Youth Theatre Journal

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uytj20

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To cite this article: Molly Mattaini (2020) Creating autistic space in ability-inclusive sensory theatre, Youth Theatre Journal, 34:1, 42-54, DOI: 10.1080/08929092.2019.1633719

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2019.1633719

YOUTH THEATRE JOURNAL
2020, VOL. 34, NO. 1, 42–54
https://doi.org/10.1080/08929092.2019.1633719

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Creating autistic space in ability-inclusive sensory theatre

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ABSTRACT

Ability-Inclusive Sensory Theatre (AIST) is an emerging genre of Theatre for Young Audiences which serves young people with autism and other cognitive disabilities. Distinct from sensory friendly or relaxed performances, these productions build the entire aesthetic experience to cater to an audience with sensory differences. The space created in these productions mirror the social concept of "autistic space" in which the needs of people on the autism spectrum inform the physical and social design of the environment. This article explores how AIST productions create autistic space through script development, audience engagement, immersive design, soft transitions, sensory objects, and an audience-centric dramaturgy.

Introduction

Ability-Inclusive Sensory Theatre (AIST) is a genre of Theatre for Young Audiences which creates highly intimate theatrical productions in which narrative structures are organized around sensory engagement. Productions are audience-centered and focus on the agency of the child to engage in any manner the child finds aesthetically stimulating. The flexible structure of the productions and the focus on sensory stimulations means the aesthetic quality of the productions is distinctive. Internationally, the field focuses on creating productions for young people with cognitive disabilities but in the US the genre is mostly focused on audiences on the autism spectrum. Due to my own location and experience, this article will focus primarily on US understandings of Autism Spectrum Disorder but will look at an international community of theater companies practicing AIST

I propose that AIST creates an artistic version of "autistic space" through the audience-centered creation which focuses on the experience of the audience over the messaging of the artist. AIST is built for an audience of children on the spectrum from the beginning and as a result, the form itself is distinctive. The resulting innovative use of materials, adjusted focus of the performer, and customization of the theatrical experience allows children on the spectrum to experience drama in a richer way than they would in a typical TYA performance, even a typical performance with adaptation.

AIST is distinct from "Sensory Friendly" performances. In Sensory Friendly performances (or Relaxed Performances), the rules of audience etiquette are amended; for example, the theatre may allow talking, moving, and eating in the house. Adjustments are also made to the production; for example, bright lights are dulled and sound cues are quieted (Fletcher-Watson 2015). Sensory Friendly productions are an *adaptation* of an

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existing work, rather than a creation of a new work. In contrast, AIST builds shows from the ground-up with an audience of young people with cognitive disabilities in mind.

AIST is not interested in theatre as a therapeutic avenue to fix, help, or otherwise adjust individuals on the autism spectrum. AIST can instead be considered a part of the neurodiversity movement. Neurodiversity is,

> the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions. (Silberman 2015)

Neurodiversity frames Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a neurological state which is different from, but not inferior to, typical brain structures. Much in the same way as multiculturalism embraces differences as strengths to society, neurodiversity argues that the community of humanity is strengthened by an embrace of neurological variations.

AIST can be connected to neurodiversity both because these productions do not seek to offer therapeutic fixes to autism and because the environment of AIST productions celebrates the distinct ways children with autism perceive the world. None of the companies that practice AIST explicitly call themselves a part of the neurodiversity movement, but the connections are evident. Instead of providing therapeutic resources, the goal of theatre for children with autism is the same as any other Theatre for Young Audiences performance: namely, to provide children access to quality art. AIST expands existing TYA to children with disabilities by creating a piece of theatre that is particularly appealing to a person with autism. This expansion is necessary because both children and adults with disabilities are often overlooked as part of a theatre audience.

