a breath.

"Do you want a little rain on your hand?" I asked him, and pointed the spray bottle at my own hand first. I misted my palm, and looked for his reaction. Slowly, deliberately, he nodded his head. I pulled the trigger, and he jumped. And he laughed.

This young boy, who had been so unsure of my presence, now felt the rain in his hand and laughed. It's moments like these that I remember why I do this kind of work. It's so easy for me, as a teaching artist, to focus on what's not going right, what learning goal is not being met. But sometimes, it has to be less about the standards, the story, the drama structures, and more about the experience that the students are having.

In my time as a teaching artist, I have encountered many opportunities to create with students with ASD. I have found that flexibility and a focus on individual needs is invaluable in these cases. I like to think of it as using my improv training to connect with one audience member. There are many factors to think about when working with students with ASD, but sometimes the focus is how you can affect the person in front of you.

When creating and/or adapting theatre-based workshops for a specialized audience, what factors do I need to be mindful of? Is it the planned lesson or the individualized learning? When can it be both? In this chapter, I will explore the meaning and benefits of arts integration and the adaptive tools and tactics for a specialized audience.

### What is Arts Integration?

At the end of my first semester at the University of Central Florida, the students in our Theatre for Young Audiences program were invited to participate in a seminar that focused on theatre education, specifically Arts Integration. Being new to the practice of teaching, I wasn't entirely sure what that meant but I was hungry to learn. It was a two-part seminar, given by a Master Teaching Artist from the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, entitled: *Laying a Foundation: Defining Arts Integration*, and *Mapping the Journey: Planning Effective Residencies for Students*.

In these seminars, we explored the meaning of Arts Integration. The definition that was given to us was, "Arts integration is an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both" (Silverstein & Lane 1). In order to further our understanding, our facilitator had us use rhythm and repetition, tableau, and image work. To learn the core concept of Arts Integration, we used theatrical methods.

To break down the definition in my own words, Arts Integration is using an art form to connect students with a core subject and/or social competencies. The art form, which in my case

is theatre, is used in equal measure to the core competency, and both elements work to enhance learning of each other. For example, in the seminar, I created a five-day residency that connected creative movement and geometry. The basic idea was to explore shapes that our bodies can make, and then relating it to geometric theory. We would then explore how the mathematical concepts of shapes (the relation of angles and sides, area and perimeter) related to our physio-emotional connections. It was a first pass at this type of lesson for me and, looking back at it, the concept was interesting but not really successful.

A large part of the process of creating an Arts Integration lesson is awareness and reflection. Part of creating a successful Arts Integration Residency is being aware of students' engagement and whether the learning goals are being met. Reflecting as a teacher and artist helps determine what adaptations need to be made to make the lesson more successful. In the case of my mathematical lesson (a challenging feat in both its creation and its implementation), I needed to simplify my goals and possibly adjust for whom I was creating the lesson.

This type of art education can also help to enhance creative thinking. According to Robert E. Franken's *Human Motivation*, "there are three reasons why humans need and use creativity: the need for novel, complex, and varied stimulation; the need to communicate ideas and values; and the need to solve problems" (Franken 396). To me, creativity is a tool that can be used to generate and recognize ideas and possibilities, allowing for growth in social development, engagement, and problem solving. I often use reflective drawing as a method to assess the understanding of learning goals and a students' personal creative growth. At the end of each residency session, I ask a question that relates to what we learned that day and give them

the opportunity to draw their response. (Ex. We read a story about a cloud that changes into many different objects. If you were a cloud, what would you change into?) Incorporating a visual art after a session of active, theatrical exploration asks students to think in a different way than they had been during the activities. The question challenges them to reflect upon what we learned, and asks them to use their imaginations to craft a response.

### **Inclusion**

Developing Arts Integration residencies for students with ASD has been a challenging and exciting endeavor for me. I want to focus on the art of theatre and a core competency, but I have to be aware of the methods I use. The emphasis of this section and the following chapter is how I have learned to keep my focus on the lesson as a whole while learning about my audience. Teaching is a reciprocal act. While my students are learning from me, I am learning from them.

There are a multitude of perspectives in a classroom, and each person learns in different ways. Theatre-based Arts Integration uses a variety of learning modalities, from kinesthetic to musical, from visual to verbal. When creating a residency for an inclusive classroom, where there can be a range of developmental and physical abilities, I find that it is important to focus on individual learning styles to assess if understanding is being reached. To do this, a teaching artist has to be fully cognizant of the different perspectives in the class and adapt accordingly. Keeping the audience in mind and purposefully using a variety of tools and tactics to reach that audience, enhances engagement and therefore learning.

### **Intentional Design**

The first thing to determine in the creation of an arts integration residency is what needs to be learned. I will call this our Learning Goal. The Learning Goal is discovered through a

series of questions: What should students already know? What do students need to know? How do I use my art (dramatic teaching structures) in order to obtain that goal?

However, when using intentional design, the focus needs to be on the individual needs of the student. The Learning Goal has to take a backseat to the students' optimal learning and engagement styles. For example a student that is a kinesthetic learner may not connect with a call and response activity. If this is the case, the call and response can be adjusted to include a physical movement. This small adaptation may help that individual to make the intended connection. As a teaching artist, I have to constantly assess how engaged my class is to an activity. Adaptations may have to be made in the moment, and should remain connected to the purpose of the activity. The possibility for improvisational adjustments makes the teaching artist an intentional designer and an intentional adaptor.

### **Play**

I love introducing dramatic play in the classroom. Functional and symbolic play help to guide students in discovering the “what” and the “why” of core concepts. In an arts integration lesson, there are moments when discovery can be fueled by just experiencing. As theatre artists, we constantly push ourselves to use our imaginations to tell stories, solve problems, and express ourselves.

Students must be able to communicate verbally, understand and grow social behaviors, and be able to flex their imaginative muscle. As stated by Piaget in his work *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* symbolic play, or the use of representation to pretend that one object is another, is a foundation of abstract and imaginative thinking (qtd VanHoorn et al. 33). Dramatic play, a form of symbolic play, involves the creation of imaginary roles and situations and often

will involve the use of pretense on objects, and social negotiations with others (Van Hoorn et al. 33). Both symbolic and dramatic social play (or sociodramatic play) are major ingredients in theatre education, and greatly increase a student's confidence in his or her own cognitive and creative abilities.

When creating an inclusive and accessible classroom environment for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder, educators must remember the individual needs and abilities of the student. Students with ASD may show impairments in joint attention, social imitation, and social-emotional skills, which means that they might find spontaneous social play, a main aspect of theatre, difficult (Douglas & Stirling 1). Ongoing development of verbal and nonverbal communication skills may be necessary to enhance student confidence in a theatrical setting (Simpson and Myles). Although difficult for some, how could adult-directed play training in symbolic and sociodramatic play enhance the experience of students with ASD in a theatre education setting, as well as further developing social, verbal, and imaginative skills? Teaching Artists need to contemplate these ideas when creating and adapting a lesson for this specific audience, and to accordingly adjust based on the individual needs of the audience.

### Connections

The following chapter is my experience adapting a theatre-based Arts Integration Residency that was implemented in an inclusive classroom. The residency, Blue Man Group: Inventing an Instrument, was originally a one-hour lesson based around the idea of using observation and engineering principles to create an instrument. I modified it to include equal parts theatre and science, and to be flexible enough to be implemented with a variety of student



perspectives. The adaptation of this lesson is an excellent example of how I have learned to see beyond my own goals as an artist and educator to focus on the individual student needs, to enhance their learning and imaginative growth.

## **CHAPTER SIX: THE PROCESS OF CREATING AND ADAPTING A LESSON**

### The Lesson

Teaching is learning in front of an audience. I like to think of my moments as a teaching artist as an opportunity to hone my improvisational skills: although you have a set goal, it's very possible that everything will have to change at a moment's notice. Certain tools can aid in the adaptation process of a particular lesson in an inclusive or ASD classroom. Emphasis on individualization, clarity, and structure not only guarantees greater connection and engagement with students, but also appreciation from their teachers. I use six main tools and tactics in my adaptation process: observational sessions, clear expectations, visual guides, kinesthetic reinforcement, sensory exploration, and awareness.

In 2013, I was asked to adapt and implement a theatre-based residency with the Blue Man Group and Orlando Repertory Theatre. The curriculum was designed around the scientific principles of observation, design, and engineering. My task was to turn the one-hour lesson into a five-session theatre-based residency for elementary students. In order to do so, I would also incorporate the communication, movement, and nonverbal qualities of the Blue Men themselves.

The workshops were scheduled to take place in a series of classrooms: a 4<sup>th</sup> grade class in a Gifted Program, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade class in a Title 1 school, and a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class in an inclusive charter school. This meant that I had to use Intentional Design to develop a residency that could be adapted for all of these audiences. Focusing on the learning goals and on flexibility, I started adapting the residency Blue Man Group: Inventing an Instrument.

The primary learning goal of the residency was to use observation and adaptive skills to simultaneously design an instrument and construct a character. Students were asked to use observational skills (their five senses) to first explore a group of materials and then use their discoveries to design an instrument. After creating a plan, they had to determine how to make their plan into reality, with the materials as their engineering tools. Then the students would work with me through guided movement-based play to discover the different ways that we use our bodies to communicate. They would create a character based on three movement variables (tempo, weight, and direction), and would practice bringing their characters to life.

Once students were confident in the individual development of their instruments and characters, they would then come together to create a culminating theatrical experience. Individuals formed bands, introduced their characters, played their instruments with each other, and then had to improvise a collaborative nonverbal scene based on their band's first gig.

My teaching goal was to emphasize imagination and adaptation in the planning and creation processes. I wanted the students to feel confident in their creations and to begin to understand that design and development can often be about adaptation. One of the ways I emphasized imagination was through functional and sociodramatic play. Students would be given examples of their production materials (marshmallows, rubber bands, paper tubes, balloons, pipe cleaners, duct tape etc.), and would be encouraged to use their senses to fully explore the possibilities of each object. The challenge was to describe every aspect of the object, rather than naming it. (What words can you use to describe a marshmallow?)

After they had described each object, the challenge was to figure out what else it could do. (What could you do with a marshmallow aside from its intended purpose of being a delicious treat?) By guiding play in this way, allowing exploration and open engagement, I was asking them to see things in a more innovative way. Although effective in its learning goal, this activity led to many marshmallows being thrown across the room.

When using the materials to engineer students would then have a greater knowledge of other ways they could modify an element to suit their needs. They had already squished, stabbed, thrown, dunked, torn, and twisted every object. How could the knowledge of what the object could do suit their adaptation needs? If it didn't work the way that they wanted, they were already in the mindset to adjust their perspectives and try something new.

When creating their own characters (or Blue Man), I wanted students to move away from their own perceptions of how their bodies moved. The goal was to develop awareness of creative movement possibilities. (How else could they move? How did that change who their character was becoming?) Every day that we played as our characters, I would start with physical warm-ups that challenged their minds and bodies. Use it or Become it is a game where individuals are given an object that they must model either using or becoming, employing only their movements. This guided play allowed for students to realize that there are far more ways to communicate than just speaking. Their bodies could be their vehicle for communication.

By preparing a series of workshops that were structured, purposeful, and fun, I was able to create a plan for myself that could easily be implemented in a variety of classroom settings.

## My Adaptation Process

### **Intentional Adaptation Toward Inclusion**

My primary tasks in adapting this workshop for an inclusive classroom were to get to know the needs of the individuals and the culture of the classroom. After I had a better understanding of my audience I could determine the tools and tactics that I thought would work to accomplish the Learning Goal. I had a plan that was purposefully pliable enough to suit many classroom settings, so now I had to observe my audience to guide my intentional adaptations.

### **Observation: Knowing the Audience**

I needed to get to know with whom I was going to be creating. From my research and through the process of developing Sensory Friendly Performances, I had cultivated a rich theoretical knowledge of what it means for someone to be on the Autism Spectrum. To work with this class, however, I needed more than just theoretical knowledge. Scheduling an observational session in the classroom, prior to the first session, would give me the opportunity to meet the class and witness the culture of the classroom. I find that making a personal connection with students gives me time to get to know them and their needs.

