

RELAXED PERFORMANCE PROJECT CONFERENCE

2nd September 2013

A relaxed performance is aimed at opening up theatre experiences for people with autism and other learning disabilities.

Executive Summary

« Families like ours are usually

swimming against the tide.

Today, we were the Tide »»

Conference supported by



RELAXED PERFORMANCE PROJECT partners



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Project overview

The Relaxed Performance Project came about as a result of a partnership between The Prince's Foundation for Children & the Arts; The Society of London Theatre (SOLT) and Theatrical Management Association (TMA). It was a strategic response to develop the existing work of theatres that had been providing autism-friendly or relaxed performances for many years – such as Polka Theatre, London; Unicorn Theatre, London; and West Yorkshire Playhouse, Leeds and to build on the industry appetite to hold such performances following the Autism & Theatre Conference in 2011.

What is the need?

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability. It affects how a person communicates with – and relates to – other people and the world around them. It is a spectrum condition in that while all people with autism share certain areas of difficulty, their condition will affect them in very different ways. At the same time, all people with autism or Asperger syndrome are unique and have their own special skills and abilities. An acknowledged difficulty for the Relaxed Performance Project was to engage with such a diversity of individual needs and expectations across the audience.

Whilst the project was aimed at attracting audiences in the autistic spectrum to live theatre, relaxed performances were noted to be also suitable for people with learning difficulties, sensory and communication disorders.

How was the project funded?

Funding was sought and provided by the Nancy Lurie Marks Family Foundation with the proviso that there should be an independent evaluation and theatre partners were sourced.

The project was collaborative and brought together theatre staff and volunteers from a wide range of backgrounds, experiences and interests in the participant theatres, and partners such as national and local charities. This promoted awareness of the challenges that are experienced by individuals and families with autism whilst also building an audience.

Who did it involve?

Charities involved were: Children & the Arts; National Autistic Society; Children's and Social Services; Ambitious about Autism; MENCAP; The Mousetrap Foundation; Theatre Development Fund, US.

Theatre partners involved were: Apollo Theatre, Nimax Theatres, National Theatre; Grimsby Auditorium, Ambassadors Theatre Group, Principal Productions Ltd; Lyceum Theatre, Disney Theatrical Group; Oxford Playhouse, David Wood; Royal Shakespeare Company; Shakespeare's Globe; Theatre by the Lake; Unicorn Theatre.

The audience – who were they?

From November 2012 to June 2013, the Relaxed Performance Project engaged with a total of 4,983 audience members at eight theatres across the UK with an average audience of 622. This total audience comprised:

- 42% families living with autism
- 33% community groups (e.g. autism specific community organisations; SEN schools)
- 25% others (e.g. individuals and families).

The audience make-up

Of those individuals interviewed during and/or surveyed after a Relaxed Performance:

- 60% reported they had never been to the theatre before as a family
- 30% had never been to the theatre
- 90% had never been to a Relaxed Performance.
- Parents suggested that the promotion of & attendance at a relaxed performance brought about a shift in public awareness and an understanding of autism through engagement with their local networks. This in turn increased their confidence in attending a further relaxed performance

What we did

- A visual guide was compiled and posted to each family prior to the performance
- Autism-specific training was delivered to 300 staff of all partner venues
- Advice was given on how to engage with potential audience members or audiences were found
- A press consultant worked with theatres to promote the performances in local and national press
- Every participating theatre adjusted light and sound levels during the performance to suit the needs of the audience
- Designated 'chill-out' areas were prepared for audience members to use should being in the auditorium become overwhelming. These lessen stress, subsequently promoting feelings of 'relief' and 'acceptance' amongst individual family members.

Press

National and regional media was used successfully to communicate with families, and all the coverage drew families to the Relaxed Performance Project Facebook page (www.facebook.com/RelaxedPerformanceProject) where they could find future performances and where they could communicate with families and support groups that had already had positive experiences of the Relaxed Performances. We then encouraged families to use social media channels to tell others about the Relaxed Performance Project. This all had a positive effect on ticket sales. Press was obtained in, among others, The Times; The Guardian; Independent; The Observer; Oxford Mail & Times; BBC Breakfast TV & Online; BBC Radio 4; BBC London 94.9; BBC Radio and TV Oxford and Online; Sky News Paper Review.

“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. ”

Tips for putting on a Relaxed Performance in 10 Points

1 Choice of Production:

Think about it! Is a pantomime the best choice? They can be considered to be challenging due to noise, lights and the uncertainty. Well-known shows might well sell better as they already have more profile.

2 Scheduling:

Work out with your local audience when the best time for them would be to come to a show.

3 Funding:

Can you fund the discounted tickets yourself? Will you have enough budget for marketing the show. On the day you will need extra people front of house.

4 Marketing & Press:

Building audiences for Relaxed Performances takes time. 'Word of mouth' and personal recommendation' and building a personal relationship between a staff member and local groups proved a more effective means of marketing the programme than advertising. Several theatre staff reported that marketing through their 'traditional routes' was not effective in this instance. Press worked wonders.

5 Partnerships:

In order to build an audience for a Relaxed Performance it is imperative that you speak to community groups, schools and individuals and listen to their needs and work with them.

6 Advocacy:

Whilst this will take time, it will be worth it in the long run as it will build your community relationships and work as a good advocate for your theatre.

7 Preparation & Information:

Is absolutely key. If audiences know what to expect, there is less for them to worry about. It is difficult enough getting to the theatre so clear and comprehensive information is imperative – *"The visual guide was absolutely fantastic ... the reassurance about the story line was really helpful in preparing us for the shock of it"*.