Social concept of autistic space

This truncated history will focus on the specific label of autism because the legacy of autism advocacy effects the broader culture around cognitive disabilities. The autism community includes a large group of people placed along a complex spectrum of ability and includes many prominent and articulate self-advocates. These verbal advocates have become a voice for a broader group of people who cannot communicate through normed verbal/spoken language, opening up understanding of people with a broad range of cognitive disabilities, whatever their diagnostic label. As a result, the history of the autism community affects all AIST companies, even those focused on serving a broader population than just those labeled with ASD.

The current understanding autism comes from the autism self-advocacy movement which began in the 1990s, when adults on the autism spectrum began to form personal connections at autism conferences which were targeted to parents of children on the spectrum. Adult attendees on the spectrum formed enclaves which subverted the intended purpose of the conferences. Rather than discussing the difficulties of raising a child with autism, these attendees formed neutral social spaces to connect with other Autistics.[1]

[1]Members of Autism Network International, inspired by the Deaf community, prefer to be called "Autistic" rather than a person with autism, because they believe that person-first ordering implies that autism is a negative trait which must be separated from the Autistic person (Silberman 2015, 441) I will use the term "Autistic" for individuals who have expressed a desire to be identified as such, and continue to use "person with autism" at other points in this paper to follow current standards.

Journalist Steve Silberman writes about the phenomenon of these conferences in his book *Neurotribes*, in which he calls the information booths geared to Autistics "little oases of autistic space" where Autistics could take a break from sensory overloads, judgmental looks, and "constant reminders that their existence was a tragic puzzle" (Silberman 2015, 442). One of those advocates was now notable advocate Jim Sinclair, a frequent attendee who had grown tired of his conference role of providing insight about the behavior of non-verbal children for parents because he felt like a "self-narrating zoo exhibit" (Sinclair 2005). Sinclair observed from the enclaves at these conferences that the spaces created by Autistics were different from the public spaces created by neurotypical people. Some of the factors which make autistic space unique are safety from sensory overload, respect for the boundaries of people on the spectrum, and an openness to non-verbal communication.

Out of these social connections made at conferences grew a large community, and eventually Sinclair, Xenia Grant (formerly Kathy Grant-Lissner), and Donna Williams started the Autism Network International (ANI), the first autism organization run by autistic people (Sinclair 2005). The purpose of the organization is to create spaces, digitally and physically, for people with autism to connect. ANI also welcomed and provided information to neurotypical allies but established clear boundaries for expected attitudes and behaviors from the neurotypical people being invited into autistic space.

From 1996 to 2013, ANI ran an annual conference/retreat called Autreat, which was structured for maximum accessibility for people on the spectrum. Autreat was organized by people on the spectrum, and people with autism were the primary audience of conference presentations. The topics of presentations given at the conference focused around neurodiversity, and neurotypical participants were welcomed on the condition that they not focus the event on their experiences, or "how heroic they are for putting up with us" (Sinclair 2005). While Autreat featured presentations on how to successfully navigate the neurotypical world as an Autistic, the primary purpose of Autreat was as a retreat, creating a space where unusual behavior was welcomed and celebrated, where participants did not feel a need to suppress autistic behavior simply because their behavior was atypical. Autreat ended in 2013 but its directly inspired UK counterpart Autscape is still in operation, having met annually from 2005. The topic of the first Autscape was "Creating Autistic Space" (Autscape n.d.).

AIST as autistic space

I assert that AIST performances create an artistic version of Sinclair's concept of "autistic space." (Sinclair 2010) The space created within an AIST show is designed in totality to be pleasing, interesting, and welcoming to a person on the spectrum. This presents a profound effort to carve out space specifically for people with autism. Where Sensory Friendly performances make room in neurotypical spaces for people with autism, AIST makes autistic space which neurotypical people can earn an invitation to enter.

Sinclair's use of "autistic space" described social environments rather than a theatrical experience but a similar sense of safe, autistic space is reflected in both the design and attitude of AIST spaces. Many AIST companies share a sense that the immersive spaces of their shows transcend a simple physical transformation. The language companies use to describe abstract "space" created in their productions is varied yet connected. Oily Cart refers to the spaces within their shows as "wonderland" (Webb 2018) and Trusty Sidekick

calls the metaphysical space "a world of yes," where the goal of the space is to engage and feel comfortable, but not to engage in any particular way (Schmidt-Chapman 2018). The physical transformation of the theatre space informs a space in which the rules of engagement with art are amended, where children are able to connect with performers and welcome their neurotypical-loved ones into a shared, joyful experience.

