

Andrew J. Kempe

Widening Participation in Theatre through 'Relaxed Performances'

In this article Andy Kempe discusses how a nationwide project has marked a significant step forward in improving access to the theatre for UK audiences who have hitherto felt largely excluded from theatre by mounting a number of 'relaxed performances'. He makes particular reference to autistic spectrum disorders to illustrate how, in order to widen participation, theatres need to cater for a diverse range of individual needs. The article explores the challenges of catering for children and young people who may be, variously, under- or over-sensitive to sensory stimuli, in both the way performances are adapted and how the front-of-house is organized. A case study is offered of how one small regional theatre sought to address these challenges by giving a 'relaxed performance' of its annual pantomime. The impact of the production is considered as well as insights that have emerged from the enterprise. Andy Kempe is Professor of Drama Education and a Teaching Fellow of the University of Reading. His work with students of all ages and abilities has informed his numerous publications on a variety of issues in drama and arts education, including *Drama, Disability, and Education* (Routledge, 2012).

Key terms: social justice, autism, special needs, learning disabilities.

RELAXED PERFORMANCES (RPs) in British theatre are a relatively new initiative. Indeed, the term itself is far from fixed, some theatres preferring to describe performances as 'autism-friendly'. There is little empirical evidence or analysis regarding how such performances are presented and what impact they may have. This article discusses the contribution relaxed performances might make to the cause of social justice by widening participation in theatre for children with special educational needs. Particular reference is made to children with autistic spectrum conditions. Relaxed performances are defined by the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts as:

creative, safe, and inspiring public theatre performances for children with special needs, including autistic spectrum conditions and/or learning disabilities and, crucially, their families. Performances are specially designed to give those who otherwise might feel excluded the chance to experience live theatre.¹

London's Polka and Unicorn theatres for children and West Yorkshire Playhouse have

welcomed children with special educational needs to performances dedicated to them for some years. In 2012/13 the 'Relaxed Performance Project' was organized jointly between the Society of London Theatres, the Theatre Managers Association, and the Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts. This project has spurred other theatres to consider the value of investing resources to include a relaxed performance in their schedule.

The spark that ignited the Relaxed Performance Project was an incident involving a twelve-year-old boy with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) at a performance in London's West End in 2011. The incident was initially reported in the *Evening Standard* on 2 August 2011 and later received some attention in the national press. The Ambassador Theatre Group issued an immediate apology to the family involved and stated firmly its belief that everyone should have access to live theatre. A theatre industry day was organised in conjunction with the National Autistic Society from which emerged the 'Relaxed Performance Project' involving

eight theatres across the UK. The project culminated in a conference aimed at sharing best practice held at London's Lyceum Theatre on 2 September 2013. The outcomes of the project were collated in the Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation (2013).

Sonali Shah notes that people with a disability have significantly lower rates of arts attendance or participation than those without a disability, while family members of children and young people with a disability are also less likely to take part in arts and cultural activities.² If entire families feel excluded from visiting the theatre this indicates a significant issue regarding social justice. In an interview conducted as a part of the present research, Heather Wildsmith from the National Autistic Society noted that theatres have wanted to help but have not always known how to do so. The Relaxed Performance Project represented a significant step forward:

Because of the Disability Discrimination Act, theatres are scared of getting it wrong, and every time the theatre gets it wrong, especially in the West End, it hits the press, but when they get it right it doesn't. There was the bad incident with one show, but a lot of good has come out of that.
(17 December 2013)

One of the main aims of a relaxed performance is to make as few changes to the actual show as possible but rather to make adjustments to the organization of the front of house in order to reduce anxiety and stress for both the children and young people attending and their families. In this way, relaxed performances open the door to mainstream theatre, providing 'a new example of how theatres – and their programmes – might impact upon those critical social issues of access, inclusion, tolerance, and understanding'.³

In practice, the project ran from November 2012 to June 2013 and engaged with a total of 4,983 audience members. Of this total 42 per cent were families living with autism, 33 per cent were groups such as specific community organizations and special schools. Of the audience 25 per cent were other indivi-

duals and families. Of those surveyed as a part of the project, 60 per cent reported they had never been to the theatre before as a family; 30 per cent had never been to the theatre at all.

