

Reach Out and Relax: Extending Access to Theatre for Families Living with Disability



Andy Kempe and Sarah Gregson

Abstract A peculiarly British custom, pantomime mixes traditional folk or fairy tales with comical contemporary references, songs, technical wizardry and audience interaction. The leading male is traditionally played by a young woman while his mother, the ‘Dame’, by an older man. Given that one aspect of autism is frequently a compulsion for things to be straightforward and predictable, such a confusion of signals may well be thought an inappropriate introduction to theatre for an autistic child. However, for many children in the UK their first and often only experience of live theatre is the annual pantomime, while for many local venues the panto represents a major community event. To exclude families living with autism from this is tantamount to excluding them from live theatre per se.

This chapter describes and discusses how an arts venue in a small town in England undertook to include a ‘relaxed performance’ of *Jack and the Beanstalk* in the light of research into factors that may contribute to the development of social and communication skills in children with autism. The chapter presents evidence of the impact the event had on local children and their families and influenced the venue’s subsequent programming.

Keywords Disability · Autism · Access · ‘Relaxed performances’ · Family · Pantomime

A. Kempe (✉)

Institute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, Berkshire, UK
e-mail: a.j.kempe@reading.ac.uk

S. Gregson

Learning and Participation, Newbury Corn Exchange, Newbury, UK
e-mail: sarahg@cornexchangenew.co.uk

© Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2019

M. Finneran, M. Anderson (eds.), *Education and Theatres, Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education* 27,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22223-9_19

287

1 Context

Over the past two decades there has been a considerable shift from ‘outreach’ programmes organised and managed by mainstream theatres in the UK to more ‘in-reach’ activities (Ball 2013, pp. 155–156).

One sector of the community that this shift has hitherto made little impact upon though is the families of children with special educational needs. London’s Polka and Unicorn theatres for children and West Yorkshire Playhouse have pioneered work aimed at widening participation in the theatre for children with disabilities while companies such as Bamboozle (<http://www.bamboozletheatre.co.uk>) and Oily Cart (<http://www.oilycart.org.uk>) have taken theatre to children with special educational needs into their school context. Conversely, Nottingham Playhouse has funded the creation of a purpose-built portable theatre especially designed for small audiences of young people with profound and multiple learning disabilities and autism.

People with a disability have significantly lower rates of attending the theatre than those without and family members of children with a disability are similarly less likely to take part in cultural activities (Shah and Priestley 2011). For UK arts organisations there is an increasing imperative to undertake activities specifically designed ‘to meet the needs of existing and potential audiences to help arts organisations develop ongoing relationships’ (ACE 2011, p. 2). Implicit in this is a need to understand the lived experiences that will enable arts organisations to develop their practice by removing actual and perceptual barriers to participation. One such initiative has involved theatres offering ‘relaxed’ or ‘autism friendly’ performances, defined as being:

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. (Prince’s Foundation for Children and the Arts 2013 n.p.)

Founded on the success of autism friendly cinema screenings, the Autism Theatre Initiative, was launched in New York with a performance of Disney’s *The Lion King* on October 2nd 2011 (Theatre Development Fund n.d.). Subsequently, following a complaint regarding the treatment of a boy with autism and his family at a show in London’s West End (London Evening Standard 2.8.11), a pilot project was undertaken in the UK to explore the challenges involved in mounting specially adapted performances for such an audience. The Relaxed Performance Project culminated in a conference aimed at sharing best practice in September 2013 (Kempe 2014a).

Between one in 80–100 people are estimated to have an autistic spectrum disorder. If the entire gamut of learning, sensory, social and communication disabilities were taken into account then this ratio would obviously be considerably higher. What is known is that many families living with disability are wary of visiting the theatre for fear of disrupting the performance or upsetting other audience members. The resultant self-exclusion is being recognised and theatres in the UK are

increasingly acting to change the perception that they are ‘off limits’. In this sense, the appellation ‘autism friendly’ is problematic in that it suggests an event exclusively for a very specific target audience, while the term ‘relaxed performance’ might suggest that the professional integrity of the performance has been compromised in some way. In practice, relaxed performances aim to make as few changes to the show as possible but rather adjust the organisation of the front of house and auditorium in order to reduce anxiety for those attending.

Relaxed performances are on the increase, from under 5 globally in 2011 to just over 120 in 2014 (Fletcher-Watson 2015). A particular rise in UK theatres can be attributed to The Relaxed Performance Project and a subsequent industry wide conference in 2013. Many of these RPs are pantomimes.