However, there is an essential difference between the autistic space that Sinclair discussed and the autistic space that AIST produces. AIST shows are in large part created by neurotypical artists, not by artists with autism. This tension parallels an overall tension in TYA, which strives to create aesthetic experiences for children but is made by adults (the adult/child dynamic also being present in AIST). However, the dynamic is not entirely parallel because while all adult creators were once children, but all neurotypical people do not have previous first-hand experience of being neurodivergent. Adding onto this tension is my own perspective as a scholar, as I am a neurotypical adult writing about this artform with an outsider perspective on the experiences of the young people attending these productions. A scholar who is on the spectrum or identifies as Autistic may provide a more nuanced understanding of these productions. However, I believe that the neurotypical artists creating AIST have engaged genuinely in an effort to create autistic spaces, just as adult TYA practitioners have worked diligently to create aesthetic experiences for children even though they are not themselves children and the field of AIST is quickly turning its attention to authentic inclusion of artists with autism into their development and performance process.

While the concept of creating public, autistic spaces is important beyond the world of theatre, theatre is uniquely equipped to create these spaces because the nature of theatrical performance is to create temporary spaces which reflect worlds that do not truly exist. The habitual creation of temporary spaces positions theatre ideally to contribute to the creation of autistic spaces. As well, TYA companies are in a unique position to contribute because the social capital afforded to children with disabilities is often greater than what is afforded to their adult counterparts.

In the following sections, I will lay out my current conceptualizations of the essential elements which make AIST a distinct art form, in the hope that putting some of these concepts into widely disseminated words will advance an art form which is politically and morally necessary.

Building an autistic space: development and audience preparation

Each company with publicly available documentation of their creative process begins show development with drama education workshops in special education classrooms (Brown 2012; Performinglineswa 2015; Shaw 2010; TrustySidekickVideo 2015). Working in special education environments serves a dual purpose for the company to try out material on the same or similar audience which will be attending the show and serving as a professional development opportunity for the artists to familiarize themselves with the various approaches, languages, and challenges present in the disability community.

Beginning the artistic process in the special education classroom comes out of the tradition of Oily Cart, the foundational company to the AIST field, which developed their first AIST show through a partnership with a special education school (Brown 2012, 4). Oily Cart's initial company mission was serving very young children, but their work expanded to include children with disabilities in 1988 because of a request from a "Special

Needs" school (a term in the United Kingdom for a school that is exclusively offering special education) to bring in a Theatre for the Very Young (TfVY) show. Rather than bringing in a TfVY show for older children, Oily Cart asked the schools to work with them to develop an age-appropriate show which would consider the abilities of all the students at this school. After working extensively with the students at the school, Oily Cart developed a show called *Box of Socks* that would appeal to the broadest possible contingent of students at this school, a challenging proposition considering the age and ability ranges in their school community. From this history, one can see the artistic heritage of TfVY in AIST productions. AIST emerged directly out of TfVY but with adaptations formed by an audience-first approach. The artistic process began by getting to know the people in their audience, before considering anything else about the concept of the show. This tradition has continued as Oily Cart's professional development workshops and partnerships have passed on their process to other companies, which have then created a development processes of their own with the building blocks of Oily Cart's model.

Once the essential framework of the show has been developed, companies must engage in an intensive audience development process. In addition to traditional marketing material, AIST companies produce carefully curated social materials to prepare all audience for their productions before they arrive at the theatre. This can range from social story (a narrative infographic which rehearses a new social experience[2]) to Sensorium's mobile app (Berrick 2018) which includes an interactive map of the production, photos of the cast, thematically related games, and recordings of the music from the show.

