

How Can Theatre Processes Be
Accessible to Autistic People?

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An Introduction

I have worked within theatre for many years, during this time I have facilitated workshops for adults with learning difficulties, performed with a cast during the Edinburgh Fringe, and devised work both as a solo artist and as part of an ensemble. As someone who is diagnosed with Autism, at times these processes I have been a part of are not always accessible. I have found myself overstimulated, misunderstood, and I have found that, through masking, being too loud. Through this research, I will explore and discover ways in which theatrical, or rehearsal processes can be constructed to allow autistic people to occupy space in a non-disabling way.

To make reading this clear for me, I have split my writing into two categories, 'Define' and 'Autistic Stories'. This helps offer a glimpse into part of my writing process as an autistic. I should note that Applied Theatre falls under both categories, this is done intentionally.

It is important to begin by defining some keywords that will be used throughout this essay mainly Autism, Theatre, and Process.

Define: Autism

Autism, or autism spectrum disorder is a developmental disability which affects communication and interaction with people and the wider world (National Autistic Society, n.d.). Autism is not a personality trait. Andrew Solomon, an American “writer and lecturer on psychology, politics and the arts” (Soloman, n.d.), writes in his book *Far From The Tree* that people with autism can be “optimistic and buoyant” and some are “withdrawn and depressed”, and that those with autism also have “full personality range to be in the neurotypical population.” (Solomon, 2012, p. 282). I would also like to express that I view autism through the Social-Model of Disability, which means that “it is society that disables ... people. Disability is something imposed on top of our impairments by the way we are unnecessarily isolated and excluded from full participation in society” (UPIAS, 1976, p. 3). This is due to my own experience of feeling disabled in certain environments, rather than feeling disabled in my autistic existence. For example, when I am at home or walking down the street, I wouldn’t consider myself having any disability, however, when I have struggled to work in the rehearsal room, I have felt disabled.

Define: Theatre

“Ever since the 1990s, the nature of theatre and the way we view it has changed considerably - so much so, indeed, that we are no longer sure what name to give it, where we can find it or what questions we should ask it.” (Pavis, 2016, p. x). Peter Brook, an English theatre director, states that: “I CAN take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.” (Brook, 1996, p. 7), This tells us theatre is not set to one building nor to structured places. The spaces in which theatre can happen are infinite and are created by the intention of the performer and the witness. Tim Etchells, who founded the experimental contemporary theatre company Forced Entertainment who have been working collaboratively for nearly forty years, confirms this in an interview as it is “the relationship of watcher and watched” (Essential Drama, n.d.). Etchells then expands on this with “It’s about a piece of time or space that’s somehow separated from other time and space so we can look at it.” (Essential Drama, n.d.). These two definitions of theatre are useful for my research. Theatre is the relationship between the performance and the audience, in a space which is constructed typically by the artist.

Define: Process

I start off writing this section with a discussion of a well-known dumpster fire. *Music*, a film by Sia, is an example of what happens when you create a process that is inaccessible. Sia is an Australian songwriter and singer, her most well-known works are *Chandelier*, *Elastic Heart*, and *Titanium* alongside an extensive list of writing credits. The film is about a “low-functioning” and “non-verbal” girl, though centres on her sister. The film controversially cast Maddie Ziegler, a neurotypical able-bodied performer, who has made her name being an able-bodied dancer. When asked about miscasting and misrepresentation, Sia tweeted “I actually tried working with a beautiful young girl non-verbal on the spectrum and she found it unpleasant and stressful” (Jenke, 2020). This shows that the process which Sia created was inaccessible to an autistic individual, which is made worse when the topic is an autistic narrative. This casting decision received backlash from the autistic community. Additionally, further backlash occurred due to Sia only consulting with one organisation. Autism Speaks is a charity which is discredited within the autistic community due to feelings of not being listened to and favouring how autistic people affect neurotypical lives. The Charity

was founded in 2005, with its original mission to prevent and find a cure for autism (Ulatowski, 2022). One of their most controversial moments was a commercial called “I Am Autism” (Autism Speaks, 2009), which links autism to cancer and AIDs. The advert describes autism as a disease that plagues families and that is hard for parents to deal with, which has resulted in the dangerous and lethal practice of restraining being shown in the film (Kellogg, 2021). This horrific example shows how crucial it is to make processes accessible, not only to allow autistic voices to be heard but also to avoid the dangers of misrepresentation.