I made plans with the teacher to come in and check everything out, to carefully insert myself into the students' world prior to our first session. Generally, my observational sessions include learning names, examining the physical layout of the classroom, and gauging reactions to my presence, to the teaching team, and to each other. I also constructed a list of questions for the teaching team, keeping in mind my lesson's Learning Goals. No one knows better than those who work with these students everyday what tools and tactics might comply with their learning styles.

In addition, I wanted to get a glimpse of the classroom culture. Students already have models of behavioral management that they use on a daily basis. Their classroom is their comfort zone. The teaching team knows what works best for their students when it comes to engagement and behavioral management. I want to assert to both students and teachers that I belong in their class, and that I respect what they have established. I am not coming in as a disturbance to their learning or to their environment; I want to add to it.

As I entered into this classroom, the first thing that struck me was the physical layout. The room was packed with islands made of desks. There was no open space for group gatherings. I remember thinking, “Oh, right. These are fifth graders. They don’t do circle time like the younger kids.” In one part of the room there was a comfortable space (if someone needed to decompress) and in another a grouping of computers. Visual guides for the students, such as a visual schedule and a list of classroom guidelines, were up on the walls. As I introduced myself to the students, I noted their names and how they reacted to my presence. Some students met me with hugs and chatter while others looked at me warily. As far as determining ability, I didn’t think too much about it. In many school systems, outsiders are not privy to students’ personal information. And, honestly, I didn’t need to know; I was there to get to know them as people.

We had scheduled our sessions for the middle of May. It was the end of the school year and this class was about to move up to middle school in just a few months. I could tell that they were excited. The room was practically crackling with energy as they tried to figure out who I was and why I was there. I sat with one of the teachers and asked her what she used for behavior management, if any of the students might need visual guides, what some issues might be. She

and I laid out a plan. Before I left, she let me know that this class was special. There were so many strong personalities and quick wits, I was going to have a great time with them. I didn't doubt it. With a better idea of my audience I began thinking about what I needed to incorporate into my already established lesson to guide our learning success.

### **Clear Expectations: Essential Questions and Guidelines**

Focusing on clarity and structure serves the needs of the students and keeps me focused on our learning goal. I needed to set clear expectations for myself, for the students, and for the teachers. By posting a visual that displays my Essential Question, a simple learning goal for the day (Ex. What is imagination?), and referring to it at integral moments, I would keep the intention of the lesson in the mind of every person involved. This Essential Question keeps me on task, sets a visual learning goal for the students, and communicates to the teaching team what will be covered.

In addition to a Visual Essential Question, a set of student determined expectations can be helpful with engagement and behavior management. The first thing I asked the class to do was to create a set of guidelines that would be in effect for the entire time I was working with them. Together, we created "The Guide for Becoming a Blue Man." Some of the guidelines included points about safety, being respectful to one another, listening to me (a favorite of mine), and having fun. I feel that, because I asked the class to create their own expectations, it allowed them greater autonomy over their actions. There was greater investment in what we were doing. I posted our guidelines as a reference and they became part of our routine and environment.

### **Visual Guides: Seeing Structure**

As a new person entering a classroom, I often feel like I am disrupting the routine, throwing off the schedule, and interrupting learning. It makes me feel slightly off-kilter. Imagine, now, that you are someone for whom the structure of routine gives comfort. A new person coming into the room or initiating activities outside of your comfort zone may be jarring. There are tools that can help students cope with a shift in schedule. A visual schedule is a guide to our adventure together. It can include written explanations of activities, the timing of the event, and pictorial representations of the event. Many special education teachers use visual schedules to help students to adjust to changes in routine. I wanted to use this tool as a way to create a routine.

For the Blue Man Group workshops, I created a visual schedule that included the title of each activity, a small pictorial representation, a length of time for each activity, and a picture of a clock for when each activity should begin. This felt like a lot of structure for this particular class, but I wanted to cover my bases. A visual communication of the lesson gives the students an opportunity to mentally and emotionally prepare for activities. It can keep them engaged in the routine that I have made for them. In addition, my visual schedule would help me to maintain the structure of our lesson during its implementation.

### **Communication and Kinesthetic Reinforcement**

As a teaching artist I want to always be clear in my communication with students. The words I use can greatly affect understanding. I have discovered that when I intentionally construct my language to be clear and concise, students understand me better. Repetition of main ideas is also crucial, as is asking students to participate in repetition. As a rule, regardless of the



individual needs of a particular class, I strive to be purposeful and direct. This being said, I also like to put a little flair in there for entertainment.

ASD can include a wide range of communication needs. Some students may be very verbal while others may be completely nonverbal. Because of this range of possibility, the use of kinesthetic reinforcement, such as sign language and gesture, can make a lesson more accessible. I have seen many inclusive classroom teachers incorporating sign into their daily routine, because it allows for another mode of expression for their students.

For this residency, I decided to incorporate sign into certain aspects of each lesson. For any theatre activities where we would be in a circle, I would use the sign for “circle.” When I needed them to stand, I would use the sign for “stand up.” My main mode of kinesthetic reinforcement was modeling movement. In this lesson, I wanted students to explore theatrical movement in order to create a character and to communicate nonverbally. The best way to explain what that meant was to demonstrate it myself. When we spoke about tempo, I would physicalize fast and slow and then ask them to do it. Modeling gave them an example of what I was expecting and they could try it on their own, within their comfort levels.

Making kinesthetic adaptations to a lesson prior to working with a class can come with certain unforeseen limitations. Although I had observed the group in the natural environment of their classroom, I had not fully observed the physical or behavioral issues that certain students may have had. One student in particular had a physical disability that made standing for long periods of time or moving freely around the room uncomfortable. Much of the character creation portion of my residency included creative movement, which he did not want to participate in. As

I saw this issue unfolding, I decided to confer with the classroom teacher. She and I worked together to adapt the movement so that he could try the activities sitting rather than standing and moving.

### **Sensory Exploration: Feeling the Meaning**

Sensory processing is something I wanted to be mindful of when adapting this residency.

I have been taught that behavior is often based on need, and therefore a student's sensory processing needs may be the reason for their level of engagement. For example, if an individual is particularly fidgety, it may be that they are seeking sensory input. They need to feel or move or do something kinesthetic. This need is getting in the way of their engagement. In these cases, it may be that the young person needs to hold something in their hand, to draw, or to do something physical. On the other hand, if a student is completely checked-out of the experience and is not at all engaged, it may be that they are overwhelmed by their sensory experience. In this case, the student may have to take a moment away from the group or do a calming exercise to make them comfortable.

This residency incorporated sensory exploration as a means to observe both physical objects and students' body awareness. We were constantly moving, tasting, touching, seeing, smelling, and hearing. This meant that I needed to be aware of how each student reacted to what was happening. It's not easy to do that when you're working with a class of eighteen students. Things got loud when we were playing our instruments, and I did have to say that it was ok to put hands over ears. When we practiced moving like our characters, I sometimes had to remind students to control their bodies. Some wanted to move as much as possible, which could become

unsafe. In those moments I asked them to move in slow motion, which was fun for them, challenging for their bodies and guaranteeing that I could better ensure safety.

Overall, when working with this specialized population, it is imperative for me to be aware of what is happening on a general class level and on personal levels. Theatre allows for students to experience learning in a plethora of ways, but not every way is right for each student. The Blue Man Group: Inventing an Instrument residency invited students to write, draw, create music, and move both individually and collaboratively. By introducing the adapted structures that I have written about, I ensured engagement within these learning modalities.

### Reflection

Assessing successful learning is a difficult task. For the purpose of continuing the explanation of my journey as an artist, I believe that any such assessments would only damper my intentions. When discussing the outcome of this particular residency, I would like to focus on my own personal reflection as an artist, educator, and activist, rather than on the reactions of the students. All I can say is, I know that I learned a lot from them and I can only hope that learned a lot from me.

In general, the adaptations I made were incredibly helpful to me in the implementation of the lessons. The applied structure that was incorporated into the lesson allowed me to be a more pliable teacher. By having a visual map of expectations and timing, it was easier for me to direct learning and keep focused on the learning goal. Having “The Guide to Becoming a Blue Man” set of guidelines helped me to curb unwanted behaviors; I could turn around and point to them. Because we created the guidelines together, the students knew what was expected of them.

Did every adaptation that I planned for work? No. And that's ok. Lesson plans are just that—a plan. Using sign language with this class did not affect the communication I had with them. It was fun, though, to incorporate a different method of nonverbal communication into a lesson that was partially about nonverbal communication. It was a reminder, in a way, that people don't have to speak to express themselves. I am someone who tends to communicate more effectively when I'm not speaking, so this idea of movement as communication, allowed for me to express myself to the students in a form that was actually easier for me than verbalizing. The language of movement became a standard mode for communication, as well as a wonderful way for me to visually model for the class.

There were adaptations to the residency that I did not think about until I was in the middle of a lesson. Part of our culminating activity was collaboratively creating nonverbal scenes in our “bands.” In the scene, each student would portray their character and play their instrument. When I introduced this idea, I was met with blank stares and proverbial crickets. This was not an activity that appealed to the class and I could feel their attention slipping away.

On the fly, I quickly wrote a blank scene for them to get into pairs and try. The first time they read the scene, it was just to become familiar with the words. The second time they read the scene, they had to incorporate some of their character's movement. The third time they read the scene, they had to try to express the lines using only their faces and bodies. The fourth time they read the scene, they had to somehow incorporate their instruments. Our culminating event, rather than being three longer, nonverbal scenes of their own creation, became more about one-on-one communication with a partner. The activity may have changed, but the intention of design,

observation, and adaptation was still there. On top of that, I had modeled artistic adaptation for them, solidifying what I had said to them throughout the residency: sometimes you have to try something else until it works.

I was bowled over by the creativity and inventiveness of this class. The conversations that they came up with challenged me to examine what I knew. One particular discussion that made me question my own methodologies was when we explored the idea of creativity in invention. Why is creativity so important when it comes to innovative design? How does creation within both theatre and engineering intersect? I found myself using the scientific method to explain character creation, something that I had not connected in my mind until this lesson.

Creative play with our materials made me see the materials in a different light, and gave me ideas about how to use them differently. I used my imagination to construct a world with the students where there were nothing but possibilities, which enhanced my vision of my own artistic ideals. Purposefully emphasizing using the senses to explore with this particular audience helped me to better understand their perceptions of their world. I left each session feeling as though the students introduced me to different ways of seeing and understanding, which put my own perspective into question.

Truthfully, I believe that the residency I adapted for this specific audience challenged me as an artist and educator more than the residency before it was adapted. My awareness and my adaptive skills were in the forefront. I feel as though I walked into this classroom with a greater sense of purpose in what I was teaching, because I had made the effort to analyze every moment.

I focused more on the audience as an active participant of the lesson, rather than a passive spectator, because I was actively incorporating their individual needs into what I was teaching.

Artistically, creating and adapting this residency for this audience pushed my boundaries, and forced me to further examine my tactics and structures. The focus on individuality means that I can't only focus on my own intentions, or even the intention of the lesson. I have to use every tool in my artistic toolbox to create a welcoming and engaging environment.

Reflecting on this experience, I knew that I wanted to do more. This arts integration residency was just a step toward what I wanted to create. Through my Sensory Friendly process, I had learned how to adapt theatre for a specialized audience, not focusing on the individual. In the Inclusive Arts Integration Residency, I was learning how to be aware of individual needs and how to adapt in the moment. But how could I create something larger; perhaps a full production? I had such an urge to put on that director hat, but I also knew that my perspective was not as interesting or as important as the students with whom I was working. What kind of work could be done that allows students to create the experience while challenging me further as an artist?

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: MULTI-SENSORY THEATRE AND THE ARTIST AND AUDIENCE AS CO-CREATORS**

I can still hear her voice as she said my name. She had such a distinct accent to me, but I'm sure that I had a distinct accent to her. Pigtales and glasses and holding my hand, I will never forget a young woman named Lorna.

The main hallway of the school was completely clear, as we had noticed they almost always were. After basically living with twenty-some-odd people in the tiny teachers' lounge for two days, the hallway seemed bright and spacious. Welcoming, even. With the cameraman behind me, and Tim ahead of me, I took a deep breath, physically stepped into character, and marched up to the door. Lorna was waiting.

"Ticket, Sara?" she said, before I could get out a word. I couldn't help but smile as she ran back to her table to grab the green billet.