A peculiarly British custom, ‘panto’ blends traditional folk or fairy tales with comical contemporary references, songs, technical wizardry and audience interaction. The leading male is traditionally played by a young woman while his mother, the ‘Dame’, by an older man. Given that one aspect of autism is frequently a compulsion for things to be straightforward and predictable, such a confusion of signals and sensory stimuli may well be thought of as inappropriate for an autistic child. However, for many children their first, and often only, experience of live theatre is the annual pantomime. To exclude any family from this is tantamount to excluding them not only from live theatre but an integral aspect of community celebration. This chapter reports on how one arts organisation embraced the findings of the Relaxed Performance Project in order to extend its own provision to the community it serves.

2 A Small Town in England

Newbury is a market town in southern England (pop. 32,000). Newbury Corn Exchange (NCE) is a small to medium sized multi arts organisation and receiving house, offering a comprehensive programme of touring theatre, dance, music, comedy and family shows as well as a range of participation work for all ages. The annual pantomime is produced in-house. In 2013 the organisation was a registered charity funded through the local authority, trusts and foundations. It was not, at the time, an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) i.e. in receipt of regular funding, but has since become an NPO. The quest to offer a relaxed performance may be seen as a marker of its ambition to operate at the same level as larger organisations such as those that took part in the Relaxed Performance Project. The idea was thus supported by the management team as a potentially essential part of an audience development strategy.

The drive to produce a relaxed performance came from the Learning and Participation Manager (LPM)

- (a) Feeling that they had a mandate, as ‘access champion’ to pursue a solution to an enquiry from a patron who could not attend the panto due to photo sensitive epilepsy;

- (b) Having personal interest in the social justice possibilities of widening participation in pantomime, an annual theatre and family tradition;
- (c) Discovering the emergence of a relaxed performance practice in the UK (SOLT 2013) and
- (d) Finding that a personal drive to offer this kind of access to a section of the local community chimed with the organisational and perhaps national ambition for theatre.

In 2013 the Learning and Participation department consisted of one full time manager and a part time assistant. RPs sit within the department's wider aims in addressing a particular sets of needs and ensuring that NCE offered a positive welcome to marginalised groups e.g. families and people with a disability. The relaxed performance sat naturally as a joint project between the Learning and Participation team and Front of House, given their experience of welcoming a wide range of groups with particular needs. The organisation was positive about, though not entirely undaunted by, the challenge of mounting a relaxed performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* as part of the 2013–2014 panto season.

The LPM was aware that engaging with the reality of how difficult the theatre experience might be for some families would challenge accepted working practice. In order to 'understand and know' (ACE 2011, p. 2) an audience group, an insight into their situated knowledge can be helpful. If 'each of us constructs different knowledge from experiences within our own historical and social contexts' then each person's knowledge will 'shape the way they interpret experiences' (Lang 2011, p.89). This situated knowledge adds a specific validity to their voices and makes consultation essential for audience development initiatives. In this case local support groups, the local branch of the National Autism Society and two local special schools were contacted. From the subsequent meetings, three 'situated partners' came to work with the LPM throughout the production process and provided training in autism awareness for staff and volunteers in all departments. A tour of the venue with a member of a local support group (a parent of a child with autism) proved invaluable in highlighting small changes that could be made to the environment. While Fletcher-Watson (2015) notes how the number of relaxed performances has grown exponentially, he questions the extent to which the voices of autistic people themselves have been accessed in the initiative. While this may be a valid challenge to set before theatres intent on widening participation to mainstream theatre generally, NCE saw their target audience as the whole family. In order to cater for those members of the family with autism it seemed most appropriate to ask for advice from those best able to offer it, that is, the rest of the family.