Feedback, as reported in the Conference Evaluation, was overwhelmingly positive with parents in particular suggesting that the promotion of the performances and their attendance signalled a shift in public awareness and an increased understanding of autism and other learning disabilities as more members of the public, including staff and volunteers at theatres, engaged with local support networks. In turn, this has increased confidence in attending not only RPs but other theatre performances in the future. As one parent commented:

There are a lot of people who won't be autism friendly, so families feel more comfortable coming to a performance like this with their autistic child. The importance of these events is that they open a door to get a child into a theatre. My son has come for the first time today to a big theatre. It wouldn't be as hard now to get him into another theatre.⁴

Provision for Children with Autism

It is important to stress that the overriding aim of relaxed performances is to provide opportunities to attend the theatre for individuals, families, and groups that have hitherto felt unable to participate. Some theatres have made a specific point of using the term 'autism friendly' to describe nominated performances. An example of this is *The Lion King*, which is produced by the Disney Corporation and is currently playing at the Lyceum Theatre in London. Recognizing how autistic spectrum disorders may manifest themselves provides a case in point from which a review of some of the conundrums and challenges implicit in mounting a RP might be drawn.

Our understanding of ASD continues to develop. Exactly how it is defined by, for example, the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the implications of this have attracted considerable controversy not least because of the problem of homogenizing a

set of people whose individual differences fall within a broad spectrum.⁵ The National Autistic Society defines autism as ‘a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people’.⁶ By prioritizing the social dimension of the condition such a definition implicates other members of society, whereas regarding ASD as a predominantly medical condition of the individual in effect absolves society from interacting with it.

The same is held to be true for other individual needs and learning disabilities in that social justice may only be achieved when society is conceptualized as being made up of individuals who have rights, opportunities, and privileges equal to those of all other members of that society. A social model of disability regards disability as a product of the way society is organized and so attends to ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people.⁷

Some children with ASD, as indeed many other children, may not have developed an awareness of the thoughts and feelings of those around them. A child’s awareness of others may be awakened, though, when their behaviour causes them disturbance and they react negatively. Attending any social event such as theatre may thus represent a hurdle in that a child’s behaviour may be at odds with what others attending the event expect or are prepared to accept. One parent’s comment recorded in the Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation illustrates the excluding effect of this:

Ross does love the theatre, but we didn’t take him a lot when he was small. Because, you know, you’re sort of interrupting everybody else. People come to the theatre to enjoy the show, they want peace and quiet in the audience.⁸

Beyond the potentially alienating effect of its complex etiquette, the cost of going to the theatre may be prohibitive. If it is the case that non-participation in the theatre results from a fear of embarrassment and a sense of alienation, to what extent is this exacerbated for families who are aware that their children’s responses, or even their very presence, may interfere with another audience mem-

ber’s enjoyment? However, other comments in the evaluation suggest that relaxed performances helped remove this particular barrier to attending theatre:

I would definitely bring him to this kind of performance again. We did take him to see *Shrek the Musical* and he enjoyed it but he did find it difficult to sit still. People sitting next to you, they start to judge, because they don’t understand. But this performance, you’ve got people shouting and screaming, but nobody cares, because they all understand.⁹

It is distracting when people are making lots of noise, but it’s great that today it doesn’t matter.¹⁰

People with autism may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light, or colours. This represents a challenge for theatres regarding what adjustments should be made to a performance in terms of the use of theatre technology and interaction between performers and audience. Erin Hurley argues that theatre sets out to provoke internal and external feelings by offering ‘super-stimuli’ that ‘concentrate and amplify the world’s natural sensory effects’.¹¹ A relaxed performance must therefore decide the extent to which effects should be amplified or muted and, perhaps more importantly, what facilities will be available either to help to avoid or to ameliorate adverse responses to over- or under-sensitivity. Over- and under-sensitivity to sensory stimulus is not confined to people with ASD, of course. In terms of achieving social justice, there is a need to consider, for example, how to include those with visual and auditory impairments.