Companies have also recently turned their attention to the preparatory materials for neurotypical, accompanying audience members because the social rules of the AIST space can be just as foreign for a caretaker used to managing the behavior of their child in a traditional theatre space as it can be for a child with a cognitive disability. Particularly companions from an educational setting may come in with the expectation that their role in the space is to enforce the social norms of attending theatre, which is counter to the "wonderland" space created in an AIST show. Companies have begun experimenting with ways to establish the new rules of the space as quickly as possible. For example, Sensorium Theatre has developed a sheet of guidelines which are distributed to caretakers in the initial space to introduce caretakers to the idea that their role in this space is not to exert control on their child. One of the responsibilities of AIST artists are to create a space in which caretaker control can gradually, safely, and joyfully be lifted.

The audience development process also requires that marketing, ticketing, and front of house staff be included in the language of the production. In a typical rehearsal process, a theatre company develops a common artistic language to communicate about their show. With AIST productions, a new social contract is being created within the performance space that involves both the performers and the attendees, meaning the people involved in every level of the production to be introduced to this language before the show begins.

[2]Having a publicly-available generalized social story about coming to the theatre has quickly become best practice in the TYA community. Most AIST productions try to create a more specific social story for the production which includes pictures of the characters in costume, the performance space, transition areas, and sometimes major plot points.

Entering autistic space: immersive environment

I have come to visualize both the physical and extra-physical spaces of AIST as concentric circles. The choice of circles calls upon a concept from Sensorium Theatre that the transitions into and out of their productions work to maintain a "circle of care" (Sensorium Theatre 2018). The circle of care around the child is constant and includes parents, professionals, and other loved ones. During an AIST performance, the circle is expanded to include the performers, and then during the transition out the performance, performers gradually remove themselves from the circle, shrinking the circle back to its initial size but always maintaining the strength of the shape. The following sections are inspired by that imagery (see Figure 1).

AIST productions acknowledge that a child's experience at the theatre begins with their arrival into the initial physical space of the theatre, rather than their entrance into the performance space. Social assumptions about what it means to enter a theatre space cannot be relied upon with an audience who is unlikely to have attended theatre previously due to their age and ability, and because people on the autism spectrum usually require more overt social cues to understand the dynamics of a new interaction. As a result, the establishment of what constitutes the theatrical space must begin immediately.

The initial space is the first space a child encounters when entering the theatre. This is usually a lobby, although the physical realities of the building call for companies to think broadly about how an audience enters a space initially – such as with Trusty Sidekick's *Up and Away* in which two musician characters greeted incoming audience in an elevator and then rode with the audience up the lobby space while strumming stringed instruments. The initial space usually includes multi-sensory activities which have an aesthetic or thematic connection to the coming performance, and performers meet the audience

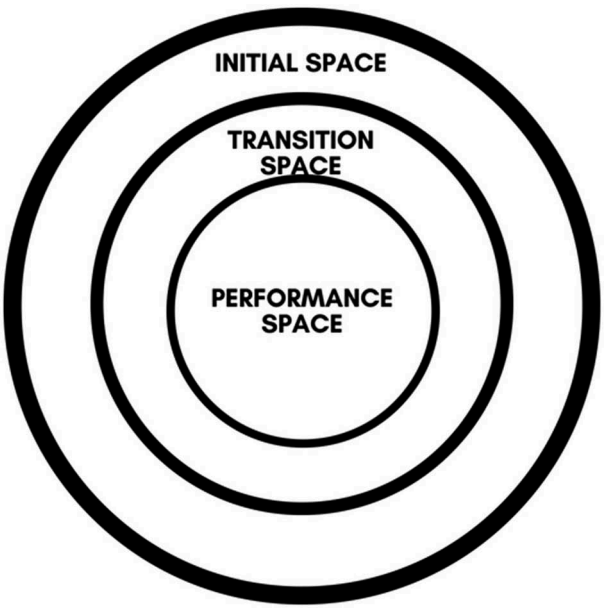

Figure 1. Spaces within an AIST performance.

member in this initial space before accompanying them into the theatre. The activities and interactions in the initial space begin the establishment of the social rules of the AIST space, for both the young people on the spectrum as well as the neurotypical people accompanying them.