"Tickety-tack, time to go!" I said. I held up my own green ticket, repeated the word clearly (in my seemingly awkward American accent) and made eye contact with the teachers. With a scraping of chairs, guidance from the teachers, and excited chatter, we lined up and set away on our journey to a different world: a sensory world. A world where a hallway was train tracks, and a cafeteria was a train station. It was a world where a suitcase held magical, yet simple, elements to be explored.

And all the way there, Lorna chanted along with me, giggled, and held my hand.

### Multi-Sensory Theatre

Theatre is a sensory event. Spectators use their eyes to witness and their ears to hear, but what happens when you turn that model on its ear? Immersive theatre is a trend that has been growing exponentially, with creations like Punch Drunk's *Sleep No More* and Sublime and Ridiculous' *In Their Shoes*. These theatrical experiences invite the spectator into the role of co-creator: the audience is part of the action, and can drive it forward with the decisions they make. Immersive theatre practices create a world around the audience, and use highly sensory activities to provoke, question, and entertain. It stretches the notion of what theatre can be.

In the world of Theatre for Young Audiences, Oily Cart Theatre, based in London, UK, uses Immersive Theatre techniques to reach a much younger audience. In these productions, young people and their caregivers enter a world that is rich with multi-sensory experiences, and invites them to participate in the action of the play. The focus is upon the individual spectators, their needs, and their reactions. The productions consist of a simple and purposeful structure that allows audience and performer to create the experience together.

#### **Oily Cart Theatre**

Oily Cart Theatre's motto is, "All sorts of theatre for all sorts of kids." And they live up to this statement. For over three decades, this company has been creating immersive, multi-sensory works for the very young and for students with complex disabilities. Their shows focus on creating a richly artistic experience for the audience, while inviting the spectators to help drive the story along.

Oily Cart was originally made up of three founding members: Tim Webb (Artistic Director), Amanda Webb (aka Claire de Loon, Head of Design), and Max Reinhardt (Music



Director). In the beginning, they did every part of the production, including writing the scripts, composing the music, making connections with schools, and performing. Now they have a support staff that aids them with their creations, and hire actors to perform in the shows.

The first show that Oily Cart produced for students with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) and Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) was *Box of Socks* in 1988 (“Oily Cart”). I spoke to Tim Webb about the creation of this work during a Skype interview in March 2014. They were asked by the principal of a special school to come in and work with their students. The challenges they saw were the wide range of ages of the students, which went from 3-18, and a wide range of abilities of the students. Prior to this, Oily Cart had primarily created theatre work for very young audiences. So the question was, how do they use their artistry, and the structures that they already knew, and apply it to a new audience?

Firstly, they had to get to know the audience. What the team ended up doing was “crash landing” a spaceship in the yard of the school. They dressed as aliens, and pretended that they had just landed in the playground and knew nothing of Earth. The students had to take on the role as teacher for the aliens, showing them around and explaining activities that, while normal to them, were completely foreign to the aliens. This gave the students a sense of autonomy, allowing them to share skills and activities that they knew to someone who really had no idea. At the same time, the Oily Cart team was able to learn more about the students and their possible needs (Webb).

This model is very similar to the residency plan that I experienced in the 2014 intensive Dream: The Joy of Creating with Oily Cart, which was run by Oily Cart members and the

Theatre for Young Audiences department at Rose Bruford College. I will go into more detail about Dream in Chapter Eight: The Joy of Creating with Oily Cart.

### **Inclusion**

The multi-sensory theatre that Oily Cart produces is intended for three distinct audiences: children and young audiences with learning disabilities, babies and toddlers, and children aged two and over. This unique style provides opportunities for young people to experience theatre in a way that they can connect with and asks questions about what else can be created for these audiences?

This is not the usual model of Inclusion, where young people with cognitive disabilities are integrated into generalized or mainstream settings. Instead, this is a mode of Inclusion where awareness is the key. The multi-sensory theatre that is produced by Oily Cart is about awareness about theatre. It gives this specialized audience the opportunity to partake in a theatrical experience that is designed purely for them. It focuses on the needs of the individuals, thereby giving them greater ownership of the art and confidence to try new things.

In addition by creating theatre for this audience, Oily Cart is raising awareness of the audience itself. It is a form of Theatre for Social change, where the presence of the art in society raises questions about accessibility. If beautiful, rich, purposeful theatre is being created for students with cognitive disabilities, then what other areas of life can also be opened to this audience? What other possibilities are out there in the world?

### **Play**

Exploration and play are a huge part of the Oily Cart experience. Beginning with their entrance into the space, audience members are immersed in a different world. They are asked to

pretend that the doorway into the performance is a portal. At the same time, often the Oily Cart work starts with a recognizable situation. This is so that the audience can find personal connection, or even learn more about aspects of their world.

Within the performance, audience members are invited to touch, smell, see, hear, and taste in order to further the story. At times, the performers may even ask the audience to actively participate to answer a question: to physically move a block, or find a sock, or ring a bell that will cause something else to happen onstage. In these moments, the performers are inviting the audience to participate in symbolic play, become part of the world of the show in order to make something happen

### **Engagement**

As stated in the forward to the book: *Oily Cart: All Sorts of Theatre for All Sorts of Kids*, “Through a 30 year body of work, Oily Cart has consistently asked questions about theatrical form, the way in which narrative is used and how the rules of spectator engagement can be mischievously adapted and changed for the benefit of young audiences and their carers” (Gardner 2). In an Oily Cart show, the audience is part of the action, constantly being asked to taste, feel, smell, hear, and see. There are moments when the spectators have to join in the activity in order to further the story. In this way, the audience is not merely watching, they are helping to create the experience. They are co-creators.

In addition, there is a very specific method in which the performers and the audience members interact in this type of theatre. There is no fourth-wall between the action and the audience, and the performers have to have moments when they are reacting and responding to each other, reacting and responding to the audience as a whole, and reacting and responding to

individuals in the audience. This three-tiered method of engaging the audience is incredibly difficult for performers and often takes time and experience to master.

Most actors are already trained to respond to the other actors onstage, and even to a larger audience; but how do they respond one-on-one with young people who may not have the verbal skills to communicate directly? Intensive Interaction, developed by Phoebe Caldwell, is a method of communication with people with ASD that encourages body language as a main mode of response (Caldwell). Reading the young person and responding to how they communicate is the key. If a student avoids eye contact, the performer shouldn't insist, but instead find a different way to connect. If a student is flapping their arms or stimming by rocking back and forth, the performer can repeat the movement back to them. This is not done as mimicry, but as a way to relate that they understand the movement. Giving the students this focus will help the performer to connect better with the audience member, which will give the audience member a level of comfort when they are invited to participate in the experiential and communal activities of the performance.

### Connections

The following chapter is my experience exploring the process of creating multi-sensory theatre with the members of Oily Cart Theatre, Rose Bruford College, and 15 others who wanted to learn the techniques of this fabulous company. The intensive, which took place over a week in October 2014, was set within a special school in Ashford, Kent, UK. By focusing on purposeful creation, collaboration, and sharing the creation with our audience, I have learned how to use my artistic training to intentionally design a piece for young people with perspectives different from

my own. In addition, I have grown to see just how important focusing on individuality within our audience can affect me as an artist.

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: THE JOY OF CREATING WITH OILY CART**

I felt so lucky to be chosen. An overwhelming sense of joy engulfed me, knowing that I was only one of two people from the United States who had been hand-selected to participate in this intensive. In October, of 2014 I joined 15 artists, educators, and activists to learn together about using sensory exploration to create theatrical experiences for young people with complex disabilities. After two years of practically worshipping the intense artistry that is Oily Cart Theatre, I was given the opportunity to meet and work with them in the UK. Dream. Come. True.

### Dream: The Joy of Creating with Oily Cart

In this intensive, we had the opportunity to not only learn and analyze the Oily Cart process, but also to work with and present to students with a variety of complex disabilities. Our goal for the week was to create a “show” based on the needs and interests of our audience. In this week, we would work collaboratively with three other people to develop a theatrical structure; we would “compose” music, play with sensory items, and get to know each individual in our class. The days were broken into four sessions: observation, Sharing 1, Sharing 2, and Sharing 3. We would then take the piece that we had created and present it to the community of Ashford, in an effort to raise awareness of ASD and the wonderful artistry that this work can bring.

### The Creative Process

#### **Day One: Introductions**

It was 9am, and I had only a whisper of a voice. Actually, my body thought it was 3am, and it was angry that I was so exuberantly moving around. How could I not be excited? I had

traveled from Nashville, TN to Ashford, Kent, UK so that I could learn from one of the foremost creators of multi-sensory theatre for students with complex disabilities. I was nerding out.

The home base for the Dream intensive was in The Stroud Community Center, specifically in the Jasmin Vardimon Dance Studio. It was a wide and cavernous room with curtains and mirrors. As each participant entered the space, we quietly sat in chairs in a circle. It was time to begin our journey together.

### *Ensemble Creation*

The first task was to go around the circle and check-in about what our greatest hopes and apprehensions were for the week ahead of us. I madly began typing on my iPad, knowing that there was a strong possibility that I wouldn't actually be able to say the words that I wanted to say. I felt a sense of panic that because of a literal lack of voice, I couldn't communicate who I was. If I couldn't communicate who I was, how could I make connections with other people?

An interesting conversation came up as we went around the circle that made me realize just how many different backgrounds and opinions were present. One woman brought up the subject of language and stated that she really preferred the term Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), rather than Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Hearing that, I blushed, knowing that I had said ASD in my introduction. I had never heard of ASC and thought it might have been something that was not used in the United States.

It turns out that ASC is terminology used in the social model of discussing Autism, whereas my research and practice was within the medical and educational models. Thinking about this, I realized that because of our personal relationships to Autism, we would all have different models that we were following. My connection with Autism is through educational

research and theatrical practice, not personal connection. I will never be passionate about Autism in the same way as the mother of a son with Autism would be. But that doesn't mean that we can't still create together and work towards that greater goal of inclusion and acceptance; it just means we may need to be more aware of how we communicate.

Communication was actually the next thing on our docket. Just as the brand of theatre we were going to be creating is active and discovery-based, so was our exploration of communication. The Oily Cart team got us up on our feet and facilitated a number of exercises that made everyone step outside their comfort zone and use their bodies, minds, and voices to get to know each other. We were playing together, laughing and being silly, but still learning about personalities and different ways that we could communicate with each other.

My favorite activity that we did during this session was Sound Tag. Max, the music director of Oily Cart, had every person spread out across the vast expanse of the cavernous dance floor. He asked us to create a sound and movement that we could do while moving—running, even. We shared each mini-creation, and then he chose a person to be “It.” That’s when the chaos began. Everyone spread throughout the space, making their noises, and the person who was “It” had to catch people. When you were caught, you had to plant yourself and begin doing the “It” person’s sound and movement. The “It” person had to pay attention to who was not making the “It” noise, all the while continuing his or her sound and movement. It was a lesson in awareness of the space, awareness of what everyone around you was doing, and communication of needs. It also helped all of us to get out of our heads and to be silly and creative.



It should be said that every activity we did, although facilitated by an Oily Cart team member, always included every person in the room. This meant that Tim, Amanda, and Max, from Oily Cart, and Jeremy and Nori from Rose Bruford played along beside us. Everyone in the room came together to play. This emphasis on ensemble lasted throughout the week, regardless of stressful situations or communication errors. We were all a team, and we were learning together.

### *Experimentation*

The activities that we did together went from individual creation to collaborative experimentation. In an activity that focused on exploration and experimentation, we were given the opportunity to examine our space using our senses. We paired up, and were given a blindfold. One partner wore the blindfold while the other guided them around the space, helping them to touch, taste, hear, smell, and feel whatever was in the room. The guide had to think about the experience of the blindfolded person and had to facilitate accordingly. The blindfolded partner had no idea what was going on and had to trust their partner completely, while still trying to really explore.

While this led to some comical moments of discovery (I had my partner, unknowingly, touch the hand of another blindfolded person, which led to dual physical recoils and shrieks), there were also beautiful moments of inspiration. Laura, my partner, touched a piece of fur that was on someone's jacket, and automatically recoiled. Seeing her discomfort, I, as guide, took the fur and held out her arm. I gently brushed it against the inside of her forearm until she relaxed her posture. Laura was uncomfortable. I read that in her body language, and, instead of avoiding

the sensation, I offered her a different way to experience it. We were learning each other's sensory preferences, how to read physical cues, and how to adapt in the moment.