Removing Barriers to Participation

Following a lead from the USA, various UK cinemas have been offering ‘relaxed screenings’ for some time for various groups including, for example, mothers and babies, people with dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, and families living with ASD and other learning disabilities. Extending provision to groups who might otherwise be excluded makes economic sense, but this does not necessarily detract from the contribution

towards social justice such initiatives represent. However, cinema attendance *per se* grossly outweighs theatre attendance. This suggests that a considerable degree of self-selection may play a part in non-participation in the theatre. One reason for this may be seen as lying in the social conventions, perceived or actual, that surround how audiences are expected to behave in a theatre.

Steve Ball claims that, for many people, theatres represent a degree of challenge and alienation; in order to avoid the embarrassment of contravening unknown or misunderstood codes they simply do not go, even if they would like to.¹² Ball insists that this is a dilemma that must be addressed in order to make theatre truly accessible to all sections of the community.

Helen Freshwater notes that, although it is possible to speak of 'an audience', there may be 'several distinct, co-existing audiences to be found among the people gathered together to watch a show and that each individual within this group may choose to adopt a range of viewing positions'.¹³ Not all these positions will necessarily be directed at the performance. For example, parents and carers may be watching their children, who may be as intrigued by other members of the audience as they are by the show!

Bundy's research into young people's first encounters with theatre records that some 'indicated that they experienced pleasure when their own responses were affirmed by other people's apparently similar reactions'.¹⁴ The relevance of this to relaxed performances is that the dynamic of the theatre experience needs to inform how the event is organized and the audience primed by, for example, a 'visual story' that may be sent out in advance.

The idea of the visual story derives from the 'social story', a term coined by Carol Gray, a consultant on children with ASD. Such stories aim 'to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience'.¹⁵ Ideally, the stories will contain directive, descriptive, and affirmative sentences in order to suggest appropriate actions, identify commonly shared values in a given situation,

and summarize the characteristics of the situation.¹⁶

If children's responses to what they see on stage disturbs other members of the audience, what they may learn is that, somehow, confusingly, their engagement leads them to experience the negative feelings of others. The new idea gained is that theatre can hurt and cause others to be aggressive. In a relaxed performance, all audience members can engage with the action however they wish. That other audience members are doing likewise ideally leads to the recognition that theatre is a good space in which feelings can be physically and verbally expressed.

Bundy cites Eric Bentley's point that art is not so much a matter of cognition but of recognition. In this sense, 'live theatre can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar'.¹⁷ A primary endeavour of a theatre hosting a relaxed performance must be to make the strange surroundings and event familiar in order that the specially invited audience might recognize not just the fiction enacted onstage but the whole experience.

Pantomime: a Case Study

The Relaxed Performance Conference Evaluation recorded that several parents reported that their first experience of theatre had been taking their child to see a pantomime.¹⁸ Due to the high levels of light, noise, and audience participation, and the unsettling effect that this could have especially on children with autism, it was considered that pantomime might not be the most appropriate genre to include in future phases of the Relaxed Performance programme.

However, in the UK, the annual pantomime is a traditional family event and a popular outing for special schools. As one teacher working in a special school and who was interviewed as part of the research said:

We take our kids generally to a pantomime each year at school. I think that's one of the safe shows that you can go to because you're allowed to shout out; it's acceptable. People expect to sit there and have noisy children around them. In that respect it's one of the easiest trips for us to do.