3 The Arts and Autism

The question 'What is known about children with learning, sensory and communication difficulties?' is too broad to address fully in this chapter but needs to be considered in order to understand why families of children with ASD tend not to

come to the theatre. ASD is a 'spectrum disorder': those individuals with a diagnosis of 'autism' are as different from each other as anyone else. However, an overview of the spectrum is useful when considering families' experience of a live theatre event. People with autism may 'experience **over- or under-sensitivity** to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours' (NAS n.d.). Relaxed performances need to be mindful of all manner of sensory impairments. Given that theatre by its nature sets out to provoke internal and external feelings by offering what Hurley calls 'super-stimuli' that 'concentrates and amplifies the world's natural sensory effects' (2010, p. 23) it is clear that the danger of over-stimulating those who are already ultra-sensitive while trying to accommodate those who need or crave heightened stimulation presents a challenge which may, inevitably, result in some degree of compromise. Some children with learning, sensory or communication disabilities lack an awareness of the thoughts and feelings of those around them. This presents a challenge in the social setting of the theatre. NCE's work with 'situated partners' highlighted some particular difficulties, for example, the noisy and confined nature of the Front of House space. Grandin and Barron (2005) insist that children with autistic spectrum disorders need direct experience and live interaction in order for social skills to become 'hard-wired' in their brains. With careful planning, the unique social dynamic that can be fostered in the theatre can be utilised to help develop social and communication skills. A central element of the Social Communication Emotional Regulation Transactional Support Model (SCERTS), which aims to address deficits in social and communication skills, is the notion of 'joint attention' whereby the child follows what a partner is very deliberately pointing to or gazing at while using 'exaggerated facial and verbal responses to an unexpected or anticipated event' in order to emphasise appropriate social reactions (Shore and Rastelli 2006 p. 173). The actors' aim, complemented by what Hurley (2010, p. 28) refers to as 'feeling-technologies', is to draw the attention of the audience to the stage. An integral facet of panto is certainly the use of exaggerated facial and verbal responses and an active encouragement of the audience to make their responses visible and audible. If the actors are successful in this then an attending child will not have just one partner to refer to in terms of 'joint attention' and associated response but the entire population of the auditorium! In Bundy et al's research, 'Several young people spoke about being aware of the responses of other audience members. Some indicated that they experience pleasure when their own responses were affirmed by other people's apparently similar reactions' (2013, p. 156). Thus, the act of jointly attending with a group and the object of that attention may be seen as efficacious in the development of social skills while also representing a rich aesthetic, cultural and communal experience.

A major barrier, however, continues to lie in attracting such an audience in the first place due to the social conventions, perceived or actual, that surround how audiences are expected to behave in the theatre. Theatres can represent a degree of challenge and alienation. In order to avoid the embarrassment of contravening an unknown or misunderstood code people may simply not go even if they'd like to (Ball 2013). The cost of going to the theatre may also be prohibitive, a fact that

doubtless adds to the fear of having one's child interfere with another audience member's enjoyment. One parent in Newbury 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 they are badly brought up and just look at them, being cross. It's really debilitating.

What might be learnt from such responses is that engaging with a performance can lead to experiencing negative feelings from others. In a relaxed performance the audience is invited to engage with the action in whatever way they wish; that other members of the audience are doing likewise may lead to the recognition that theatre is a good space in which feelings can be physically and verbally expressed.

4 The Learning Organisation

With an awareness of some of the challenges of ensuring that an RP truly reaches its intended audience it is essential that a whole organisation comes on board with the process. Having just one informed staff member making a one-off event happen by force of will would not make for a sustainable model of practice. If such initiatives are to be agents of change then consideration must be made of how an organisation learns and to what end.

In the current UK cultural sector, funding is difficult to access, and notions of accountability, value and impact are omnipresent. In 2013 NCE was subject to these forces and faced local authority funding cuts of up to 52%. In such a climate organisations and funding bodies ask 'what are we/you here for?' Loss of stability for arts organisations requires a '*continuous* processes of transformation' (Schon 1973, cited in Smith 2011). The skills of those within learning and participation teams to engage with situated knowledge can be of use to organisations in undertaking audience development that addresses these fundamental questions. However, as with any shift in practice, introducing RPs can be challenging. The work of Chris Argyris and Donald Schon on organisational learning suggests that where there is a problem to solve there are two possible learning responses: Single Loop Learning, in which the operational norms of the organisation remain unchallenged and the error or difficulty is managed, or Double Loop Learning, in which 'the error is detected and corrected in ways which involve the modification of an organisation's underlying norms' (Smith 2011).

Newbury Corn Exchange strove to operate as a reflexive, 'double loop', learning system by allowing situated knowledge to inform practice. However, a true double loop learning system operates a number of feedback loops through which the information and impetus behind change can reverberate around the whole organisation. When norms are being challenged with a view to direct action then these feedback loops can act to ensure that connections to new and potential audiences are more than skin deep.