After a quick cup of tea and some conversation, the sixteen participants were divided into groups of four. The Oily Cart team brought out a huge bin of items: the bin had fabric, cushions, feathers, fans, bubbles, instruments, scented oils, bubble wrap, newspaper, and so much more. We were given a few moments to play with the elements, to see how they could be used, and then our task was laid before us: create an inviting entrance experience for someone coming into our theatre-space for the first time.

Oily Cart is known for their multi-sensory performances, and also for their emphasis that the entire environment be experiential. This includes the entrance to the playing space. We were given twenty minutes to work together, and would then present our creation to the group. One of the Oily Cart team members would step into the role of someone who was entering the space for the first time. This exercise gave us the opportunity to stretch our creative muscles, to communicate and collaborate with our new teams, and to purposefully design an experience for a specific audience.

### *Collaboration*

The past two years have been an extended lesson in the art of collaboration. One of the beautiful pieces of the art of theatre, and the program at UCF specifically, is the many opportunities we are given to work with and learn from people with a wide variety of backgrounds and ideals.

From the first day of the Dream intensive, it became clear that we were going to flex our collaborative muscle often and with fervor. Sixteen people, of all different backgrounds,

skillsets, and goals had come from around the world for one purpose: to learn how to create an experience with students with complex disabilities. At the end of this week, we could no longer be sixteen individuals, but one living ensemble.

My group consisted of four women: a theatre artist (Susan), a designer (Pip), an educator (Oona), and me. I was the only person in my group from the United States, and the only person who thought of themselves as a performer as well as a director, educator, and musician. In addition, I was the only person who couldn't fully communicate through talking, and instead had to be a very active listener.

I felt slightly unsure of my own abilities. Although I had been given a great deal of experience in creative collaboration, my colleagues weren't coming from the same background. There was so much that I didn't know! I decided to trust my training, trust my team, focus in on our goal rather than on myself, and to be as open and thoughtful as possible. Listening would become my greatest asset.

In preparation for the next day, the entire ensemble sat down and talked about our expectations. We knew that we were going to be creating three 15-minute sensory-based theatrical experiences. We knew that we were going to be in a school that was designed for students with profound and multiple learning disorders and autism spectrum disorder. What we didn't know was where to begin.

Tim announced to us that our prompt for the week was "Suitcase!" We could go wherever we wanted with that idea. Each group was to choose their own name, and to start

chatting about the possibilities the prompt gave us. We chose to be called Rucksack, as it was very fun to say.

### **Day 2: Observation**

In Day 2 of the Dream experience, the members of our ensemble were introduced to the school environment in which we would be living for the next three days, the students with and for whom we'd create, and the playing spaces where we would share our creations. This day was all about active observation, getting to know our surroundings and determining how we could use our artistic and adaptive abilities to produce an interactive work for our specialized audience.

#### *Our Environment*

The school where we would work for the next few days was an inclusive day school for students aged 3-21. When we arrived, it became apparent that we were stepping into a unique environment. On the doors were signs portraying sketches how to say certain phrases in Makaton, an educational version of British sign language. This type of physical language is designed to support spoken language, and is used to aid communication for students who may have difficulty ("About Makaton").

An administrator showed us all of the support systems provided by the school as she took us around the building. There were physical therapy and occupational therapy rooms, music and drama rooms with specialists for each art, a science lab and two cafeterias. Several heavy doors, which needed a passkey to unlock, closed off the corridors; this was to keep students who were prone to running from going very far. On the floor were black lines for students in wheelchairs to follow to guide them to their classrooms.

The goal at this school was to create an environment where students could experience success and achievement, feel safe and secure, prepare for adult life, and create a community. Our hope, as artists coming into their space, that we could uphold these values and contribute to the learning experiences of the students.

### *Our Audience*

Before going into our 20-minute observation with the students, the whole Dream Ensemble sat together in the teacher's lounge and discussed logistics. There were four possible groups to work with: a junior class of students, mainly with ASD and other cognitive disabilities, a class of students with profound and multiple disabilities (meaning that they were often nonverbal and had physical limitations), a class of students with profound and multiple disabilities and vision issues (meaning students that were mainly nonverbal, had physical limitations and vision limitations), and an S3 class of students, mainly with ASD and other cognitive disabilities.

Our group chose to work with the S3 class, meaning that their ages ranged from 11-17 years old. There were nine students, five girls and four boys. We were given their names, and a little background as to how each individual reacted to disruption of routine. Our class observation was scheduled for the time when our students would be in art class, which made all of us in the Rucksack group

The fact that our observation happened during Art was actually a blessing. The teacher welcomed us in, explaining that they were working on two possible projects: glazing their already fired coil pots or drawing a face on a template of a head. The students were engaged in a

very tactile activity, which allowed me to observe their comfort level with different textures and tools.

I sat next to a darling young woman with dark hair and eyes. She looked over at me with no expression on her face, but a lot of expression in her eyes. She was absentmindedly dipping her paintbrush into the glaze, but not bringing it directly to the pot; her focus was more on me. At this point in the seminar, I still had no voice, and was relying very heavily on whatever Makaton (British educational sign language) I could pick up from the educators in the group. I started to introduce myself, using what little voice and gestures I had. And she looked at me with those eyes, never stopping her brush or even turning her body.

Just then the teacher came over and spoke to her. “Antonia,” she said, “are you done with your pot?” Antonia slowly turned her head, but did not answer. The teacher held up two hands, with her palms facing out. She gestured with the left, “Are you still painting your pot,” and gestured with the right, “or are you drawing?” It was clear to me that giving Antonia a visual cue helped her to make connections with the choices in front of her.

From what we learned about the level of communication of our audience, we decided to use as few words as possible, but to reinforce their meaning with rhythm and Makaton. Based on our observations in the art class, there appeared to be no open aversions to strange textures and sounds. Our challenge with the group would be to create an environment that would be engaging and nonthreatening for the students. We wanted to emphasize play while maintaining a semblance of structure and routine.

### *Our Playing Space*

When we left the class observation, our group was brought into our Playing Space: the large school cafeteria. The room was wooden and cavernous. It was just after lunch, and there were remaining chairs and tables, with smells of the food that had just been served. Tall windows with velvet curtains stood on one side, giving us a lot of ambient light. There were three entrances to the room from the interior of the school and two from the exterior. On the far end, we could see the kitchen, which we were assured would be closed off for our sharing. Against the sides were long wooden benches.

Knowing the age and abilities of our class, our group then discussed possibilities for the space. The challenge was the size of the room. We needed to somehow adapt this large area so that it seemed less open, more intimate, more structured. Although our audience was older and needed less guidance than some of the other groups, we wanted to create an environment that would set clear expectations for where the action was going to take place, while still being inviting.

The prompt for the week was “the suitcase,” which had already sparked the discussion of travel. This space could be ideal for setting up different stations for sensory play, having the students travel from place to place, from experience to experience. Or, we could set up one defined area and bring the experience to them. The latter seemed like the most promising idea, as we wanted to have a semblance of control over the action. Asking the students, who we had met but didn’t have solid relationships with, to move around a space even in an organized fashion, seemed like it invited too much chaos. Although, usually I love a good bout of chaos with students, our new setting and situation made me feel not quite prepared for it. After much

deliberation, the group settled on the idea of setting up four of the benches in a diamond shape, with a chair at each point. It would be our train station, and the students would be waiting to go on a journey with us.

After observations, the groups gathered together to have a cup of tea and discuss the challenges and possibilities we had with each group. It was clear that our challenges lay more in the reactions of the audience. Because we were taking them out of their classroom environment, the worry was that the change of routine would make some of the students uncomfortable. How could we create an engaging structure, allow for play, and assess the needs of the individuals in the moment in an artistically rich way?

### **Day 3: Sharing 1**

#### *Creation*

The creation process for the first day spanned over the evening of Day 2 and the morning of Day 3. We knew that we were presenting for our students at 11:30am, so we needed to have all of our material requests in by 9:00am. Really, we only had about four hours to collaboratively create a fifteen-minute multi-sensory, interactive piece of theatre. It seemed impossible, but somehow it had to be accomplished.

Each group was given an Oily Cart Mentor to guide us in our creative journey. This person served as a coordinator, allowing us to create on our own but bringing in opinions and guidance when they felt it necessary. Each day the mentors would switch groups, allowing us to work with all of the Oily Cart members. Our first day was facilitated by Amanda (aka Claire de Loon), and she reemphasized the need for structure in our piece.



Our first bit of structure was that of the physical space, which we had already determined was going to be a station of some sort where we were waiting to travel. But within the space, aside from saying the words “Train Station,” how were we going to make it clear that this is our perceived environment? And how would we introduce the sensory elements that we wanted so desperately to use?

As we were talking out how to make our room a train station, someone jokingly said, “Tickety tack, tickety boom.” This onomatopoetic phrase was one that we all connected to the sound of a train. We laughed as we started marching around saying, “tickety tack, tickety boom!” And our first piece of rhythmic structure was born. By using this phrase, we would create a soundscape that connected the audience to a train station. From there, we created many theatrical rules for our world. When we wanted the audience’s attention, we would breathe in and out three times. We used very few words, and the words we used were repeated often and accompanied by a sign or hand gesture. Hopefully, this soundscape, and the visual cues we were using would connect with these nine kids.

We also used a performance object, something that Oily Cart is well known for, to further deepen the idea of travel. Each of us would have a suitcase filled with sensory objects that we would discover with the class. Our suitcases would have themes: paper, air, scents, and light. One at a time, we would introduce our suitcase to the audience, and bring out the sensory elements for a few moments of unstructured play. Amanda reminded us, however, that we only had fifteen minutes, and we still needed an ending. We decided to show off only two suitcases,

and when it was time for a third we would shake our heads and say “Later,” while using the Makaton sign. This would signal to the students that we were coming back at a different time.

A challenge in this process was definitely communication of ideas. I still had very little voice and far too many ideas than I could sign or write out. As the person who was the most comfortable performing, many of my ideas were linked to that aspect. I wanted to choreograph our movements. I wanted to have moments of visible discovery. It’s not that the others in my groups didn’t want that, it was just my focus in that moment and I couldn’t communicate it effectively. We were all coming from very different worlds and therefore had different focuses. Susan, a director, wanted everything done purposefully. Pip, a designer, is very visual and thought a lot about the physical structure of the piece. Oona, an educator and stage manager, had a lot of ideas about different sensory experiences we could bring into the experience. Somehow, with a little luck and some long hours, we made it work.

### *Sharing 1*

I could hear them outside the cafeteria, noisily coming down the hallway. Some voices sounded excited, others nervous. Standing in a corner of the room, I was waiting for the class to come in and sit on the benches that we had laid out for them. It was my job to cue the others to enter in with our suitcases and start the performance.

I nodded my head, and we all began to chant “tickety tack, tickety boom” as we entered our playing space. Once we were all in our places at the corners of the benches, the four performers breathed in and out three times, and sat. We waited. Most of the students were looking at us curiously, with one or two looking away.

That's when the suitcase promenade began. Susan stood up, walked her suitcase grandly around the circle, and plopped it down in front of the audience. She ceremoniously unzipped it, and opened the top. "Wow!" the performers cried, as she began to pull out bubble wrap, newspaper and tissue paper.

We, as performers, started to play with the paper, pass it around to the students. Without speaking, we tried to show them different ways of using the paper, and invited them to try. At first, some stared at us blankly, unsure what to do with the props. I tried to model with the newspaper, putting it on my head like a babushka, wearing it like a beard, tearing it up into pieces of confetti. I wanted the students to discover different tactics of their own, but many times, they repeated my own actions back to me. Maybe it would just take time.

When it was time for our paper exploration to come to an end, it was unclear how we would make that happen. The performers all started our chant, but it seemed like an underscoring to the chaos rather than a call for clean-up. Somehow, we got everything back into Susan's bag, and started again.

It was my turn. My bag was full of feathers, folded fans, and drum fans. I paraded my suitcase around the square, teasingly unzipped the case. "Wow!" I slowly pulled out a huge orange fan, and waved it to create a breeze in all of the spectator's faces. We began our exploration again, and this time students gladly took materials. We played with the lightness of feathers and made rhythms with the drum fans. I didn't have to model quite so much this time; students were coming up to me, waving fans in my face so I could feel the breeze.