(16 January 2014)

Pantomime is often the only piece of theatre many children will ever see and their memories of this can be profound. Bernard Beckerman posits that, although responses to theatre derive principally from visual and aural perception, it would be more accurate to see theatre as a kinaesthetic experience that appeals to all of the senses.¹⁹ Just as Brechtian theatre seeks to invite participation through 'direct address, the use of episodic action, the inclusion of songs and film, and the ploy of leaving the lights up in the auditorium', the same dynamic is apparent in a pantomime.²⁰

As a result of the success of the Relaxed Performance Project, and notwithstanding reservations about mounting a pantomime as a relaxed performance, Newbury Corn Exchange, a medium-scale receiving house in a small town in the south of England, decided to offer a relaxed performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* as a part of their 2013–14 programme. A proposal to research the event was reviewed by the University of Reading's Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee and a small grant was awarded to cover the cost of transcribing the interviews. The research questions that underpinned the case study were:

- What preparations and adjustments were made to usual routines in order to mount a relaxed performance?
- What was the perceived impact of the performance on the children who attended the performance, their parents, their teachers, and the theatre?

I gathered data for the case study by attending a staff training session at the Corn Exchange led by members of the local support group for parents of children with ASD and the Learning and Participation Officer from Oxford Playhouse (which had staged a relaxed performance of *Spot's Birthday Party* the previous year). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the Learning and Participation Officers at the Corn Exchange and Chichester Festival Theatre; the Marketing Officer for Globe Education; Heather Wildsmith, an expert on RPs from the National Autistic Society; a front-of-

house volunteer at the Corn Exchange; and the lead actor in *Jack and the Beanstalk* (who had previously worked on the Oxford Playhouse production or *Spot's Birthday Party*).

In addition, five parents of children with ASD were interviewed. These were self-selecting, having been identified as potential participants via the local support network. Three teachers in special schools were also interviewed. Their selection was opportunistic in that I had worked with them all previously. The interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and transcribed by a professional transcription service. I also attended the relaxed performance at the Newbury Corn Exchange on 4 January 2014. The names of the children referred to have been changed.

Preparations and Adjustments

Parents from a local support group for families living with autism were invited to advise the Corn Exchange on their preparations, as were the National Autistic Society and the Learning and Participation Officer from Oxford Playhouse, who had some experience of mounting a relaxed performance. Advance publicity for the pantomime made it clear that one matinee performance had been designated a relaxed performance. The theatre has a database of families which include children with special educational needs. These were contacted directly, along with local special schools regarding the show.

Two visual stories were prepared and sent out electronically as both PDFs and Word documents so that parents/carers could edit them and print out only the parts they felt their child would benefit from. One visual story concerned what the experience of visiting the Corn Exchange would entail. Pictures showed the front of the building, the foyer, smiling assistants in the box office and the auditorium, along with a little guidance:

WHAT HAPPENS IN THE THEATRE?

- When the show is about to begin, the music will start and the lights will dim.
- Then the actors will come on to the stage and the show will begin.

ARE THERE RULES FOR HOW TO BEHAVE?

- Not really!
- You can wear what you are comfortable in.
- You can bring ear defenders or noise-filtering headphones if you like.
- During the show, some people might make some noise. People will clap at the end to show they have enjoyed the show.
- You can join in if you like.

The second story pertained specifically to *Jack and the Beanstalk*. This contained pictures and details of the different characters, for example:

- This is DAME DARCY TROTT. She is Jack's mother and she owns a dancing school.

THINGS TO KNOW

- It is a pantomime tradition that this role is played BY A MAN, DRESSED AS A WOMAN. This is supposed to be funny! The Dame has lots of costume changes.

The story was outlined in words and photographs:

- Jack lives with his mother in Newbury Bottom. They are running out of money so they decide to sell Daisy, their cow.
- Squire Wrong'un tricks Dame Trott into selling Daisy to him, but he pays her in beans, not money!