Processes within theatre are varied, often changing between each production. It is impossible to cover all processes due to “the difficulty of condensing or fixing such a complex process of development – from the tiny seed of an idea to a ‘finished’ performance, involving along the way preparation, multiple collaborations, intuitive choices, and worked-out plans as well as a myriad of emotions, challenges and practical solutions.” (Simonsen, 2017, p. viii).

In their book, *The Art Of Rehearsal*, Barbara Simonsen, has conversations with a variety of European and North-American Contemporary theatre directors. Simonsen is also a dramaturg based in Denmark (Simonsen, n.d.), having founded Seachange Lab, which is an artist-driven research forum (Teater Seachange, n.d.). In a

conversation with Kirsten Dehlholm, the founder of Hotel Pro Forma, Dehlholm talks about their process being made up of “phases” some of which are “parallel” and others which “follow right after one another”. These phases consist of research, blocking, form, and content. Dehlholm Talks about how “Time, Trust, [and] good spatial conditions” are essential for a good process, being that they take one to three years to complete each project. (Dehlholm & Simonsen, 2017, pp. 71-80).

Maxine Doyle is a choreographer, and associate director for Punchdrunk, a site-specific and immersive theatre company created in the 2000s in England. She works within improvisation as the main part of her process, spending up to two hours warming up, which then leads to “extensive” improvisations. She states that it is important that the process is a “very safe, nurturing environment”, as the content within this process asks the performers to “give a lot, we are asking people to trust, to go to places of emotional danger, places of emotional depth, and to really expose themselves and to put themselves out there as people as well as performers.” (Simonsen & Doyle, 2017).

Frantic Assembly, a British theatre Company, talks about their devising process using “building blocks” to create a “house”, the house being the product (performance), they mention that “the

purpose of some of the blocks is to support other blocks” (Hoggett & Graham, 2014, p. 15). In the same book, they go on to state that the rehearsal room they create is “well-considered” though at times “not the most organised” (Hoggett & Graham, 2014, p. 20).

Knowing the complexity and uniqueness of processes within theatre informs my view that the process does not entirely matter in the creation of theatre. Theatre can be made in an infinite number of ways, one process does not make every single performance, and one show can be made using an infinite number of processes. Though at times these processes can disable, exclude, and alienate people, which is what I am interested in. For example, with Frantic Assembly, having a disorganised space can be overwhelming for someone with autism. Punchdrunk asking performers to give a lot, does this factor in for autistic people? Spoon theory (**Memmott, 2018**) explains that autistic people can only commit so much of their effort and energy, using a limited number of spoons as a metaphor for how much a person can commit to activities a day, such as waking up, showering, and going to work. If being asked to give a lot means using energy that an autistic person may not have, the process then has excluded that person or group of people.

While it would be impossible to create one process that is accessible to everyone, due to the complex needs of people, not just those who are disabled, there are ways to create processes and spaces which are more inclusive and accessible.

Define & Autistic Stories: Applied Theatre

Throughout my research, I have read about applied theatre. This is not the area of theatre my research is intended for, but there is a rich knowledge in constructing spaces and processes suitable for individuals with disabilities. Dr Nicola Abraham is a senior lecturer at the Royal Central School for Speech & Drama, having worked over the past ten years with applied theatre projects in the United Kingdom and internationally, she notes that applied theatre has “The potential to play with alternatives, and offer space for communities to engage with the politics of oppression, which is often a central theme within applied theatre” (Abraham, 2021). Likewise, Prof. Tim Prentki who is a lecturer on the Theatre for Development Course at the University of Winchester states that “Applied theatre defies any one definition and includes a multitude of intentions, aesthetic processes and transactions with its participants.” (Prentki & Preston, 2009, p. 11). While both of these statements do not define one practice,

applied theatre is simply using theatre and creative arts practices as a tool, rather than applied theatre being a style or method. The purpose of applied theatre is to use theatre-based techniques to “discover and learn, to explore issues of concern to communities, to identify problems and actively rehearse solutions, and to provoke and shape social change.” (Center for Theatre Arts, n.d.).