It was then time to finish up our performance, say so long for the day. Knowing that this would be a complicated endeavor, the group had decided that we wanted it to seem as if one of the performers wanted to keep going, to continue playing, and then the rest of us would stop her. Oona, with her bag of oranges, started to parade around the group, tantalizingly peeling an orange and smelling it. Susan, Pip, and I stopped her, and said “Later.” Oona looked confused, and pointed to her orange. “Later,” we said and signed. “Tomorrow.”

But before we left, we each pulled out a green piece of paper. “Ticket” we said, and looked around at each of the students. Of course, none of the students had tickets. “Tomorrow” we said. And with that, we picked up our suitcases, started our tickety-tacks, and started to exit the playing space.

Before leaving, Susan stopped the head teacher and handed him a handful of our tickets. She asked him to have the students draw or write on the tickets what they would bring with them on a long journey. This little bit of homework, we hoped, would get the students to start thinking about what was important to them.

#### *Interpretation and Reevaluation*

After our sharings, each group gathered back in the teachers’ lounge to discuss our challenges that day and the possibilities for the next. Video had been taken of each group’s creation, so we were able to watch and learn from what everyone had experienced in their classrooms. We focused first on what had really worked that day: the rhythmic chorus of “tickety-tack tickety boom,” the growth of the sensory exploration, and the physical layout of our benches.

The question now was how to connect the first day with the second. How could we further the engagement of all of the students? How could we further emphasize our environment and its structure? What tools could we use to help us move from the chaos of sensory exploration back to our scripted story? With our minds buzzing, we started the creation process for Sharing 2.

#### **Day 4: Sharing 2**

##### *Creation*

Having already established a defined theatrical structure and our challenges for the day, the Creation Process for Sharing 2 was a little easier. We needed to purposefully adapt what we had created with those questions in mind, and to do it within a matter of hours.

Tim was our mentor on this day, and he emphasized with us the need for simplicity. He spoke to us about making each moment and each object precious, rather than glossing over ideas and having many objects. This would raise the stakes on what we were doing and would give greater buy-in from the audience. It was about quality over quantity.

Our sensory explorations had been a bit chaotic, both for the students and for the performers. We hadn't set boundaries in which to play, and it felt like each performer was wandering, trying to connect with students who really just wanted what was in our hands. In order to rectify this situation, the four of us decided that each performer would have a zone that they would work within and have individual interactions with the students in that area. On top of that, when sensory elements were pulled out of the suitcase, they would first go to the performers to model and then invite the students to join us.

We tackled the idea of bringing back the story after the chaos of sensory exploration. Our breathing technique was too subtle the day before, and we needed something that would be a stronger cue. In the piles of props and materials that Oily Cart had provided, there was a train whistle. This became our signal to each other and to the students that it was time to move on. It gave us another guide in our structure and enhanced the idea that we were actually in a train station.

Because we had given the students the tickets to work with the day before, we needed to use them in this sharing. They needed to be purposeful to our overall experience, not just an extension activity. But what do you do with a ticket? We were creating an environment that they were familiar with (a train station) so why not create a task that they were also familiar with? That's when the idea of punching the tickets came into play. We would have each student bring us their ticket, get it punched, and then they would put it into our last suitcase. It gave them a recognizable and achievable task, leading to even more buy-in.

Furthering the idea of the audience co-creating had become our next challenge. We had shared our story with the students, showing them the items in our suitcase. We had explored those items, played with them. It was as if sharing the items in our suitcases was like sharing the core of our characters. But now it was time to invite the audience to share with us.

### *Sharing 2*

Unlike the day before, we decided to begin the sharing in the hallway outside of the classroom, and we would systematically lead them to the playing space. This meant that one of us (me) gathered the class and then moved through the hallways with my suitcase, all the while saying the rhythmic, "tickety-tack tickety boom." Each Rucksack member was placed at a

different “station” in the hallway with their ticket and joined our train on its journey to the playing space. The students loved going on the train and chanted the tickety-tack tickety boom with me for the whole journey. The only challenge was keeping the students from running to the cafeteria without us.

In our playing space, we had the students sit on the benches again, and we took our seats in the chairs at the corners. We sat, using our choreographed routine, breathed in deeply (the visual cue to the audience that we were quietly waiting and they should, too), and began.

Because of Tim’s urging that we simplify, the suitcases that were going to be revealed only had two sensory diversions in them. First up was Oona’s suitcase of smells. She paraded her suitcase around; we all gasped when she shared what was inside. There were bunches of oranges, which we excitedly told the students, incorporating the Makaton sign. The oranges were passed to each ensemble member first so we could model a few different ways to manipulate them before handing them over to the students in our areas.

My favorite moment of this sharing happened when we were playing with the oranges. It happened that the bench that I was in charge of was where Tim had sat to observe and model. Only one other student sat there, so in the moments of intensive interaction I was playing with one student and Tim. We were smelling the oranges, rolling them up and down our arms, tasting them a little, and just generally playing. That’s when the student turned and pointed at Tim’s glasses. He reached down into his bag, pulled out his own glasses, put them on, and looked at Tim and I as if to say, “Tah dah!” The student then put the orange peel in between Tim’s glasses and his face, making him look like he had orange peel eyes. I couldn’t help but laugh, which

made the student take the orange peel and put it in between his own glasses and his eyes. We had been playing like this for about five minutes when Pip blew the train whistle, signaling us that it was time to clean up. Starting our tickety-tacks, we encouraged the audience members to help us clean up our mess.

Next was Pip's suitcase, complete with bubbles and flashlights. Before she revealed what was inside, we had someone turn off some of the lights and close a few curtains. This act was a conversation among the group, because we didn't want to jar any of the students and make them feel apprehensive. At first, there was no reaction just attention being paid to the vision of Pip's face when she opened the suitcase; an eerie glow from a push-light illuminated her face. When the bubbles began pouring out of the suitcase, the ensemble members took the sensory diversions first to model to the audience. We then asked the students if they would like to try by looking at them and simply saying, "Bubbles?" If they agreed, we would give them the opportunity to try it out. After a few minutes of play, we blew the whistle and cleaned up the space.

The very last thing we asked of the audience was to show us their tickets that they had drawn on. The students brought their tickets to the middle of the playing space, we punched it with a hole-punch, and placed it into the suitcase. It was the end of our day.

When we took the class back to their room, the teachers were given an empty suitcase. We asked that the students fill the suitcase with items that they would bring with them on a long journey. Our hope was that the teachers and students would find representations of things that were important to them, and bring the suitcase the next day to show us. We wanted them to take



ownership of our story by sharing with us. Hopefully, when we saw them the next day, they would have a suitcase to share with us.

### *Interpretation and Reevaluation*

In our reflective discussions after the sharing, the Rucksack group focused on what had worked that day: dividing the intensive interaction with the students, turning off the lights as a signal that we were about to have a new experience, punching the tickets. What we needed now was to give the students the opportunity to be co-creators in the experience, and to make it clear that this was the end of our journey together.

## **Day 5: Sharing 3 and Saying Goodbye**

### *Creation*

This was the day that we had to say goodbye to our class. I was heartbroken, knowing that I wouldn't have the opportunity to work again with these lovely students. Our challenge for the day was to use our defined theatrical structure to allow the students to be co-creators of the experience, and to end the whole thing with one final hurrah.

The focus on this Sharing needed to be allowing the audience to take autonomy over the performance, to allow them to drive the story. One way we chose to do that was to ask the class to fill a suitcase with items that were important to them, and to bring the suitcase with them to the final sharing. During the final sharing, instead of us introducing and sharing what was inside our suitcase, they would introduce and share what was in theirs.

The other way that we decided to encourage the idea of the audience as co-creator was to have a mystery that they had to solve. We decided to have one of our suitcases disappear, and the students would have to help us find it. When they did, there would be a final sensory experience,

larger than any of the explorations we had done before. My suitcase was stuffed with feathers and a large parachute, and then hidden in a closet in the back corner of the playing space. In order for the story of our sharing to continue, the students would have to find the suitcase.

We had already created a defined theatrical structure for our day, but needed a way to end it. As a group, the consensus was that we should say goodbye simply and purposefully. We would give the students a visual cue, and say, “Tickety-tack, time to go,” three times. And then we would shake each of their hands, grab our suitcases and leave.

As a gift to our class, the four of us decided to give them a little take-away to remember our time together. We put together gift bags with a piece of bubble-wrap, a feather, an orange, and a small container of bubbles. Each element stood for one of our sensory suitcases. We hoped that this gift would be a starter-kit for new adventures and experiences.

### *Sharing 3*

Just like the day before, I picked up the class from their room, and we tickety-tacked down the hallway towards our station. One of the girls had the red suitcase behind her, which the teacher had told me had been filled with items from the classroom. I had no suitcase, as mine was hidden in a closet, waiting to be discovered.

Once we had all been seated in the playing space, all four performers looked pointedly at the new suitcase in the room. “Tickety-tack, time to share,” we chanted until two of the girls brought the suitcase to the center. They opened it, and began to bring out what was inside. Each of the performers stepped forward and were handed items: a comic book, a red car, a newspaper, and so many other things that I can’t remember. Their suitcase was full and they were excited to share.

The next ten minutes are a bit of a blur. I remember some of the students coming up to me with items, showing me each detail with love and care. The reason I can't fully remember is because I was trying to encapsulate what was going on in this moment. I couldn't put my finger on why having these kids share these common items with us felt so magical. Wasn't that just a car? But then I remembered where I was and why I was there. I was sharing a moment with individuals who were expressing themselves. These same students were the ones who days earlier looked at all of us like we had come from a different world; now they were sharing themselves. It felt as though we had gained their trust. There is something magical about that.

After we discovered the items in their suitcase, Pip blew the whistle and we sat back down with our suitcases. Except for me. I didn't have a suitcase. We had hidden it in the closet, with a trail of feathers. The students noticed that I was without my prop and that there was a strategically placed feather next to my chair. As an ensemble, we went on a hunt, trying to find more feathers, until there it was! One of the students pulled the suitcase from the closet, covered in feathers, and began to open it. I struggled to stay in character as they ripped open the top and found a parachute.

Together, as eight students and four performers, we opened up the parachute and grabbed the edges. Up and down and underneath, the parachute blew back our hair and caused several of the students to giggle and shriek. I picked up a handful of feathers and threw it on top of the wave of fabric. The colorful pieces flew up high and drifted slowly down. Some of the students drifted away from the parachute and played a game of keeping the feather in the air with their breath. One student lay underneath the moving fabric and laughed, claiming that he was hiding.

These young people, who had on the first day been so apprehensive of us and of playing, were now playing on their own. It was magical.

It was time to say goodbye. Pip blew the train whistle, and we started to clean up the incredible mess of feathers. Many of the students did not want to clean up, and one or two seemed to be on the brink of melting down. The teachers stepped in and encouraged them to calm down. This was my worry: how do we say goodbye, set the expectation that they won't see us again, and not have someone get upset?

"Tickety tack, time to go," was our final chant. We repeated it three times, with a gesture. One at a time, each performer went up to a student and shook their hand to say goodbye. We took our suitcases and started to leave the room. Just as we got to the door, all four of us turned, signed and said "Over! Goodbye!" and walked out. We had done it.

### **Day 6: Sharing as Reflection**

A unique aspect of the Dream program was having the opportunity to reflect on our experiences by interpreting our pieces to share with the community of Ashford. Each group took the piece that they had devised with and for the students and transformed it into a five-minute snippet for an audience of adults. The challenge was trying to show the joyful moments of discovery that we had with each individual. It felt so strange to boil down such an inspiring experience into the meat of what we created; we wanted the audience to see how the students reacted to our efforts.

What our group ended up creating was a rhythmic piece of choreography, complete with suitcases, fans, oranges, and a train-whistle. We paraded around the audience, stopping at each corner to interact with our closest spectators. As we called out "Day One! Paper! Wow!" each of

us pulled out bubble wrap, which we held out to our audience. Many of them looked at us strangely but took the paper. That's when we got to show how we had learned to model our play and then share it with an audience member. Pip would blow the whistle after a moment or two of play with our new friend and we would march on to the next corner of the audience and the next day. For each day we shared an element with the group: paper, fans, oranges, and bubbles. For each element we had a sign and a little something to pull out of the suitcase to hand out. Finally, we came to our final day where we signaled to the audience "tickety-tack time to go." We then ushered them on to the next group and said goodbye to our performance piece forever.