5 Relaxing Jack: A Case Study

The process of delivering an RP began with a review of the current status of the organisation in terms of autism awareness and accessibility. The LPM and the Commercial and Sales Manager referred to the Arts Council England's *Family Friendly Toolkit*, which provides a practical guide 'designed to support arts organisations wishing to make a commitment to families, making it easier for families to take part in the arts as audiences and participants' (ACE 2007, p. 2). An audit based on that proposed in the toolkit was undertaken at NCE with the aim of raising awareness and promoting discussion in order to identify possible improvements. They then worked closely with the marketing and box office teams to evolve a clear message about what a relaxed performance is and who it can be useful for. The wording on the website explained the nature of event carefully so as to be inclusive:

We welcome everyone to our relaxed performances, which are slightly amended and designed with people with autistic spectrum disorder, learning disabilities and photosensitivity in mind.

The box office team contacted each booker directly after they had purchased tickets to ensure they knew that they had booked for a relaxed performance and understood its nature. Specific press releases went out and the LPM also worked with situated partners to promote the event.

All staff and volunteer stewards were offered autism awareness training, pre-show briefings and e-mail updates and meetings were held with the creative team and cast about adapting the show. Changes to the show, requiring rehearsal and replotting between performances, initially caused concern. However, few changes were ultimately made. Pyrotechnic explosions were removed from the finale, sound levels were lowered slightly throughout and inflatables that were dropped from the ceiling into the audience were dropped instead onto the stage. (Feedback later suggested that this last change would have been unnecessary as long as advance warning was given). The biggest change for the cast was that the auditorium lights were raised throughout. While relatively few actors may have received specific training in theatre for children and even fewer will have had extensive experience of working with children with autism, performer feedback on the event was very positive. The actors enjoyed interacting more directly with this new audience; a view endorsed by Alex Gaumont who played Miss Trunchbull in a relaxed performance of *Matilda The Musical* (Fletcher-Watson 2015).

Two 'visual stories', focused on enabling families to prepare for the experience, were sent out and hosted on the website in an editable format so that parents and teachers could edit them and use the parts they felt their child would benefit from. (<http://cornexchangenew.com/visitus/access>). The first covered the experience of

visiting Newbury Corn Exchange picturing the features of and spaces in the venue, along with some commentary and guidance. For example:

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 onto 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 and outlined the storyline and pantomime traditions, for example (Fig. 1):

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.

Advice from parents and guidance from the NAS (<http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/leisure-and-environments/theatre-and-autism-guide.aspx>) suggested that the visual story should explain the stage lighting; give a warning that the chairs flip back; state that pantomimes are noisy, and that dry ice would be used which has a slight odour to it. Very importantly it should emphasise that it would be OK to call out because in a pantomime this ‘is NOT being rude’. ‘Familiarisation Visits’ in which families could visit the venue with their child in advance of the performance were also on offer and a Google street view tour of the building was available on the website (<http://cornexchangenew.com/tour>). The main focus of adaptation was the venue environment on the day of the performance. Taking into consideration social anxieties and the potential for sensory overload the following adaptations were made:

- Hand driers were turned off
- Flashing toys were not sold
- All staff wore a large ‘Can I Help?’ badge
- A quiet space was provided during the performance
- Furniture was removed from the foyer to create space
- The auditorium was opened earlier than usual to avoid crowding
- Green lanyards were available for anyone who did not want to interact directly with the cast
- A quiet area was set up

Evaluation showed that all adaptations, except the Google virtual tour tool, were used and found to be useful.



Fig. 1 Dame Trott. (Picture courtesy of Farrows Creative)

6 The Impact on Children and Their Families

The positive reception of *Jack* mirrored the picture gained from the Relaxed Performance Project as a result of which a relaxed performance of *Aladdin* was programmed for the 2014–2015 season. Many of the same strategies were refined and re-employed.

The fact that a relaxed performance was to take place was regarded as a good thing and worth trying. Such a view seems to have rippled throughout the British theatre network. In the 2014–2015 season there were at least 48 relaxed performances of pantomimes illustrating an increasing willingness to embrace the initia-

tive. A common response was that the relaxed nature of the performance appeared to have an effect on the behaviour of many children. Simply knowing that they could go out and that no one was likely to be bothered by anything they did resulted in greater attention to the performance and provided a relief for many parents (Kempe 2014a, b). One mother commented:

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.