8 Training & Understanding:

Take time to understand what a family might have to encounter day-to-day to understand how important this is and train your staff as it will pay dividends. *"We trained the cast and front of house staff for today and with autism awareness training. They all felt incredibly honoured and really thrilled to be doing something special."*

9 Environment:

Make people feel comfortable and secure. *"Having the relaxation room for the interval was really brilliant ... he needed to blow out and I didn't need to stress about him being too loud or being too fidgety in the show"*.

10 Future:

"We would totally come again". Build on your success. All theatre partners in the project have programmed a further relaxed performance.

“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. It's such a beautiful thing to be able to do, it's really lovely!”

“It was truly amazing! We were just saying that it's been so sympathetically done, for just everybody in the audience. We were chatting to people, theatre staff and have realised just how adaptable they were. So when the music was a little bit loud, they brought the volume down. It's been absolutely fantastic, not only have they really thought out everything about the performance in general but they actually considered how they were going to change the performance while it was happening, when people weren't able to cope. That's just amazing! ”

Fact & Figures about Autism

- 700, 000 people in the UK have an Autistic Spectrum Condition – this is 1 in 100 people
- Autism affects the lives of 2.7 million people across the UK
- Individuals with a disability or illness have significantly lower rates of arts attendance or participation than those without disability or illness.
- Family members of children and young people with a disability or illness are less likely to take part in arts and cultural activities

Relaxed Performance Project: venues and programme

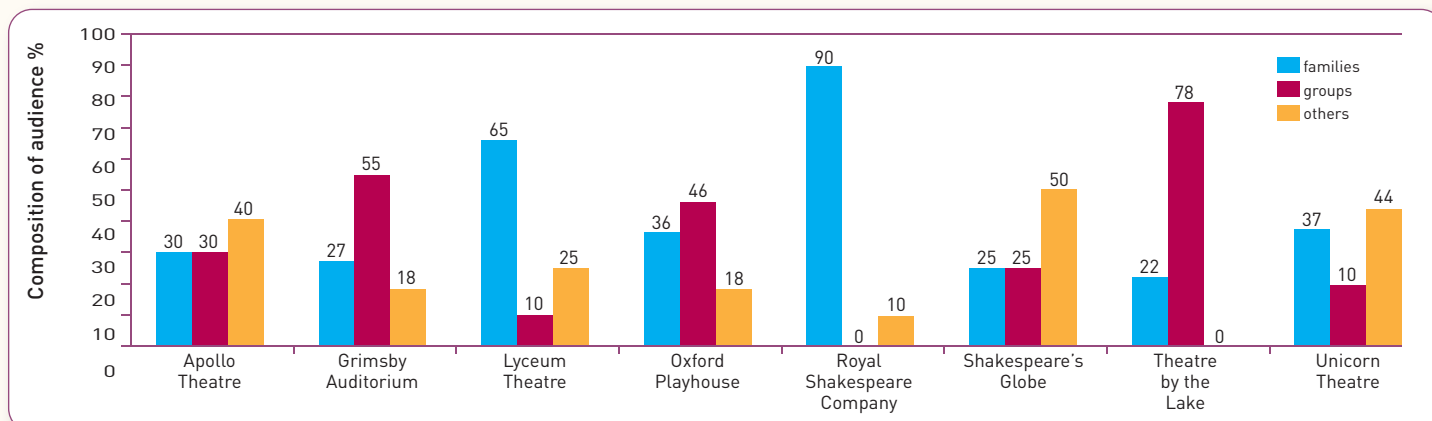
Venue	Location	Audience	Relaxed Performance	Age	Duration	Scheduling
Apollo Theatre	London	616	The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time	11+	2h 40	22/8/13, 2.30pm
Grimsby Auditorium	Grimsby	112	Cinderella	All	2h 20	19/11/12, 2pm
Lyceum Theatre	London	1,828	The Lion King	7+	2h 40	14/4/13
Oxford Playhouse	Oxford	249	Spot's Birthday Party	2-6	60 mins	2/4/13, 2pm
Royal Shakespeare company	Stratford-upon-Avon	482	The Mouse and His Child	8+	2h 20	7/1/13, 1.15pm
Shakespeare's Globe	London	1,417	Romeo and Juliet	11+	2h 20	16/3/13, 2pm
Theatre by the Lake	Keswick	96	The Railway Children	All	2h	17/1/13
Unicorn Theatre	London	183	1,001 Nights	6+	60 mins	2/3/13, 2pm

Ticket prices and reductions

Which theatre	Ticket Prices	% Reduction
Apollo Theatre, London	£25 adult / £25 child	52%
Grimsby Auditorium, Grimsby	£10 adult / £10 child	62%
Lyceum Theatre, London	£39.50 stalls / £25 circle	70%
Oxford Playhouse, Oxford	£11 adult / £9 child	0%
RSC, Stratford-upon-Avon	£10 adult / £5 child	40%
Shakespeare's Globe, London	Free	100%
Theatre by the Lake, Keswick	£10 adult / £5 child	43%
Unicorn Theatre, London	£8 adult / £8 child	62%

Free due to funding from Deutsche Bank

Relaxed Performance Pilot Project: composition of audience



The Future?

All of the theatre partners have scheduled one or more future Relaxed Performances.

For more information, contact SOLT & TMA on 020 7557 6700 or Children & the Arts on 020 3326 2230
www.officiallondontheatre.co.uk/access www.childrenandarts.org.uk