It felt really good to reflect on our process in this way. By taking our three days of performances and boiling them down into a five-minute piece we had to pick out the highlights. What worked? What was extraneous? What was important to share? How do we make this sharing as interactive as what we created for the students? Although everyone was tired and brain-dead, actively reflecting on our process solidified the ideas. Showing our work to an audience that was not our students felt strange yet empowering. We were sharing what we created with these students. We were sharing with the world how they had touched our lives.

### The Outcome

This week was unlike any that I had ever experienced. I was in a different country with new collaborators, creating a form of theatre that I had not work with. I was outside of my element. What I walked away with was confidence. Dream: The Joy of Creating with Oily Cart challenged me to examine my own creative possibilities, while still being mindful of the simple joy of a singular experience. It has allowed me to reach outside of my comfort zone and to tell

stories in a way that I had never perceived. The intensive demystified this seemingly complex experience and made it attainable. And I could do it. I did it. That confidence will live with me forever.

As an artist, I feel as though the emphasis on simplicity, individual interactions, and collaboration pushed me to creatively problem solve. There were so many moments that a decision just had to be made. There was no time and we all had different opinions. I could feel my brain kicked into high gear, and I found myself searching the corners of my mind to come up with solutions.

As a director, I have been known to pile on the spectacle when I feel out of my element. Somehow, I make myself believe that shoving glitter and lights into the audience's eyes will blind them to the apologies I am making. What this experience taught me was to focus on simplicity and purpose. Quantity does not equal quality. There was a moment during the creation of Sharing 2 where we were talking about all of the sensory elements that were going to be in Oona's suitcase. It was a lovely mixture of sponges with scented oils, rubber gloves with dried beans inside, oranges, and air freshener. I wasn't really sure why but it seemed like too much. My Sensory Friendly hat was set askew by all of these smells; I felt overloaded. That's when Tim stepped in and suggested that we only share one item, his reasoning being that sharing one item made that item much more special. And how we used it, the purpose we put onto it, would excite and engage the students all the more. It was about being purposeful.

This idea of purpose is one that I have had to work on all of my time in graduate school. It is so important to me and so meaningful to me when an experience is simple and impactful.

And yet, when I am taken outside of my comfort zone I want to pile on, to prove that I know what I'm doing. Or I could just think of Tim with the orange as he delicately sniffed it and smiled. Simplicity and purpose is now my motto.

As a performer, I was set with the unique task of being hyper-aware of the meta-lesson as well as the individual reactions in front of me. When exploring one-on-one with a student, whether it was through call and response or sensory play, I had to be mindful of their response to an activity. At the same time, I had to stay in-role and continue with our purposeful structure. This was not an easy feat. Often, I would become enraptured with what discovery was happening in front of me and would have to shake myself back into the structure of the performance. This was not a style of performance that I was accustomed to but it reminded me a lot of my teaching practices. I could get to know the individual and still be aware of the goal of the exercise. This is a feeling that I want to instill in young artists with whom I am working: you can be an individual and still be part of the whole.

This process was filled with moments of intense creative collaboration. We were given short spurts of time to develop artistic, structured, and engaging pieces of a show for a specific audience. This alone was incredibly challenging. Each person in the group came from a different background, so our focuses were different. We hadn't worked together before, and we each had our own opinions as to what the intention of our piece should be. We had to quickly learn how to communicate with each other in a way that was helpful towards our goal and meaningful to each other. Hurt feelings were not part of the protocol. There was even a portion of time when

I really connected with the idea of having the audience as co-creator, creating the opportunity for them to drive our story along. There were so many conversations about how we could accomplish this in a purposeful manner. Just having the audience members be spectators did not align with the spirit of the exercise, and having them participating in a manner that was not purposeful felt like we were cheating them. Essentially, what we ended up doing with both the tickets and the suitcase was create a learning goal. We gave them activities that got them thinking about what was important to them. Then we incorporated that idea into the sharing at moments when we felt they would be prepared to share. It was scaffolding. We showed them what was important to us (the sensory objects in our suitcases), and then we asked them to share with us, first through writing and then through showing.

This work was about how we share ourselves, through language and through action. Part of our conversation with Tim on the second day was using words sparsely and purposefully. This forced us to examine what moments actually needed to speak and what moments could be communicated through actions. It reminded me of my work with the Blue Man Group, where the emphasis was on the physical action rather than words. The students really picked up the words and phrases that we introduced; it was like we created our own language. Since this discovery I have been using words less with my students. There are so many ways in this world to communicate and part of theatre is discovering how we want to express ourselves. Maybe I can learn to focus on non-verbal communication as a new method of expression.

The final culminating performance for the Ashford community was an interesting method of reflection for the entire Dream ensemble. I feel like it allowed us to step outside of our



creative processes and break down what had truly been important during that week. It also gave us the opportunity to have a conversation with a different audience about disability and what it means to intentionally design for this specific audience. In sharing our artistic creations, we were teaching the public about theatre, about disability, about the possibilities that arise when the two collide. It was a form of theatre for social change, an attempt to express what these students had meant to us, how we designed for them, and what art came out of the process.

I think one of the most important things that I gained by working with the Oily Cart team, my collaborative team, and these students was the realization that, although developing theatre for a specific audience, you are creating for people. You are not creating for a diagnosis. You are not creating for the community at large. You are not creating for yourself. You are creating for young people with interests and spirit and emotions. These young people are not their ability. They are people and they deserve every bit of attention and artistry I can give to them.

## CHAPTER NINE: THE POSSIBILITIES OF ACCESSIBILITY

Draw the art you want to see, start the business you want to run, play the music you want to hear, write the books you want to read, build the products you want to use – do the work you want to see done. -Austin Kleon, *Steal Like an Artist*

This is work that needs to be done. Theatre is a communal art, where all should be able to share stories and experiences. It is a place for us to provoke thought, to question the status quo, to learn and discover together. The prevalence of Autism in our society is not dwindling; it is growing every year. The artists, educators, and activists in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences, cannot ignore the perspectives of this audience. Work is being done, but is it work that will continue when the hype is gone?

### Ensuring Inclusion

Let's look back at my original question: How do I, as an artist, educator, and activist make theatre more accessible? I'm currently working with all three of the practical methodologies laid out in this thesis, but they are a stepping stone, a starting point.

In my experience in the worlds of both theatre and academia, there is an emphasis on being The First, or being The Best. Maybe, in this line of work, the emphasis should be on who is the Most Adaptable. I have learned that being open to adaptation aids me in my connections with students on the spectrum and their caregivers. I know that I may have wonderfully grand ideas that could very possibly change a mind, or change the world. The fact is, if it isn't serving the audience that I'm working for it's just not going to work. So how do I adapt? How do I

continue to use the artistry that is within me to create and grow with this population? Adapting doesn't mean giving over your own beliefs, your own artistry, it means communicating and compromising: it means collaborating with your audience. It means being a co-creator.

Sensory Friendly Performances connect theatre companies with the community, are relatively inexpensive, and give young people and their families the opportunity to experience theatre in a non-threatening environment. But, the fact is, that they are not completely inclusive. They provide an opportunity, but they are still separating the population. It's possible that adaptation of a production and an environment is just the first step in the journey. How do we create something that is accessible for all individuals, regardless of their sensory processing needs? What are the possibilities?

A conversation that has arisen recently, as I continue to explore the medium of Sensory Friendly Performances, is what an SFP should be. As I have stated before, each company creates their own Sensory Friendly process, focusing on the needs of the theatre, the audience, and the community. Our methods at Orlando Repertory Theatre reflect our needs; we, as a team, have created a process where we modify a lot of the environment and the technical aspects of the show. Other companies do not adjust as much as we do. So the question that I am currently pondering is: are we changing too much? Are we trusting our audience? When do we cross the line from making meaningful adaptations to pandering?

As an artist, these questions are an important part of my reflection. Examining what we have done helps me to further my idea of what our process can be and what inclusion can mean. Without challenging our methods there would not be growth in our process. SFPs have taught me

to always be learning from those around me, and to push for more inclusive possibilities. There is always room to reach one more person, to change one more mind.

Inclusive Arts Integration Residencies give the teaching artist the opportunity to connect with students. You have a structure, a learning goal, but have to adapt to suit your audience both prior to the lesson and in the moment. You relate to them one-on-one, learn their needs, and take the small victories. Creative thinking and adapting is key. How do we make these experiences more accessible to more young people? How do we get them into more theatre classes? How do we demystify the art of teaching for students with disabilities so that more teachers want to do it? I have learned so much from the young people I've taught, and from the teachers I've collaborated with, and I still feel the frustration. I still have to remind myself of the small victories.

The classroom is where I have learned to fail. With so many goals in mind (learning goal, artistic goal, individual goals), it is entirely possible that a plan or an adaptation will not work. As a teaching artist, I have to reassess my original plan and recognize that it just did not work. In those moments, failure may seem like a problem. In actuality, the problem is a possibility. By recognizing that my plan is not perfect, I can then search my brain for how to make it work. What do I have in my toolbox that I can purposefully interject into this experience to attain my goal? What possibilities lay in front of me? How can I work with my audience to discover a higher level of learning and creation? The classroom is a community and my students are some of the resources I need to reach my goals.

Multi-Sensory interactive theatre is incredibly effective in the engagement of audiences with cognitive disabilities. The performers' split focus between the individual and the whole performance creates an intimacy that inspires confidence in the audience members. Having moments where the audience gets to simply play and experience, allows for sensory discoveries to be made, solidifying the "whats" of the world, not just the "whys." Allowing for the individual audience members to act as co-creators in the experience provides ownership of the experience. The challenge then is, again, how to bring this work to more audiences? Where does the funding come from? Where does this model of art fit into our already perceived models of theatre? How do you train actors in this method of performance?

With all of these questions come many possibilities.

### The Possibilities

I started this journey as someone with no personal connection to the work. All of that has changed. I now have pages of stories that add to my passion. I have faces to put to the research. I've created with students, worked with teachers, collaborated with artists, and connected with parents. My passion will continue to drive my belief that all people should be invited to play. My experience and my training will give me the tools I need to better create those possibilities.

The practices and processes that I have written about in this thesis are not the only experiences out there. Theatre companies are casting people with cognitive disabilities, and are truly examining the question of how society views this method of diversity. TYA houses are developing productions that are a step beyond Sensory Friendly, inviting people of all sensory processing levels to join in an experience that would be welcoming to all. The Kennedy Center

Theatre for Young Audiences just presented an adaptation of the book *Mockingbird*, by Katherine Erskine, which is the story of a young girl on the autism spectrum who changes a community (kennedy-center.org). There are examples of the conversation of ability rising. There are possibilities of artistry rising with it.

In my own life, I am trying to push myself as an artist, educator, and activist, by recreating my experience at Oily Cart at a school in Orlando. I have gathered three young actors, and have developed workshops based on ensemble creation, sensory exploration, the conversation about society's views of Autism Spectrum Disorder, and the possibilities that the marriage of artistry, adaptation, and intentional design can bring. Our ensemble will be going into a PreK classroom for observation, and then we will collaboratively devise a multi-sensory, interactive theatrical experience for the class. Our goal is to focus on the needs, interests, and engagement of the individuals while using rich theatrical language and purposeful storytelling to create a piece of art for the students. It will be for them, it will be with them, it will be a gift to them.

The process that I have developed to work with my ensemble follows that of the Dream Intensive, but with one simple difference: I am the guide. I have to take the methods I've learned and communicate it to three young theatre artists who have not had the opportunity to fully devise a theatrical piece. They have not worked with this population. They have not worked with each other. Because of this, the environment in which we create has to be just as much about relaying information and creating a safer space for the individual artists, as it is about our audience. I have become the artistic director in these moments, allowing space for them to create,

to fail, to grow, to question, while still focusing on our goal. This process, although still in its beginning stages, has challenged me to share and to question what I know about directing, about ASD, about purposefulness, and about art. I am the one with the prior knowledge, but I find myself learning from the ensemble, their perspectives, and their insights.