Advice from parents and guidance from the National Autistic Society suggested that the visual story should explain where the lights would come from in the show and why; give a warning that the chairs flipped back; state that pantomimes make a lot of noise, and that dry ice would be used, which might have a slight odour to it. Very importantly, it should emphasize that it is 'OK' to call out because in a pantomime this 'is *not* being rude'. Sometimes, the story explained, the cast would come into the audience. Each child attending the relaxed performance would have a green card and by holding it up they would be signalling that they did not mind being talked to.

A training event was held for the theatre staff and the volunteers keen to be available for the relaxed performance. The session outlined the salient features of ASD, stressing its diverse manifestations, and allowed discussion on what sort of incidents might arise and how these should be dealt with. Other advice included providing a quiet space with, if possible, a monitor showing what was happening on stage; turning off hand-dryers in toilets; offering a 'touch tour' so that children could go on to the stage to explore the set with a member of the company; and providing a 'list of surprises' separate from the visual story so that parents/carers had the option of whether or not to share these in advance.

For the performance itself, adjustments included leaving some light on in the auditorium, removing or reducing the use of strobes and pyrotechnics, and generally lowering the volume. It was decided to cut a sequence in which giant beans were flung into the audience.

Responses to *Jack and the Beanstalk*

The positive reception of the relaxed performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* mirrored the picture gained from the national project, although there were caveats to this. The very fact that a relaxed performance was to take place was perceived to be a good thing and worth trying, as this comment made by a parent to Heather Wildsmith shows:

We hummed and ha'd and thought, actually we think he'll be alright in the standard one but the very fact that there was a relaxed performance encouraged us to book for that. (17 December 2013)

A recurrent response from parents and other stakeholders was that the nature of the relaxed performance appeared to have an effect on the behaviour of many children; simply knowing that they could go in and out of the auditorium and that no one was likely to be bothered by anything they did resulted in greater attention being paid. The evaluation of the Relaxed Performance Project showed that the initiative provided a

relief for many parents, and this, too, was mirrored in the Newbury case study:

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

(Parent 1, 20 January 2014)

This same parent noted that while Ella (aged five), who is described as 'under-sensitive to stimulus', had run around a good deal in the relaxed performance, when she attended a different pantomime with her school she stayed sitting still for longer. This was put down to pressure from her teacher to stay still with the consequence that 'When she went, she really went!'

By contrast, Parent 2, the mother of six-year-old Harry, who has Asperger's Syndrome and ADHD, commented that she never feels relaxed when out with her son because her consciousness of him upsetting people was so deeply engrained. Rather than being deterred, she stated that in the future, she would probably go to a standard performance as she had learnt ways of dealing with Harry and would 'take him out if he got a bit manic' (28 January 2014). Grandin and Barron insist that children with ASD learn by doing and so need direct experience and live interaction in order for social skills to be 'hard-wired' in the brains.²¹ Parent 2 associated Grandin's philosophy with 'the school of hard knocks', which she saw as a necessary factor in bringing up all children. She had some reservations about RPs serving to mollycoddle children like Harry unnecessarily, but shared the view that an RP was a safe place to find out more about the child's responses to different sensory and social experiences:

There'll be all these tiny little things that unless you are that child you just won't even be able to predict. . . . But because it's a relaxed performance it's easy to deal with them, whereas if it was a normal performance it might be meltdown time.

(Parent 2, 28 January 2014)

Accordingly the performance was perceived by some to be an opportunity to foster independence:

I see my job as a parent to help my son learn to self-regulate his traits. If part of that is going to the theatre and understanding that he is sensitive to sound, he's learnt now that if he uses his headphones then he can control that. It's something that he can take on further and hopefully through the rest of his life. (Parent 3, 17 December 2013)

Generating Experience and Sensation

Children's memory of visiting the theatre can last an entire lifetime. Director Ann Bogart states: 'Experience and sensation become memory via emotion. The more emotion that is generated in the heat of experience, the more likely the memory is to "stick".'²²

As I noted earlier, a primary aim of theatre, and most especially pantomime, is to generate experience and sensation. This can be for no other reason than the aesthetic and celebratory pleasure of it, but that does not negate the possibility of valuable social and cultural development arising from the experience. One measure of the impact *Jack* had was in the play and talk of the children following the visit. Two weeks after attending the relaxed performance at the Corn Exchange, Ella's mother reported that there had been 'a lot of play around giants', with Ella being the giant and pretending to engage with other little characters.