Aged 5 when she saw *Jack*, Ella, who is described as 'under-sensitive to stimulus', had run around a good deal in the performance, though when she attended a different panto with her school she stayed sitting still for longer. However, this was put this down to pressure from her teacher to stay still with the consequence that, 'when she went, she really went!' One year on Ella's mother stated that:

Last year we were thinking with Ella that there's no way could we have this experience if it wasn't like this (i.e. a relaxed performance). There's still no way could Ella not talk so what we're doing is getting her used to talking quietly! Since last year's relaxed performance there's been a huge change in her ability to sit and pay attention. There may have been a lot of factors at work here but at least the relaxed performance is one of those factors. A massive extra bonus about it is that it's something we can do as a family. That's huge.

Conversely, Harry, who has Asperger's syndrome and ADHD and was 6 years old when he went to see *Jack*, was taken to see the mainstream performance of *Aladdin*. His mother reported that he had become restless due to its length but conceded that he was much happier going to the theatre now and had attended other mainstream performances in the intervening year, his attendance at the RP being a factor in his preparedness. While she had some reservations about relaxed performances serving to unnecessarily mollycoddle children like Harry, she shared the view that they were a safe place to find out more about the child's responses to different sensory and social experiences. Sustainable attendance and integration into mainstream events is one of the stated intentions of the whole relaxed performance initiative.

Children's recollections of visiting the theatre can last a lifetime (Freshwater 2009) while director Ann Bogart (2010) states that, '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. If a primary aim of theatre, and most especially panto, is to generate experience and sensation, then adding the family into the equation may help create not only an especially potent memory but more immediate development of social and inter-personal relationships. Two weeks after the performance of *Jack*, 5 year old Fay's mother noticed how she was replicating the way one of the panto characters spoke as she played with her toy birds:

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 panto*) 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.

A year later Fay's mother was able to note another significant development which she saw as being directly related to attending the relaxed performance of *Aladdin*:

Fay was fidgety and talkative but responsive and really involved with what was going on. At the end she said, 'Hooray! It's over!.... Oh no! It's finished!' She was really relaxed afterwards. We went for a pizza. We don't get to do things like that. Ever. But she was really calm talking about the performance. Maybe it's because we were all chilled out. It was good. That doesn't often happen. It was lovely to do something as a family. I can't remember the last time we went out to somewhere where you had to wait for a meal. So yes, it's had a massive impact

In terms of the effectiveness of the special preparations and adjustments made by the NCE, the visual stories prepared for *Jack* were appreciated by parents but seemed of little interest to the children. A year later both Fay's and Ella's mothers reported that both girls had been more willing to look at them and this had prompted a number of questions about the show. Ella was especially interested in the picture of the quiet space because she had noticed a toy of Peppa Pig, a popular character on children's television, in the space. She was a little upset when, on the day, the toy wasn't there, prompting her mother to advise:

if you take a picture of what the quiet space is like it really needs to be like that because if it's not there can be a real problem! The visual sense is so strong it has to be that exact.

This kind of attention to detail is vital. Fay's enjoyment of her visits to NCE could have been very different. Arriving at the theatre to see *Jack* she was in need of the toilet but immediately became anxious because of previous bad experiences with the noise of the hand driers. On that occasion though she was able to read the sign that said the driers were turned off and visibly relaxed. When attending *Aladdin*, Fay remembered that there would be no problem with this.

Attending the theatre affords opportunities for aspects of socialisation not always available through formal education where children with ASD may find themselves 'in a bubble with a few adults' (Kempe 2015). Nine year old Jay's mother recounted how well he had dealt with another boy's behaviour during the relaxed performance saying that it made her realise 'how hard he has to try in other social situations and I think this is what makes his behaviour worse because he gets anxious about it. But here you learn to get used to it and just accept it.'

For social justice to be achieved for children with ASD and other individual complex needs, awareness and understanding must be raised within the broader community. Relaxed performances can play a part in this. A group of Scouts attended the relaxed performance of *Aladdin* because the date suited them. However, following the event the troupe leader commented that:

If the dates suit next year we'd probably choose to come to the relaxed performance again. It certainly hasn't done any of them any harm to share an experience with all the other children that were here.

Similarly, a teacher who accompanied a group from a residential school for children with autism noted that while her students attracted 'a few looks from other audience members' it was a good thing for members of the public to be exposed to them just as it was certainly good for her students to be able to spend time in public places.