In my eyes, creating for specific individuals pushes artists to think beyond their comfort zones. It challenges us to take out every tool we have in our toolbox and to examine our methods in a more purposeful way. I know that, through my experience, I focus more on purpose and simplicity than I ever have before. I think more about the perspectives of others than my own perspectives. And isn't that what activism is? Stepping outside of your own perspectives to purposefully connect with others?

I want to create a Theatre for All Audiences. I want it to be possible. The work that I have learned about, developed, and practiced has fed my belief that theatre is a tool to connect communities and challenge perspectives. I think of myself now not as an artist, not as an educator, but as an activist who educates through her art. The more people I meet, the more perspectives I come into contact with, and the more I learn about the work that other artists are doing, the glimmer of possibility for a Theatre for All Audiences grows brighter. Accessibility comes closer, but always ever so slightly out of reach.

So how do we ensure the growth of accessible and inclusive practices in theatre? By continuing the conversation; by conducting and keeping up with research; by observing the needs and wants of our audience; by purposefully creating for our audience; by adapting our own practices; by trying new things and never being afraid to fail; by communicating and

collaborating and reaching for the brass ring; by focusing on the positive and realizing that it is not always going to be unicorns and rainbows; by using our artistry to make those connections, to share the stories, and to do the work we want to see done.



## **APPENDIX A: SOCIAL STORY**



## going to the theatre a social story

After the show, please tell us what you think of our  
Sensory Friendly Performance! Please fill out our survey:  
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/GPMWSPG>



## theatre

Today I am going to the **theatre**.

I am going to Orlando Repertory Theatre to see a  
**show**.



## show

I am going to see Dr. Seuss's *The Cat in the Hat*.

This is a book by Dr. Seuss that was made into a  
**show** with actors and music.



## lobby

When I enter the building, the first thing I will see is the  
**lobby**.

There are many fun and colorful things to look at, and  
there may be a lot of people.





### lobby

There is a lot to see in the **lobby**. There is even a stage that I can stand on.

There may be other people in the **lobby** that I do not know. They can also stand on the stage with me.



### box office

Before we go into the **theatre**, we have to get **tickets** for the **show**.

We will go to a place called the **box office**. This is where we will talk to a person who will sell us **tickets**.



### ticket

I will get a **ticket** that lets me into the **show**.

Every person seeing the show needs to have a **ticket**.



### concession stand

On the other side of the lobby is a concession stand.

The **concession stand** is where people go to buy snacks and drinks.

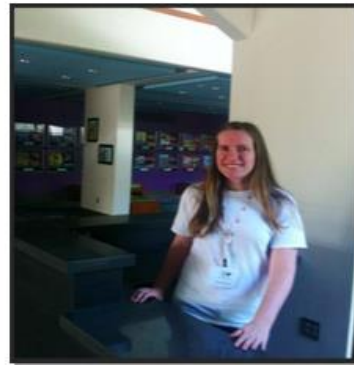




### **ramp**

When it is time for the show, we walk up the **ramp** to go to the theatre.

When I walk up the **ramp**, I will hold the handrail.



### **helpers**

If I need help, I can ask a **helper**.

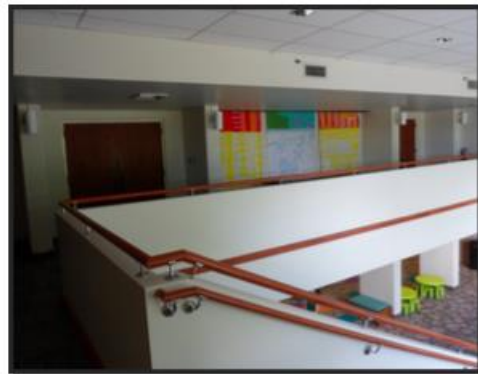
**Helpers** will be wearing white shirts and a tag that says **Helper**.



### **upper lobby**

The **upper lobby** is the entrance to the theatre. There may be a lot of people waiting in the **upper lobby** to see the show.

To get into the theatre, I will have to walk up **stairs**. There will be **helpers** in the lobby who can show me where to go.



### **balcony lobby**

I will enter the theatre from the **balcony lobby**.

Here, a **helper** will look at my **ticket**.





### theatre

The **theatre** will be darker than the balcony lobby.  
A **helper** will be there to help me find a **seat**.  
To get to my **seat**, I need to walk down **stairs**. There is a **handrail** for me to hold.



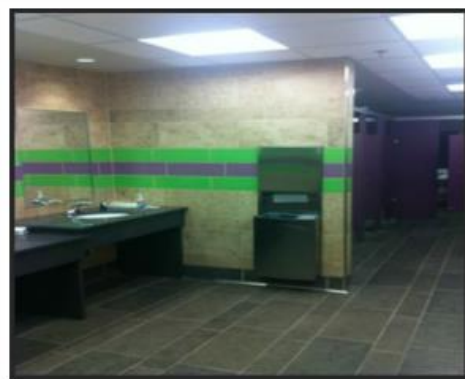
### sitting

A **helper** will help me find a seat.  
I sit with my friends or family members during the **show**.  
I may be **sitting** next to someone I do not know.



### show

The **show** will be on the **stage**. There will be actors, colors, and music during the show.  
It is ok for me to cover my ears if the **show** is too noisy.



### bathroom

If I need to use the **bathroom** during the show, I can ask a friend or family member to take me.  
A **helper** can help me find the nearest **bathroom**.  
The **toilets** in the **bathroom** are noisy, and will flush on their own.







### exit

If I need to take a break from the show, I will tell a friend or family member.

We will **exit** the theatre, and ask a **helper** how to get to the **quiet lobby** or **quiet room**.



### quiet lobby

If I need a break from the show, I will tell a friend or family member.

I can leave the show at any time and go to the **quiet lobby**.

I can sit in a chair or walk around the **quiet lobby**.

There may be other people in the **quiet lobby**.



### stairs

If I need some quiet time, I will ask a friend or family member to take me to the **quiet room**.

We will ask a **helper** to guide us to the **quiet room**.

I will have to walk up **stairs** to get to the **quiet room**.

When I walk up **stairs**, I will hold onto the **handrail**.



### quiet room

If I need some quiet time, I will tell a friend or family member to take me to the **quiet room**.

A helper will guide us to the **quiet room**.

I can sit in a chair or walk around the **quiet room**.





### clapping

The show is over when the actors take a bow.  
I can show that I liked the show by **clapping** my hands.  
Other people will **clap** too, and it may be loud. If the **clapping** is too loud, it is ok to cover my ears.



### leaving

When **leaving** the theatre, I will have to walk up **stairs**.  
There will be other people **leaving**, too. There will be a lot of people on the **stairs**.  
I will walk slowly and wait for my friends and family members.



### leaving

When I **leave** the **theatre**, I will walk down **stairs**.  
  
There will be a lot of other people on the **stairs**. I will walk slowly and hold onto the **handrail**.



### meet and greet

After the show, I can meet the **actors**. This is called a **meet and greet**.  
The **actors** will be in their costumes from the show.  
I can tell them that I liked the show and say thank you.

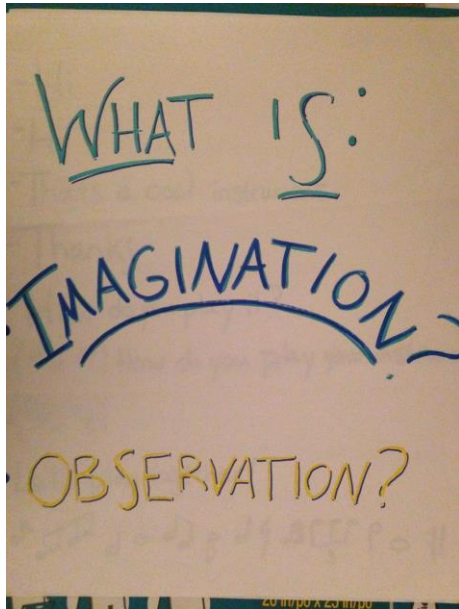


**APPENDIX B:**  
**CLASSROOM MATERIALS FROM BLUE MAN GROUP: INVENTING**  
**AN INSTRUMENT**

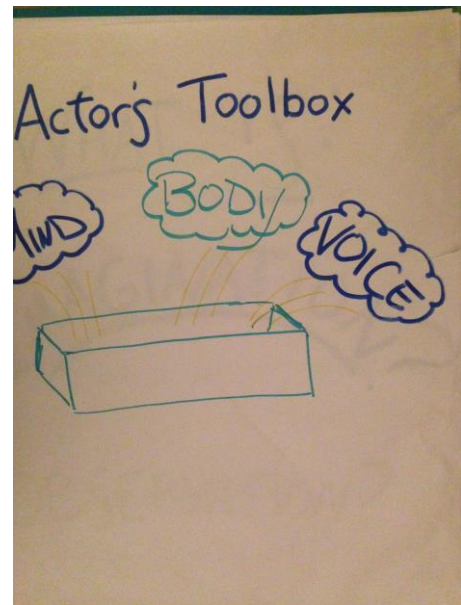


## Essential Questions/Visual Aids

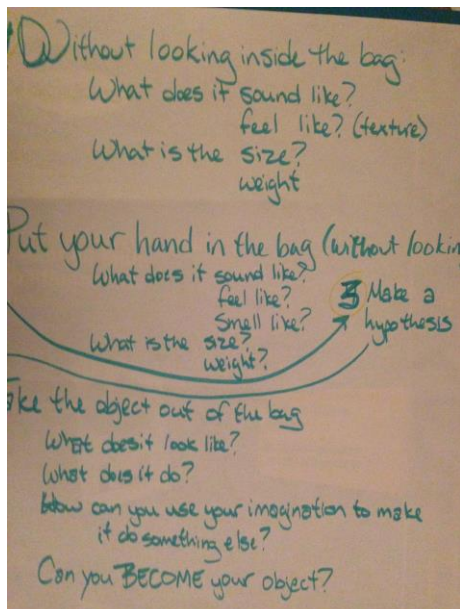
### Inclusive Day 1: Essential Question



### Inclusive Day 1: Visual Vocabulary



### Inclusive Day 1: Activity Layout



How do we use  
our IMAGINATIONS and  
our OBSERVATIONS to  
INVENT?

- 1) imagination
- 2) observation
- 3) invention / design
- 4) .....
- 5) .....
- 6) .....

TODAY'S  
ESSENTIAL  
QUESTION:  
How do we use our  
IMAGINATION and  
Observation  
to CREATE A CHARACTER?

# Engineering Steps:

- 1) imagination
- 2) observation (5 senses)
- 3) design/plan
- 4) implementation
- 5) adaptation

# Creating a character:

- 1) imagination
- 2) observation (movement vocab)
- 3) design/plan
- 4) implementation
- 5) adaptation

1) Fast	quick furious hurried - speedy roaring flying sprinting	Fast heavy - nervous to go slat right back about 100 feet per second ap green army antelope Flash as train plane marker truck Saw Katie
2) Medium		Redstart two Flamingos turk fish penguin
3) Slow	turtle suspiciously moving	Slug small tortoise runner in sea food motion lady
Weight: <u>heavy</u>		
1) light	Safe slender velocity any	swallow butterfly snail achieve moving read/forth
2) medium		
3) heavy	dead deadweight colossal bullet-like hard back etc	iron gears the rock Gentle Aster
Leading from:		



**APPENDIX C:**  
**JOURNAL FROM DREAM INTENSIVE**

**10/6/14**

## **Introductions and Ensemble Building**

### Who am I and why am I here?

- Teaching artist, theatre maker
- In my last year getting my MFA in Theatre off Young Audiences at University of Central Florida
- Graduate fellow at Nashville children's theatre in TN
- Have been doing sensory friendly performances--believe that this is the next step
- Hope is to inform my artistic process--bring it back to us to create in school residencies and theatrical performances with and for students on the spectrum--creating immersive and sensory-based theatre--helping find their voices and stories and creating awareness
- Apprehension--physical sense getting in way of creative sense

### About our process

- No concept of the fourth wall
- Going through a process to get to theatre-space, know you're going to a new place--kinesthetic adventures--first way to find kinesthetic pathway
- Why do we do it? Intellectually challenging. How do you establish communication with those who are consider to be difficult to establish communication with?
- Changing things up and changing means of communication--adding variety
- Take theatre where it had never been before--political mission—

- Theatre education companies in UK 1960s—research
- Not art for art's sake, but art for social change
- Can kinesthetic theatre be created not from an outside source but just with touch---  
kinesthetically sat
- Close and interactive work--playfulness and reaction
- Responding to interactions and interventions of staff around
- How to touch without touching? Water and bubbles and misting
- Placing students on the drum
- Always a triad--actor, young person, carer--adults will give the impression of what will  
work more than the student often-times
- Bring something with them--some sort of object--coming up with question is difficult
- Question that could be interpreted on many levels
- Actors had more poetic ideas--students may have less symbolic ideas
- Keeping classes informed and negotiating and communicating
- Look at all spaces that are available in the school
- Keeping music simple and expressive--not cluttering or complicated
- Thesis note: the language—the asd episode
- Phoebe Caldwell--intensive interaction

#### Ensemble Exercises:

- Create a sound tag
- Motet with movement

- Sound exercise with movement, move around the room four groups
- Spectrum of difference with sides of the room
- Soundscape
- Guiding blind with sensory play
- Entering the room with student to comfortable area

**10/7/14**

## **Wyvern School day 1**

### The School:

#### FE department

- create college environment
- home school department
- No longer wearing uniforms
- Doing work out in the community and competitions 2 days at college
- Given tasters to decide where they would like to go when they leave--finding appropriate courses in community and be involved with what's going on
- Enterprise trailer
  - Preparation for independent living--kept separate from little ones 16-19

#### Secondary school

- Worked closely with architects for spaciousness
- Key stage 4--exam group?