Teachers of a group of teenagers from a school for children with autism similarly reported that there had been a good deal of talk associated with the show, while the mother of five-year-old Fay told how:

On Sunday afternoon Fay suddenly stood up [and said]: 'Ladies and gentlemen! I'd never heard her say that before, and of course I thought I wonder if that's anything to do with what they said at the beginning: 'Ladies and gentlemen, please take your seats. The performance is about to begin.' Then at bath time she drew a beanstalk all the way around the bath – we've got these bath crayons. And then a few days later, one of her little things is birds that make noises. We've got a menagerie of blackbirds and goldfinches and you squeeze them and they make the noise of the bird in your back garden. And she was doing this, I'd never

seen her do this before, she's like, 'Budgie,' she said, 'I can tweet best.' And then she changed her voice, 'No, I can tweet best!' which is what Beansprout [a character in the pantomime] did – 'I'm the best.' 'No, I'm the best!' and all this kind of chat, chat, chat, chat, chat. It was just like, oh, amazing! I thought it was anyway.

(Parent 4, 20 January 2014)

The novelist David Mitchell argues that it is a misconception to believe that all children with ASD lack imagination and therefore struggle to differentiate fact from fiction or empathize with either real or fictitious characters.²³ Rather, distinction needs to be made between imagination and social imagination, that is, the ability to recognize what others may be thinking and feeling if it is not expressed explicitly. The parents interviewed in this case study denied that this equated to the lack of ability to engage in drama and dramatic play:

He loves joining in with drama.

(Parent 3, 17 December 2013)

She's got a lot of actress in her. . . . She loves to make you laugh and to entertain and put on an accent.

(Parent 1, 20 January 2014)

He's got loads of imagination and an incredible memory. He can repeat something word for word and puts on accents and things.

(Parent 2, 28 January 2014)

Harry's mother was insistent that he made conscious use of his ability to recall things in detail to amuse and obtain a response from others. However, while she acknowledged that this did not necessarily amount to effective acting since there was 'no passion' in it, he was nonetheless fascinated by other aspects of the theatre encountered at the RP:

He's into special effects and electrical things (and) what was going on with the guy doing the sound and stuff like that. (Parent 2, 28 January 2014)

Attending the relaxed performance was clearly providing an opportunity to enter the world of the theatre that Shore and Rastelli note as being attractive to many people with ASD but one from which they often feel debarred.²⁴ An example of this is captured in feedback provided by the National Theatre:

We've come from Reading today to see the relaxed version of this production (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time*) because I have Asperger's. I've read the book, it's really good. I'm very excited about it! I don't go to the theatre too much. . . . It's fantastic what the theatres have done for kinds like me, yes, great job!²⁵

From the theatre's point of view a relaxed performance is a conduit into a new audience: there is a financial incentive to widening participation. David Bellwood of Globe Education, for example, reported:

One lady with an autistic son came with his older brother who became so engaged that he has booked the whole summer season ahead. And of course this had been his first time in the theatre because he'd never been able to come before.

(27 March 2014)

Some Reservations

The presentation of the visual stories was appreciated but not widely used by the parents I interviewed. Harry showed no interest at all in the one that focused on the storyline:

He likes facts. He knows the difference. I'll try and read him a book but he doesn't read fiction. He wants factual books. (Parent 2, 28 January 2014)

Ella finds sitting still difficult, but while she did not engage with the visual stories, she was excited about going to the pantomime. Fay's mother reported that Fay had lashed out because she did not want to go through the stories with her at that time. However, shortly before leaving for the performance she had picked them up to look at by herself.