When the show is about to begin, performers lead the audience into a transition space. Transitions can be particularly difficult for children on the autism spectrum, both because changing one's focus requires difficult cognitive work and because any new space threatens overwhelming sensory inputs. To lessen this anxiety, transitions happen slowly and move through some sensory-neutral spaces. In the book *Oily Cart: All Sorts of Theatre for All Sorts of Kids*, Tim Webb compares this transitional space to the "airlock" on a spaceship – a decompression point which marks a temporal and spatial change, and which the audience is welcome to return to at any point (Brown 2012, 21). This transition space is sometimes established with a clear structure, such as the "observatory" space in *Up and Away*, in which the audience is introduced to the performance space – a room filled with faux hot air balloons – through a wooden "observatory" structure outfitted with screens which reveal the balloons at the narratively appropriate moment. But a transition space can also be an unstructured, less stimulating open area on the outskirts of the performance, such as with Sensorium's *Oddysea*. *Oddysea*'s airlock space is simply the peripheral space of the theatre outside the main action which takes place within a tent. This transition space is inhabited by characters called "Peris" (short for perimeter person) who interact with children who may be sensory-avoidant by providing less intense versions of the multi-sensory materials being used in the performance. Children are free to remain at the peripherals throughout, move on to the main action, or oscillate between.

The initial and transition spaces work to move audience into the central location of the performance space. The performance space is usually based in either a black box theatre or a school auditorium (depending on the company model) which has been transformed into an immersive space which evokes the setting of the show.

The aesthetics of the performance space are essential, because of the connection that people on the spectrum often form with physical objects and locations. For example, in Temple Grandin's memoir *Thinking in Pictures*, she speculates that for people with autism, emotional bonding happens at a stronger level with routines and objects than it does with other people (Grandin 1996, 140). This highlights the importance of the immersive space of an AIST show. A child in the audience may connect more with the environment created for the AIST show than with the characters within the space. These spaces therefore deserve great care and detail, as the connection with the space may be the basis of the entire experience for the child. This connection to immersive spaces presents an opportunity to go beyond "sensory friendly" spaces that merely avoid triggers, to also include aesthetically compelling elements which contribute to the experience of participation in the theatrical event.

In addition to the importance of the contents of each of these three spaces, artists must also consider how the thresholds between these spaces are crossed. Agency over the transitions between spaces becomes a way of respecting the boundaries of the audience member on the spectrum. In *Oily Cart: All Sorts of Theatre for All Sorts of Kids*, Claire de Loon, founding member and designer for Oily Cart, discussed creating the physical space for their production *Blue* which considered the needs of children who were reticent to

enter a new space. She describes each detail of entering the space, with each design choice being made out of a desire to give the child agency in the way they entered the experience:

> … there was a very wide opening and you could actually watch the show from outside, and the young people could shuffle in gradually as they became less afraid. This only applies to a small minority of the audience but you have to cater to them too. They wouldn't be able to participate at all if you didn't take these things into account. We did two other things for those young people. The first sight you got of the set was seeing what was inside from the outside; it was just the shadows of the actors inside the installation. That was a gradual introduction to what was inside, to demystify it and take the element of surprise out of it. So the young people got an introduction to what was coming next. There were also little windows in the set that audience members could look through. So if you weren't even comfortable with being at the large opening, you could just peer in through one of the little windows.(Brown 2012, 50)

De Loon makes it clear that moving into an AIST space requires number of physical and temporal thresholds, which the child must cross with full agency.

Enjoying autistic space: Objects and sensations

Within an AIST show, the narrative structure revolves around the relationship between the audience and physical objects. Other narrative elements such as plot and character are still present, but they are secondary to the aesthetic episodes in which the performers and audience appreciate the multi-sensory objects. These aesthetic materials come first, and through joint connection with the object, the object becomes a channel for human connection. This is in contrast to neurotypical theater which primarily explores human relationships through an audience watching the performers form a connection onstage and includes material aesthetics which inform this story of human connection.