Kelly Hunter MBE is a British practitioner whose work with Shakespeare and Autism forms the basis of a study at the Ohio State University. The Hunter Heartbeat Method is a series of drama games created for children with autism, the games aim to increase their own self-awareness, explore emotions, and build language skills (Hunter, 2015, p. 1). The starting point for the workshops held by Hunter is the heartbeat circle. A circle is created in which children with autism sit along with either actors or parents, they then use the rhythm of their hearts to create a beat by placing their hands on their hearts (Hunter, 2015, pp. 13-18). The purpose of this game is to connect with not only the room but also your own body, focusing on the rhythm to allow a sense of calm. This allows people to arrive in the space and then be present, autistic people can be overwhelmed by many things before even entering the space. Journeys can be stressful, the weather can be unsuitable, and many external factors can distress

autistic people. Most of these cannot be controlled by the facilitator, but the space can be constructed to have a change of pace made suitable for autistic people.

Youth Theatre Ireland developed a resource titled *A Handbook for Youth Theatre Facilitators: Supporting Young People on the Autism Spectrum*. This resource provides an example of a social script, a document that provides information and visual cues. The script can contain information such as which room the workshop will be held in, where the toilets are, as well as the content of the workshop (O'Dwyer, n.d., pp. 12-13). Providing autistic people with the information needed can help reduce the anxiety of attending social situations (Harrigan, 2022). Autism affects communication, which as a facilitator of a space, there needs to be an awareness of. Tips for communicating effectively include; speaking slowly and clearly, using only necessary words, allowing time for response, avoiding repetition, and checking for understanding (O'Dwyer, n.d., p. 6).

Autistic Stories: Vijay Patel

Moving towards autistic professionals, whose practice is within theatre rather than applied theatre. They offer their own expertise of being an autistic performer but also what it means to create a process which is accessible, and the benefits of having a process in which an autistic can be a part of and contribute to.

Vijay Patel (He/They) is a performance artist and writer based in the south of England, they also consult and advocate for neurodivergent access needs. “The work they make predominantly surrounds cultural identity, making autobiographical/political work to shift perceptions and uplift marginalised, intersectional identities.” (Patel, n.d.).

They have created an Access Rider as Part of their professional working practice (Patel, 2023). A document which aims to raise awareness of access issues that they have previously faced, and how these access needs can be met. Going back to the social model of disability, this document looks at how processes, environments, and communications are disabling. Patel has considered this when creating the rider. Access riders are unique to each person, whereas

documents such as the Handbook for Youth Theatre Facilitators: Supporting Young People on the Autism Spectrum, are broader.

In Patel's case, being neurodivergent covers more than just autism, his conditions being autism, asperger's syndrome, and dyspraxia. As of writing this, it should be noted that myself and others within the autistic community do not use the term Asperger's (Tsen, 2021), this is due to Hans Asperger having links to the Nazi party, along with evidence of allowing the euthanasia of disabled children (Baron-Cohen, et al., 2018). However, there are those who still use the term Asperger's, as they feel the term defines them more appropriately than the umbrella term of autistic spectrum disorder (ADS).

Focusing on Vijay's rider, they start off by stating the main barriers they face; anxiety, people not understanding his ways of communicating, sudden changes or unstructured/unplanned activities, having to mask around people, and physical barriers related to his dyspraxia. The Access Rider then explains and offers ways the processes they are involved in can be constructed to be made accessible to them as a participant. One of the main barriers is communication both online and verbally, and this can manifest in taking instructions the wrong way or talking in a one-sided

conversation. Highlighted in bold in the document, Patel states that they require patience, and for anything that was unclear to be rephrased or explained in a way that supports them. Sudden changes happen within the arts, and Patel notes this, but having a pre-planned arrangement often helps with the anxiety that they have when committing to working collaboratively. Patel has experienced “Asperger’s meltdowns” in the past and explains that what works best in this scenario is being offered a separate room with someone to talk to, preferably someone whom they have a good relationship with.