6.1 *The Impact and Wider Implications of the Relaxed Performance Initiative*

Drawing on a database constructed using Google searched in English, Fletcher-Watson identified that 54% of 300 relaxed performances mounted between 2009 and 2014 were children's productions, while 22% were pantomimes. The database also reveals that 'there is currently a lack of provision for adults with autism and others who may wish to enjoy traditional drama but require a degree of accommodation in order to be able to visit the theatre' (2015, p. 5). Fletcher-Watson's question 'what does the autistic theatregoer want from a theatre performance, relaxed or otherwise' (2015, p. 8) has yet to be adequately researched, but even when it is, there is no guarantee that theatres will oblige if the financial implications resulting from increased workload and reduced audience capacity are seen to outweigh the benefits accruing from being seen as more socially just in their programming.

Analysis of audience figures showed that 70% of the audience that attended the RP of *Jack* had never previously booked to see a show at NCE. While only 9% rebooked for the RP the following year, two of those bookings were large groups. The RP of *Aladdin* sold at 100% capacity suggesting that the event had attracted further new audiences. In addition, bookers for the first RP were found to be more likely to book for another event at the venue, demonstrating the initiative's ability to bring this new audience into the wider cultural experience of theatre.

A particular challenge for the LPM lay in balancing the competing needs, levels of understanding, and relative involvement in the process across the organisation whilst keeping the workload manageable. For example, one actor commented, 'I felt the depth of rehearsal before the show, which created this sort of impending doom on the cast, was not needed'. In contrast, a member of the technical team felt that amending sound cues was 'not an easy process, so a little more rehearsal time with the performers and musicians would have helped greatly'. Similarly, where 70% of staff felt that autism awareness training was 'useful to them in their work and career', one volunteer asked, 'Why not just brief people in the extended briefing before the performance. Local SEN schools have been bringing students to the performances for several years, so this was not a new concept'.

For the individual who assumes responsibility for an RP in any venue these balances are constantly being renegotiated alongside other demands and any negative feedback can feel personal and demotivating. In this instance the active attempt to harness both staff and audience feedback, whilst time consuming, enabled the LPM to build on the positives.

Since the first relaxed performance 60% of staff and volunteers reported feeling that they are more confident in their understanding of autism. The wider impact of this in the local community is difficult to measure and perhaps warrants wider investigation. The organisation have also come to realise, through active discussion, that other events can become 'relaxed' events with small changes and a heightened awareness and confidence in staff delivering them. In effect, the organisation has

realised a latent potential for accessibility that has been highlighted by the relaxed performance process.

At present, relaxed performances appear to be manifest primarily in the USA and UK. Hadley (2015) has noted that this may be due to the fact that both of these countries have legislation requiring venues to address issues of access and engagement for people with disabilities. However, developing and sustaining inclusion is more likely to be achieved through will and grace rather than legal obligation. Thus, there may be no reasons why relaxed performances should remain an Anglo-centric phenomenon once their nature and potential is brought to the attention of the industry worldwide.

7 Conclusion

Though the practice of double loop learning, fostering new partners, new approaches and new creative practices is time consuming the dividends and opportunities for further development are significant. In particular, an approach to audience development focused on dialogue with marginalised groups based on the model employed for the first relaxed performance is emerging. Such an approach will acknowledge the limitations of what NCE can offer audiences while continuing to strive to address particular needs. This reflexive approach to welcoming existing and new audiences to the building has been central to the creation of the NCE's 'approach to audiences' policy. This has involved all paid and volunteer front of house staff and has led the Learning and Participation team to actively create new opportunities for face to face contact with community groups. The challenge inherent in this role will be how to make such contacts meaningful so that situated knowledge informs programming whilst managing diverse expectations.

The positive response to NCE's initiative implies an imperative to develop and sustain opportunities for this new audience. Focusing on the observed benefits of 'joint attention', further exploration of how to apply aspects of the 'relaxed' approach to other events in which children and families may actively participate is an important next step. Finally, it seems that it would be a failure of NCE's endeavour if all of this new learning was smugly pocketed as an example of a new form of 'in-reach' at a local level. Such experiences and resultant learning deserves to be shared in order for art organisations and educationalists to consider how they might apply the emerging ideas to new situations. The reality for too many arts and educational endeavours is that taking the time to reflect on how they might 'reach-out' in order to achieve quality 'in-reach' is often the silent victim of cuts and outcomes-based oversight. However, by embracing dialogue with those who feel marginalised, new audiences may be nurtured while more is learnt regarding how their needs may be catered for creatively. Most importantly, the impact of reaching out in this way is not confined to the individuals and families being directly targeted, but serves to inform and reflect the nature of the entire community in which they live.