- Specialists for core subjects--tech room, art lab
- Coping around with moving to different subjects--same support staff with them as they move
- Life is not about always having the same team around you, but adapting how you communicate
- Try to keep primary and secondary team the same--people who know them inside out
- Each lesson is 50 minutes
- Move to different form groups
- School is not just school, school is where they're with their friends
- 188 learners
- Class sizes--9-11 dependent on pupils needs and levels of support

#### Primary department

- Sensory teaching area 2, maximizing their time in school to meet their needs, communication to meet needs--being able to let people know who you're feeling-- being tuned in to the individual 1-1 teacher to student--highly resource based
- Getting somewhere is not by accident
- J4--junior--the boys on the autistic spectrum
  - Strong personalities
  - Have own play areas--accessible for wheelchair access--covered

#### The Arts

- Have specialists for each subject--Danielle would DIE



- Do one production every year--creating an xfactor type of program--secret
- Take a decade and each class will create own element--gives chance to express themselves
- Drama not especially in curriculum but part of everyday classroom

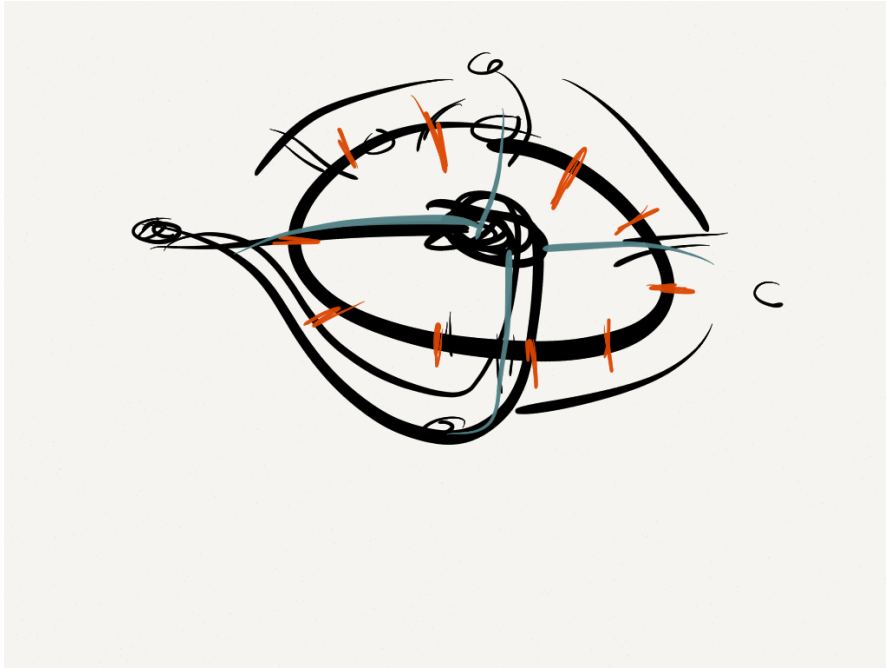
### Our Class:

#### Rucksack--S3

- Amanda (Claire) as Oily Cart mentor on Wednesday
- Matt—teacher
- A—small blonde, stays to herself, likes painting
- B--dark hair, quiet and focused, likes to laugh
- C--meet and greet, smaller, easily distracted
- D-gets excited and chatters, wants to describe everything to you
- E—will tell you exactly what he will and won't do, structure and routine
- F—mostly non-verbal, part of pmld class too, sweet and loving, can react suddenly, making her laugh is wonderful
- G—tall and thin, fascination with technology, likes to figure things out
- H--no consent
- I--no consent

### Playing Space

- larger room with windows(have blinds)--hardwood floors



Playing Space: Sensory Station Ground plan—they come to us



Playing Space: Train Station Ground Plan—we go to them

**10/8/14**

**Wyvern School Day 2:**

Sharing 1 Questions:

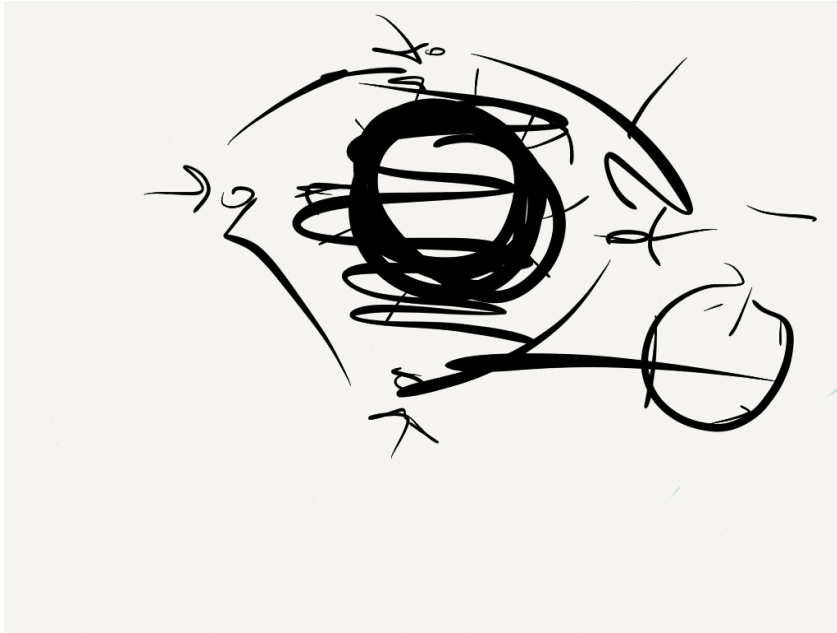
- How to move young people during performance without being the movers
- Importance of staying in character
- Difference of doing something in own space vs doing something in a neutral or unknown space
- Sound depending on student movement
- Giving elements to students not each other?
- Adaptation of space

**10/10/15**

**Wyvern School Day 4:**

Sharing 2:

- How to set up space for culminating event in school?
  - Breaking out of structure for co-creation event



Space set-up with parachute?

#### Creation of shared language

- Tickety tick tickety boom--travel
- Wow--excitement
- Tickety tick time to go
- Tickety tick tidy up
- Train whistle
- Ticket
- Suitcase
- Punching of ticket.
- Yours/mine

- Later
- Sharing of what's important

**Important to remember:**

- Every little thing has importance--ritualize and make specific
- Important to individualize

**10/10/14**

**Wyvern School Day 4:**

Our “Script”

Day One: structure creation

- They meet us in the space
  - Breathe, nod, sit, click click, breathe
- First suitcase, around--paper--show around
  - Opening ritual--zip gasp sip gasp zip gasp WOW
- Second suitcase--fans and feathers
  - OPENING RITUAL
- Start third--orange around
- TRAIN WHISTLE
- Later
- time to go
- Ticket--do you have a ticket?

- Tickets to teachers: Draw or write something you would take with you on a journey
- Tickety tack time to go--door--bye! Later!

Day Two: freer, exploration of structure

- Meet them at room- pick up others with tickets along the way
  - Go around once, they sit
  - Ritual opening (nod, sit, handle, breathe 3xs)
  - Now do I do the suitcase?
- Suitcase 3--smell--oranges and satsumas
  - OPENING RITUAL
- Train whistle
  - Tidy up—tickety-tack tidy up
- Suitcase 4--opens with light coming out
  - Bubbles
- Train whistle
  - Tidy up—tickety-tack tidy up
- Ticket--YOUR ticket
  - Share tickets
  - Tickets punched--put in bag
- Train whistle

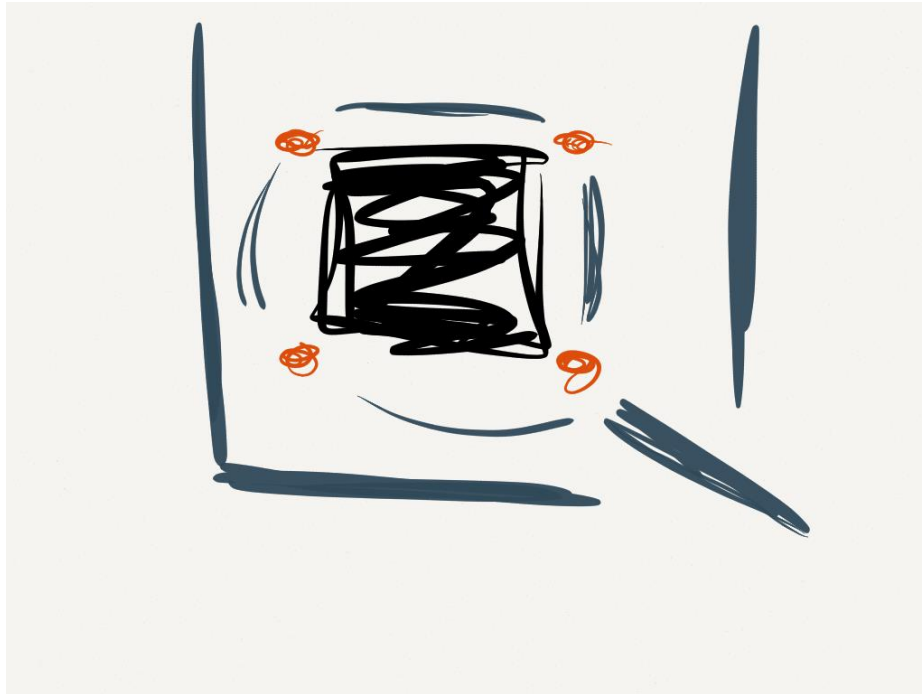
- Tickety-tack time to go
- Take back to room
- Bye!
- Leave suitcase with them
  - what would they take with them as a group?
  - What is important to them?

Day Three: free play and parachute, saying goodbye

- Pick up at room--ticket, suitcase, rhythm--one suitcase hidden with parachute
  - Pick up one at a time on way
  - They sit, we circle
- Sitting ritual
  - Breathe, nod, sit, click click, breathe
- YOUR suitcase--sharing
- Train whistle
  - Tidy up—tickety-tack tidy up
- Our suitcase--one element of sensory from each suitcase--free for all
- Train whistle
  - Tidy up—tickety-tack tidy up
- Where is my suitcase? Feathers
- Find suitcase

- Parachute time
- Sitting down, train whistle
  - Tidy up—tickety-tack tidy up
- Time to go goodbye with handshakes
- Leave them in hall and say goodbye (finished)

Transformation for sharing at Jasmin-Vardemon Studio:



Moving around audience?



**10/11/2014**

**Final thoughts**

- All about play
- Simplicity and deepening from a really focused place
- Making the most of what's being presented
- Silence and giving space
- Specificity
- Informing by students
- Keep moving on keep learning don't get stuck
- Letting ideas come and go
- Demystifying
- Confidence in artistry and as teacher
- Maybe it's not all about role play, it's about rhythm

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