An autistic meltdown is different for every person, for Patel it looks like showing little outward emotion and stressing over small things. Having a meltdown for me, is being at the point of extreme anxiety and becoming overwhelmed by other people and things that I cannot control.

Patel, within the rider, goes on to state how the document should be received by the people or company they are working with. It mentions that there may be other access requirements that may not have arisen as of the creation of this access rider. As every process is different and unique, new barriers may be revealed. The document

should be referred to multiple times throughout the process. From my own experience, accessibility can become lost in the excitement of rehearsal. Creative rabbit holes are delved into in the passion of the moment, and one thing rapidly leads to another. This is the natural evolution of creation, but because of this excitement, the foundations of working accessibly become blurred and out of sight.

Autistic Stories: Mickey Rowe

“I’ve been an actor my whole life, to pass as neurotypical. So being an actor comes naturally to me.” (Rowe & Great Big Story, 2017)

Mickey Rowe is an autistic and legally blind performer, director and consultant. He is the first autistic actor to play the lead character of Christopher Boone in the play adaptation of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*, a novel about a boy with autism. In a video for the Huffington Post (Rowe & Huffington Post, 2019), Rowe mentions that over ninety-five percent of disabled roles are played by non-disabled actors. Therefore, if you are doing a project that involves autism there is no excuse for not including autistic, actors, directors, or writers (Rowe & Huffington Post, 2019). In this video, he talks about how in job interviews he has experienced being talked as a fourteen-year-old. He explains that if you wish to understand

autism you should not be asking parents of autistic people, but rather talking to autistic people themselves, stating “we are experts on our own lives”. Rowe explains that autism isn’t high-functioning and low-functioning, as these terms mean how someone is able to communicate to the neurotypical standard.

Rowe, in his book *Fearlessly Different* talks about how he worked with the director in *Curious Incident* to allow a healthy process for him as an autistic actor, “the director and I worked together to take the stims I did naturally and modify them” (Rowe, 2022, p. 188). In allowing the process to involve Rowe’s autistic experience, he could offer his expertise and avoid masking of his own stims. However, Rowe’s experience during this process was not always positive. During the callback, those involved in production began treating him like the character within the novel (Rowe, 2022, p. 125). An improvement for himself and other disabled performers being a part of the theatre process would be to ask, “Do you have any access needs, or are there any accommodations we can make for you on the day of the callback?” (Rowe, 2022, p. 127). In doing so you give agency to the individual, who is the “expert on their own life [sic]” (Rowe, 2022, p. 127)

Autistic Stories: Marcus

For accessibility, I should note that I have found this part of my research to be disabling. There is an irony in researching accessibility while feeling disabled. My research and my disability are tied. Both centre around engaging and collaborating with others. To offer context to my practice, I have been working distanced from others for over six months. Spaces which were not accessible to me have left me excluded from working with others. Because of this, my research has become about using my own autistic lived experience to construct a process that works for me with a focus on my disability. I hope that my autistic experience and discovery can be useful to others on the spectrum.

I used one question to start my research into a process that would work for me; where do I work best? Typically, when I am using my laptop, I will be found in my bed, with my weighted blanket over my body. When I have written performances, this is my writing space, my cocoon of comfort, pressure on my body to ease the pressure in my mind. While I have not had access to a rehearsal room during this process, I can reflect on my past experiences. I have worked in many spaces, attics, studios, living rooms, and even cupboards, each had

its own benefits and access issues. When working in these spaces I have gained knowledge of what suits me best. That is a large open space with room for movement, a comfortable space for me to sit or lay down, windows that can be opened to allow fresh air in, a room with no foot traffic, and somewhere indoors.

In my discovery I have read books outside, to understand more of the struggle I have when working outside. There are so many external sensory inputs which I have very little control over, the sound of traffic, insects crawling on my skin, and people talking to me. My curiosity drove me to experiment with the difference between reading indoors and outdoors. With Hunter's book *Shakespeare's Heartbeat* in hand, I started reading and noted every time I became distracted within a twenty-minute window. While indoors I became distracted four times. I needed to get a drink, I had to stretch my legs, the sun shone in my eyes, and I heard something outdoors. While outdoors this number rose significantly, to sixteen. A small fly kept landing on my limbs, I had to move my chair, I talked to a neighbour, the wind kept blowing the pages, the clouds distracted me, and I watched litter dance in the wind. I find myself hyper-fixating and focusing on things from time to time, it is clear that for me to work effectively it would be best that I am indoors.