Knowing of the existence of a quiet area was useful and Fay's mother asked specifically to be in the balcony because the area was upstairs. However, Harry's mother was unhappy that they had been allocated seats where there was a good deal of coming and going: she had apparently not been told that, if she wanted to move seats, that would be fine. Unfortunately, teachers from a special school felt that they 'were getting a lot of stares' and 'had a family complain that they didn't want our students sitting in front of them. I guess there were some families who may not have been aware [that it was a RP].'

Fay's enjoyment of the visit could have been very different. Arriving at the theatre in need of the toilet, she immediately became anxious because of previous bad experiences with the noise of the hand-dryers. Her visit to a pantomime the previous year had been traumatic largely on account of the sudden loud noises. However, on this occasion she was able to read the sign that said the dryers were turned off, and she visibly relaxed.

Conversely, a number of interviewees were sorry that the visual and sound effects had been tempered. Harry, who had seen *Jack* with his school, had enjoyed the explosions in the mainstream performance, while for Ella 'the more crash-bang, the higher the sensation, the better. . . . She would like to be tickled with a stick and have people come down and chuck things at her – it's that level of interaction she craves' (Parent 1).

Teachers at the special school for autistic children who had seen the mainstream performance with some of their classes were similarly disappointed that an effect involving beach-balls being thrown down and the sprinklers briefly turned on was cut as they estimated that the highly sensory children that attended the relaxed performance would have enjoyed it. However, relaxed performances attempt to cater for as wide an audience as possible. This means recognizing the needs of those who are both under- and over-sensitive to sensory stimulus. Thus, there was general agreement among those interviewed for this research:

If they're going to adapt it, it's best they adapt it that way because it really does cause serious distress for some of the other kids.

(Parent 1, 20 January 2014)

A Matter of Social Justice

The impact of relaxed performances is not solely to do with the child. Rather, the effect of the initiative on whole families and carers has been profound. This testimony captures the essence of many others:

it's not just about the effect on the child, though what it means for us is Ella gets to go to the theatre, where she wouldn't normally go, and we

as a whole family get to experience something as a family we would never normally experience, and Alan [Ella's brother] gets to do something that he's been deprived of doing. Because there's only so much that you can take one child off to. We end up just taking one child off to do something and the other doesn't go and they never had the experience, or we just do it with one of us, which is hard. (Parent 1, 20 January 2014)

The adults interviewed openly admitted to how difficult they found taking their children to the theatre on previous occasions. One teacher recalled how she also felt 'hugely protective of them as we walked into the auditorium because people were looking and if anyone's going to comment, I'm ready!' (Teacher 1). A primary aim of a relaxed performance is to remove this tension. Teacher 2 recognized how this worked:

I'd go to the relaxed performance again because if there were to be negative attitudes from members of the public at a regular performance – and I'm not saying they've got a right to say those things – but I'd say they've got even less of a right to do it at the relaxed performance. (13 January 2014)

Teacher 3 saw a different possibility arising:

It's not just about giving children with autism opportunities to have what's available to the rest of society; it also raises the question, to what extent can drama and theatre be the medium in which the rest of society learn more about children who have got individual needs? (13 January 2014)

This notion was supported by one of the volunteers at Newbury Corn Exchange:

It would be nice to have shows like this on a regular basis like we have the films on Saturday morning on a regular basis. The more people get to know about them then the more people will come and after all they're members of the public, just the same as you and me. They're entitled to be catered for, aren't they? So, hopefully, it would perhaps spread and more theatres would do it. (27 December 2013)

In an interview undertaken as part of this research, Rupert Rowbotham, Learning and Participation Officer at Chichester Festival Theatre, noted that there is something of a paradox here in that 'by mounting a relaxed performance, a theatre is effectively signal-

ling that this is an occasion when the people who want to shout out in the middle of a performance can, and that in some sense limits other people from coming' (3 January 2014). Thus in an attempt to be inclusive the theatre may find itself being temporarily exclusive.