The plot of AIST productions are generally organized around the discovery of multi-sensory objects. Some examples of multi-sensory objects include the "asteroid" props in *Red Kite, Blue Moon*, which were music shakers that the children could both hold and hear (Shaw 2010). Oily Cart brought two productions to the 2011 Manchester International Festival which featured scent-scapes created in partnership with the perfume company Seven Scent (Brown 2012, 29) Many productions use soft pillows and spritzes of water, and all AIST productions are underscored with music.

Sensory objects are an important factor of Sinclair's concept of autistic space. In Sinclair's article about the formation of ANI, he discusses how he built a friendship with other Autistic adults, Kathy Grant and Donna Williams, through the co-appreciation of objects:

> I watched her [Williams] go into fits of ecstasy while arranging colorful objects and looking at them through a kaleidoscope … And while she was engaging in this activity of arranging objects and looking at them through her scope, *she kept insisting that Kathy and I look at them too*. Of course, being autistic I'm not supposed to understand things like this, but to me, that looked suspiciously like a person wanting to share a pleasurable activity with her friends. (Sinclair 2005)

Sinclair's framing of this interaction places the object as the central channel through which he is able to connect with Grant and Williams. Williams describes the same interaction in her memoir *Somebody Somewhere*, describing her time with Sinclair and Grant as feeling like finding a "lost tribe" (Williams 1994, 186). Williams explores her relationship with objects

earlier in her memoir as well, describing how as child she felt an emotional presence from objects: "things never thought or felt anything complex but they gave me a sense of being in company … people were always third-person; they imposed upon an already present sense of company" (Williams 1994, 67). From this anecdote neurotypical artists can infer that relationships formed within autistic space are more deeply connected to shared material experiences than relationships created in neurotypical space.

These are a few of many examples I have found through reading first-person narratives of people on the spectrum which provides compelling evidence that the strong relationship of many people with autism to the material world presents an opportunity for creative connection through the channel of objects. AIST productions have capitalized on this connection by arranging the narratives around the discovery of objects with interesting sensory elements. While all AIST shows are organized around some semblance of a narrative, dramatic tension is generally secondary to the use of objects.

Essential to this use of object is the agency that a child has over interacting with the object. Performers always ask for the child's consent before manipulating an object which will touch the child, either by verbally asking consent or through nonverbal modeling.

Connecting in autistic space: Circles of focus

Because AIST is an audience-centered form, the influence of each person in the room during a performance is more profound than in a typical performance. Performers are constantly reacting to the audience's reception, meaning the audience's presence has a direct impact on the structure of the performance. The audience's reaction to each aesthetic moment dictates how the aesthetic moment is performed. How the audience is constructed is therefore an essential element of the dramaturgy of these performances. The performer's focus is given primarily to the child on the spectrum/with a cognitive disability but the performance is impacted by all audience members, even those on the peripheries (see Figure 2).

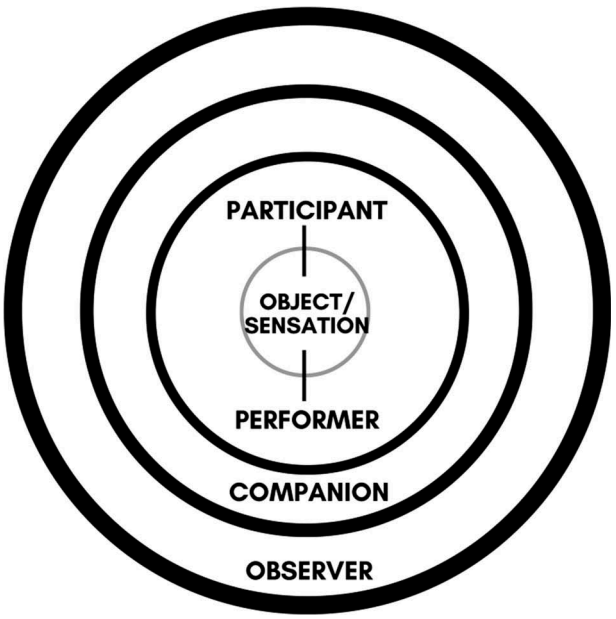

Figure 2. Audience relationships within an AIST performance.