I reflect back on a performance project from my first year of studies while at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland. I had been part of a group under the direction of Forest Wolfe, a Contemporary Performance fourth-year student at the time and now graduate. I had just been diagnosed as autistic due to experiencing struggles with the social aspect of my studies, and this had become an experience of learning how I worked with others with my autistic diagnosis. Forest had set about creating a process in which accessibility was integral to working with each other, with Forest identifying as “mentally ill” (Wolfe, n.d.). At the start of the process, we created a working document which set about creating methods of working with each other, we included communication, energy commitments, and self-identification. One key rule that we had set up as a group is that what is originally said does not hold any judgement. To offer context to what this looks like in practice I will give an example. Whilst exploring themes through discussion and play, someone may have said something that others find unconstructive, confusing, and at times upsetting. We had the space to open up a non-judgmental question of what or how something was said, the words used were often along the lines of “did you mean to say that” or “were you supposed to say it like that”. Having this as a foundation in the

process meant that we could understand each other better, as it opened up the way in which we communicate, both verbally and non-verbally.

From my own point of view, I have had struggles with tonality and non-verbal communication, the tone of my voice and the way in which I say things do not line up with what is being said. In one session we as a group were exploring the performance of love. My emotional state struggled with grasping the concept in a healthy way, and I was visibly and vocally struggling to write about being in love. I said to the group that I hated this, I was allowed to expand on what I meant by this, expressing that my frustrations were not at the activity or at the group but rather the concept of love. This then evolved into me writing about how love at times is fake or constructed as a performance, being able to communicate my feelings authentically and without judgment opened up space within the process to allow a deviation in which my experiences and views are involved in the production of content. This has led me to explore what it means to be authentic, and even more so to be authentically autistic. Alongside how I can perform and show authenticity. I started to look at the label of autism, and how I use it to describe myself and others. There are many ways to note someone's autism, you have the identity-first term

“autistic person”, having the identity first reflects that being autistic is intrinsic to who they are (National Autistic Society, n.d.). There is also the person-first “person with autism”, this is done so the person is more important than the disability (Duncan, 2010). The National Autistic Society says that the majority of autistic people prefer identity-first language (National Autistic Society, n.d.), however looking back to Andrew Solomon autistic people have a range of different views (Solomon, 2012). So, who am I? I am an autistic person, I am a person with autism, Marcus is autistic, Marcus has autism. All of these achieve the same result, that I have an ASD diagnosis. I use both identity-first and person-first language interchangeably when describing myself or autism as a condition. However, when I am referring to an individual, I will always use their preferred term, out of the respect for self-identification. I have said so many variations on how I can tell another person that I am autistic, I have talked to myself in the mirror, I have laid in bed muttering, just trying to figure out as many ways to find something that feels best, above the rest. In terms of language, I have discovered that it does not matter to me how I go about telling people that I am autistic. However, I want to avoid the stereotypes around autism, so I feel only comfortable disclosing my diagnosis to people that know me. I would have a hard time with saying “Hello, I am autistic, and my

name is Marcus”. I want people to know me, my hobbies and interests, my passions, and my story, and then through disclosing my diagnosis allow them to understand me more.

A word often used as part of the autistic experience is masking. In the words of Hannah Belcher, a researcher and lecturer with autism “To ‘mask’ or to ‘camouflage’ means to hide or disguise parts of oneself in order to better fit in with those around you” (Belcher, 2022). Masking is a performance, the aim is to appear neurotypical, to operate within the social codes which the neurotypical population subconsciously use. Eye contact is something that I very much actively engage in, for me it does not happen subconsciously, I have to think about making eye contact with the person or group of people I am speaking to. I have memories of my mother always telling me to look people in the eyes. When I am listening or talking to others I have very little struggle with eye contact, it does not make me uncomfortable or unsettle me, but rather I have no desire for myself for eye contact within conversation, the words said enough are fine. Due to my prolonged experience of masking in this way, it almost becomes a habit to make eye contact, which causes me little fatigue. Relating masking to spoon theory is important to understand the term ‘Autistic Fatigue’, coined by autistic people in explaining the