Nonetheless, what theatres can gain from the experience may extend beyond learning what the ingredients of a successful relaxed performance are. If they are truly to become more democratic, then what is taken from the event must have some transferability, a possibility here considered by Sarah Gregson, Learning and Participation Officer at Newbury Corn Exchange:

Where we may have felt we didn't have the confidence to offer other projects or include groups of young people with autism in our projects – that's changed. Our front-of-house team's awareness of what autism is and reactions to particular behaviours in our building have changed. I think this will have a big impact because we have lots of groups that are people with special needs in our shows, using our building, our cafés, our toilets even, and I think potentially there have been some mismatches of understanding of what's going on with some members of the public. We do get adverse reactions from other audience members to people who are in the audience. I think we're better placed now to explain what's going on – or, at least, have a good go. (19 December 2014)

Conclusion

This case study confirms the evaluation of the Relaxed Performance Project that relaxed performances offer families the chance to experience theatre together and provide an example of how they 'might impact upon those critical social issues of access, inclusion, tolerance, and understanding'.²⁶ It certainly seems that more tolerance and understanding would be greatly appreciated by Parent 1, who said:

I don't think you can underestimate how excluding it can be to go to things and just worry about people disapproving of your child. Every parent with a kid with autism will tell you, because they don't look different, people just think . . . and just looking at them, being cross, and it's really debilitating. (20 January 2014)

Despite doubts about the possibility of successfully staging a pantomime as a relaxed performance, this case study suggests there are no reasons why, given the appropriate preparations and adjustments, relaxed performances of pantomimes cannot be as successful as any other shows and perhaps even more so, given the nature of the form and its traditional standing as an annual family or school event.

A relaxed performance of the RSC's *Matilda* was staged at the Cambridge Theatre on 15 June 2014, and the National Theatre's hugely successful production of *War Horse* was staged as a relaxed performance at the New London Theatre on 20 September 2014. A second 'autism-friendly' performance of *The Lion King* was staged in April 2014. These events illustrate that the benefits of opening the doors of the theatre to an audience which hitherto has felt debarred from participation seems to have been recognized and is being built upon. An audience member of the first autism-friendly performance of *The Lion King* posted a fascinating and moving account of her experience on the web. It finishes thus:

When the final curtain call came, I leapt to my feet with J in my arms. I whooped and cheered for all I was worth. J hated this and screamed at me to be quiet, but I couldn't. I had to let all those responsible for this incredible production know just how grateful I was and how much it had meant to me. As the house lights went up and we put our coats on, J started sobbing. 'I don't want to leave *Lion King!*' he pleaded. 'I want to stay at *Lion King!*' He was placated by the *Lion King* flag handed to him by a smiling staff member on the way out, which is now taped proudly to his bedroom wall.

I don't know whether the cast and crew of Sunday's performance realize quite what an important thing they did. This went way beyond allowing people with autism to experience a trip to the theatre. What this performance did was to make us normal. For a few hours, our children and family members were free to be themselves and to behave however they needed to, without fear of judgement or retribution. For a few hours, we did not feel the need to apologize for our own children. For a few hours, no one felt they had to explain anything. For a few hours we had no worries. *Hakuna matata.*²⁷

There are considerable quantifiable differences between the Disney Corporation that

produces *The Lion King* in the 2,100-seat Lyceum Theatre and the annual pantomime at the Newbury Corn Exchange, but both can be seen as trying to address a matter of social justice. Some critics might well perceive their attempt as being a financially driven sop. However, it may prove to be the case that while the Relaxed Performance Project was a response to an incident that created negative publicity for a major producer, a great deal more good may yet come of that, and relaxed performances will become embedded in future accounts of the development of widening participation and social justice in theatre.

By communicating the successes of relaxed performances wherever they have taken place, other theatres, both professional and indeed amateur, might be encouraged to find out more about how best to incorporate them into their programmes. By doing so, they will be illustrating that social justice is achieved as a result of the active contribution of members of society to ensure that others in that society also lead fulfilling lives.

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