Just as the physical space was conceptualized as a series of concentric circles, I propose that the influence and focus of the audience can also be conceptualized as concentric circles. The most crucial audience relationship is at the center – the participating audience member (child on the autism spectrum) and the performer – and forms around co-appreciation of an object or sensation. The less crucial spheres of influence move outward from the center, but from those outward circles, peripheral audience members are able to influence the core relationship. Because AIST is targeted to young people, the space must be inclusive of companions, which can include parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, friends, and other family members. While the dynamic of a sibling versus a teacher is quite different, for the sake of simplicity in this overview article I have grouped anyone that has a previous relationship with the participating audience member into the category of "companion," language which I borrowed from the ticketing structure of the Big Umbrella Festival in 2018. In addition to companions, some performances may also welcome observers, or any person who does not enter the space with a previous relationship with a participating audience member. This can include donors, other theatre professionals, academics, journalists, families with neurotypical children, and curious members of the public. The likelihood of observers attending depends on a number of factors which cannot be fully explored here. However, many AIST shows include these four roles: performer, participant, companion, and observer. Therefore, it is essential when producing an AIST show to understand their dynamic and place within an AIST space.

The relationship between the performer and the participant is at the center of the performance. AIST performances always have a low ratio of performers to participating audience (ranging from 1:1 to around 1:3) which allows for personalized attention. The performers keep focused on the audience, without pretense of a fourth wall, and involve the child by learning their name and asking consent before offering the child an object. Tim Webb emphasizes that the focal point is always the audience reaction, saying, "The Oily Cart has to watch the audience members far more intently than they watch us" (Brown 2012, 8). Trusty Sidekick calls the process of a performer observing and responding to the participating audience member "empathetic improvisation" (Schmidt-Chapman 2018).

Shows are built around a flexible structure, but how the participant reacts to each episode of object/sensation dictates the experience within that structure. Empathetic improvisation allows performers to make constant decisions about how to adjust individual moments within the performance structure with the goal of maximum joy for the participant. Because the audience is given previews of the structure through social stories and visual schedules, there is a sense of balance between an anticipatable structure and genuine acceptance of however the participant wishes to engage with that structure. Even if the child chooses to engage with the performance at a distance throughout, their physical presence on the peripheral of the performance does not make their experience of peripheral importance to the performer.

While the performer/participant relationship is central, the inclusion of the other audience members is also integral to AIST performances. For companions, attending an AIST performance is a chance to experience public celebration of the joy of their loved one. Through seeing the performer/participant connection, the world of the person on the spectrum is opened up to their neurotypical-loved ones.

Attending an AIST show can be a challenging experience for companions who are used to acting as caretakers to the children they accompany. In addition to the preparatory

materials for neurotypical audience, some of the performer attention is devoted to communicating with caretakers that non-normative behavior is welcomed in an AIST space. This is often accomplished through clear, positive reactions to the child's engagement as well as sometimes through direct communication with the parent.

The most outward circle of observers creates the most ethically fraught relationship in the space.[3] On one hand, inviting neurotypical people who are not already a part of the disability community has positive implications for social integration. It prevents AIST shows from becoming ghettoized. On the other hand, observers might taint the experience with a neurotypical gaze which offers judgment of the way a participant engages or offensive wonderment at the capabilities of a child they assumed was incapable. To combat this potential, companies have also begun to experiment with preparation materials and strategies to ensure positive influence from observers.