emotional, mental, and physical toll of the autistic experience such as masking, social stimuli, and sensory overload. The energy required to mask can often leave an individual drained and experiencing burnout, taking many spoons to appear as neurotypical. From a production viewpoint, it makes sense to be aware of the tasks involved to operate and to help lessen the burden an autistic person may face when attempting to mask, this allows individuals more time to focus on the things that matter such as rehearsal or discussion rather than trying to appear neurotypical. What this looks like in practice is, allowing autistic people to operate authentically within the process, not asking them to commit to social norms at the expense of their wellbeing.

When I have been in the rehearsal room or within a large group of people, I find myself so focused on the performance of trying to seem 'normal', that I often forget about the subtle social cues that other people give or expect from me. I look at the word masking as something that covers your face, it can limit your eyesight, and dull the sounds around you. With the focus and energy spent on committing to the mask of a neurotypical, I find that I become less socially aware of the needs of both the group and individuals. For me, the character, or mask, that I use when interacting with others is

often a large personality, with confidence and often uses humour to operate with others. I am aware that this mask has issues, it can often occupy too much of the space without contributing in a collaborative way. Using humour as a coping mechanism, I can often find myself trying to please others with jokes, not all of which are received well, or in good taste. These behaviours are not intentional, but rather the product of wanting to be a part of the group, rather than being classified as other than the group. Part of my exploration throughout this process is the covering of my face, I can see perfectly fine when a wire is wrapped around my head, I can see through mesh fabrics, I can look in between the threads when a t-shirt is over my head, I can notice the light when more fabric is over the t-shirt, but with these layers, my sight becomes blind to any visual input outside the cocoon of a visual mask or cover, I have become blind in the physical sense, but with this metaphor of masking, I have also become socially blind.

This leads me to another word used within the autistic community, stimming. Stimming is the act of self-stimulation to soothe or to cope and with situations by focusing on a chosen sensory input such as sound and sight, with also repeated or autonomous movements rather than an uncontrollable external stimulus, stimming can also be

used to find pleasure or entertainment (National Autistic Society, n.d.). Those with autism may find themselves trying to surpass their stimming behaviours to fit in, at the expense of their own energy and mental health. Allowing those with autism to allow stimming to take place in the workshop is key to allowing them to occupy the space as their authentic self, but it is also good to have an external room with very little stimulus, to allow some respite from the quite often busy rehearsal room. I started to explore my own relationship with stimming, which at times hasn't always been healthy. In moments of great stress and worry I will find myself digging my nails into my skin so that I can maintain focus in those situations. It is subtle, but it does leave my hands sore and red. However not all of my experiences are unhealthy, as of writing this I currently have a fan next to me which provides both the physical feeling of air against my skin, but also the audio white noise produced by the blades of the fan, this helps me focus on the task at hand, but is also really helpful for allowing my mind to relax, and is needed for me to fall asleep. When I look at my stimming in the rehearsal room I will always be found with a pair of headphones on my person or in a bag nearby, I have such a visceral reaction to audio inputs such as music or white noise, and they always help me when I begin to feel over-stimulated. Putting this into practice turned into a sensory discovery of pleasure

and release. The feeling of my skin against a cold wall, the feeling of my back being scratched on the corner of a wall. I set out to find what sensations help me relax, what brings me down from suffering burnout and being tense, and where these can happen, particularly within a room of other people.

A Final Word

It is vitally important that theatre makers, performers, and, by extension, every workplace create environments and processes that allow autistic people to occupy and flourish in the same way the neurotypical population has the ability to.

The institutions can make changes, such as offering quiet spaces where people can distance themselves from the rehearsal room, making sure that travel is accessible for autistic people, and having training in working with autistic people. However, autistic people are so unique and different to each other, that while blanket changes can be made it is important to really take time to focus on the individual. Asking autistic people for what accommodations can be made or using an access rider allows the individual to share their own autistic expertise on how their disability affects them, and what are the barriers that a rehearsal room creates.

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