References

- Arts Council of England (2007). *Family friendly toolkit*. http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publication_archive/family-friendly-toolkit/. Accessed 08.09.2013.
- Arts Council of England (2011). *Information sheet – grants for the arts audience development & marketing*. <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/grants-arts/information-sheets/>. Accessed 30.11.13.
- Ball, S. (2013). Regional theatre as learning resources. In A. Jackson & C. Vine (Eds.), *Learning through theatre*. London: Routledge.
- Bogart, A. (2010). In E. Hurley (Ed.), *Theatre and feeling*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bundy, P., Ewing, R., & Fleming, J. (2013). Drama and the audience: Transformative encounters in TheatreSpace. In M. Anderson & J. Dunn (Eds.), *How drama activates learning*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Fletcher-Watson, B. (2015). Relaxed performance: Audiences with autism in mainstream theatre. *Scottish Journal of Performance*, 2(2), 61–89.
- Freshwater, H. (2009). *Theatre and audience*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Grandin, T., & Barron, S. (2005). In V. Zysk (Ed.), *The unwritten rules of social relationships: Decoding social mysteries through the unique perspectives of autism*. Arlington: Future Horizons.
- Hadley, B. (2015). Participation, politics and provocations: People with disabilities as non-conciliatory audiences. *Participations: the Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 12(1), 154–174.
- Hurley, E. (2010). *Theatre and feeling*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kempe, A. (2014a). Widening participation in theatre through ‘relaxed performances’. *New Theatre Quarterly*, XXXI(Part 1), 121. 2015.
- Kempe, A. (2014b). Developing social skills in autistic children through ‘Relaxed Performances’. *Support for Learning*, 29(3), 261–274.
- Kempe, A. (2015). ‘Open sesame!’ How panto can pave the way for inclusion in theatre. *Drama Research*, 6.1.
- Lang, J. C. (2011). Epistemologies of situated knowledges: “Troubling” knowledge in philosophy of education. *Educational Theory*, 61(1), 75–96. <http://ehis.ebscohost.com.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=2&sid=c442e4a1-eda4-4564-811b-ebc6ece0fd51%40sesionmgr13&hid=2>. Accessed 24.02.13.
- London Evening Standard 2.8.11. *Theatre accused of ‘outrageous discrimination’ against autistic boy*. Accessed 30.10.13.
- National Autistic Society (n.d.). <http://www.autism.org.uk/about-autism/autism-and-asperger-syndrome-an-introduction/what-is-autism.aspx>. Accessed 20.11.13.
- Prince’s Foundation for Children and the Arts. (2013). <http://www.childrenandarts.org.uk/our-projects/evaluation-reports/relaxed-performance-project-201213/>. Accessed 8.11.13.
- Relaxed Performance Case Studies. (2013). <http://www.childrenandarts.org.uk/our-projects/evaluation-reports/relaxed-performance-project-201213/>. Accessed 8.11.13.
- Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation.(2013). <http://www.childrenandarts.org.uk/our-projects/evaluation-reports/relaxed-performance-project-201213/>. Accessed 8.11.13.
- Relaxed Performance Project Executive Summary. (2013). <http://www.childrenandarts.org.uk/our-projects/evaluation-reports/relaxed-performance-project-201213/>. Accessed 8.11.13.
- Shah, S., & Priestley, M. (2011). *Disability and social change: Private lives and public policies*. Bristol: The Policy Press.
- Shore, S., & Rastelli, L. (2006). *Understanding autism for dummies*. Hoboken: Wiley.
- Smith, M. K. (2011). ‘Donald Schön: learning, reflection and change’, *the encyclopedia of informal education*. www.infed.org/thinkers/et-schon.htm. Accessed 11.08.14.
- SOLT (2013). *The relaxed performance project – how to*. <http://www.solt.co.uk/downloads/pdfs/other/13469%20Relaxed%20Performances%20%20How%20To%204pp.pdf>. Accessed – 10.06.2015.
- Theatre Development Fund (n.d.). <https://www.tdf.org/nyc/40/Autism-Theatre-Initiative>. Accessed 28.7.14.