The audience conception of concentric circles is my own, although the physical arrangements of spaces are often in literal circles. It is up to every company how to incorporate the members of the audience who are not direct participants. One way in which the company offers a profound communication about who the show is for is through the physical audience arrangement. What kind of "seat" an audience member is offered, the physical location of a seat, and whether that seat fits with the other seats in the space, all communicate to the audience to what degree they are being welcomed in the space.

Some companies opt for more flexible seating (such as floor cushions), which has the benefit of on-the-fly adjustment, freedom of movement around the space, and open inclusivity of every member of the audience. However, seating without clear boundaries can also have the downsides of audience fidgeting disrupting other audience members, and lack of a clear home to establish a place within the performance. Structured seating has potential for physically addressing audience needs (Oily Cart has designed a number of chairs over the years that allow for movement while maintaining support), but can also be more restrictive, and can negatively communicate to the audience who are not participants that they are actively not welcomed in the space.

Conclusion

While Sensory Friendly performances are a shrewd use of the resources of TYA productions that have already been developed, the adjustments made in sensory-friendly performances do not offer the same level of aesthetic experimentation as an AIST production. In fact, adjustments made for Sensory Friendly performances sometimes limit aesthetic considerations by focusing solely on avoiding triggers. In contrast, AIST shows delight in the potential of sensation to create an aesthetic experience. Based on the personal narratives of adults on the spectrum, using the sensory object to create a channel of connection with a child on the spectrum is a rich avenue for artistic exploration.

Three categories of companies currently produce AIST. The first, those who produce work exclusively for children with disabilities, includes Bamboozle Theatre in the UK, Sensorium in Australia, Frozen Light in the UK, Seesaw Theatre at Northwestern

[3]The ethical inclusion of observers is a difficult and nuanced topic. I plan to write on this issue in an in-depth way in the future.

University, Yellow Finch Theatre in upstate New York, Bluelaces Theatre Company in New York City, and Jumping Jack Theater in Pittsburgh. In the second category, TYA companies with an established arm that produced multi-sensory work, is Oily Cart in the UK, Replay Theatre in Northern Ireland, Chicago Children's Theatre, and Trusty Sidekick Theatre in New York City. The third category, TYA or other theatre companies that have produced one multi-sensory show, includes The Rose Theatre in Omaha and Bricolage Production Company in Pittsburgh. Academic environments have also fostered AIST work, including productions from Gretta Berghammer at University of Northern Iowa and the immersive "Imagining Autism" project at the University of Kent. In April of 2018, Lincoln Center hosted The Big Umbrella Festival, the first international festival of work created for children on the spectrum, which included productions of *Light Show* from Oily Cart, *Oddysea* from Sensorium Theatre, and *Up and Away* from Trusty Sidekick Theatre in partnership with Lincoln Center. This represents a complete list to my knowledge but may be missing some information.

Looking ahead, the most pressing issue for AIST companies is the incorporation of artists on the autism spectrum into the development and performance of AIST shows to create authentic autistic spaces. Many AIST companies are currently working on authentic incorporation of people with cognitive disabilities into their processes. The newly founded Pink Umbrella theatre in Milwaukee hopes to train adult artists on the spectrum and include those artists in the creation of multi-sensory works for audience members with autism.

AIST companies are looking to expand their work, both by producing more and licensing shows to interested TYA companies. The largest obstacle to this expansion is the scale of AIST productions, which tend to cap around 15 participants and require nearly as many performers. While some organizations understandably balk at the logistical hurdles to producing AIST, the historical exclusion of this audience creates an imperative for TYA companies to produce work which includes all members of the communities they serve. While further productions of these shows are ideal for the advancement of the art form, there are also many insights that practicing AIST companies can provide for producers of any type of children's programming, both artistic and educational. AIST companies should be looked to as innovators in the field of inclusion because of their profound acceptance of diverse aesthetic experience and expression.

Sensory Friendly performances are a valuable resource which should continue to be developed, but they will never serve the audience that needs the intimate setting and personal connection provided by AIST performances. Sensory Friendly performances are a strategy to make room in neurotypical space for people with autism where AIST performances create autistic space.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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