Article 5

‘Open sesame!’ How panto can pave the way for inclusion in theatre

Andy Kempe
‘Open sesame!’ How panto can pave the way for inclusion in theatre

Andy Kempe

Abstract

This paper examines how ‘relaxed performances’ are being offered by an increasing number of mainstream theatres so children with complex individual needs and their families can enjoy the social and cultural experience of live theatre. The paper explains the origins of the relaxed performance initiative, what such performances entail and how they can contribute to both children’s learning and the cause of social justice. A case study is made of how one medium sized provincial theatre offered a relaxed performance of its annual pantomime in the 2013-14 season and the impact its subsequent 2014-15 production has had on families living with autistic spectrum disorder.

Key words
Relaxed Performance, pantomime, social justice, autism, special needs, learning disabilities.
Introduction

The story of Aladdin originates from the ancient collection of Arabian and Eastern tales known as One Thousand and One Nights. As with so many popular stories, elements of these tales have mutated over time. It was thus no surprise when the magical incantation ‘Open sesame!’ which originated in another of the tales, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, was employed in Newbury Corn Exchange’s (NCE) pantomime version of Aladdin that was offered for the 2014 Christmas season. In fact the incantation, which is used to open the portal into a treasure cave, seemed especially apt for one particular performance which had been adapted in order to make it accessible to children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and other additional needs including photo-sensitive epilepsy. Theatre is a cave full of treasures for many but its delights have remained a mystery to many who feel debarred from entering. However, with a little good will, the magic of pantomime is helping to change that as ‘relaxed performances’ open the door for people to ‘potentially be able to attend a conventional production’ (The Independent, 22.12.14). One of the first regional theatres to offer a ‘relaxed performance’ of a pantomime in 2013, Newbury Corn Exchange found itself in the vanguard of what became, in 2014, a growing number of theatres offering hundreds of families the opportunity to enjoy this quintessentially British seasonal family tradition. This paper reports on the way relaxed performances have come about, what they involve in practice and the contribution they may make to greater inclusivity in the theatre. Using the work of NCE as a case study, the paper will report on the actual impact relaxed performances can have on families.

The emergence of relaxed performances

Theatre companies such as Bamboozle and Oily Cart, along with 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. However, mainstream theatres have woken up to the need to provide for such audiences more recently. Following an incident involving a boy with an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) at a performance in London’s West End in 2011 (London Evening Standard 2.8.11) the Ambassador’s Theatre Group apologised unreservedly and a theatre industry day was organised in conjunction with the National Autistic Society. From this 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 September 2nd 2013. The outcomes of the project were collated in the Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation (2013).

The project ran from November 2012 to June 2013. In total, it engaged with almost 5,000 audience members, 42% of which were families living with autism. 30% had never been to the theatre at all. These figures reflect Shah’s (2011) assertion 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.

One of the main aims of a relaxed performance is to make adjustments to the organisation of the front of house in order to reduce anxiety and stress for both the children and young people attending and other members of their family. 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.’ (Relaxed Performance Project Conference Evaluation 2013: 5).

Heather Wildsmith of the National Autistic Society notes that a particular challenge for people with autism is facing up to new experiences; relaxed performances could help them to

‘adjust to the theatre – with hopefully as few changes to the plot and story as possible – in a neutral environment, before they consider attending a mainstream theatre show.’ (The Independent, 22.12.14).

The overwhelmingly positive response to the Relaxed Performance Project suggests that this is not an unrealistic aim. 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. (RPP Conference Evaluation 2013: 28)

**What’s in a name?**

Some theatres have made a specific point of using the term ‘autism friendly’ rather than ‘relaxed performance’ (one example being The Lion King, produced by the Disney Corporation and currently playing at The Lyceum Theatre in London). However, the appellation ‘autism friendly’ is problematic in that it suggests a very specific target audience which excludes other people with learning disabilities, or sensory and communication needs. Conversely, the term ‘relaxed performance’ may be interpreted as suggesting that the professional integrity of the performance itself has in some way been compromised. Rupert Rowbotham, Learning and Participation Officer at Chichester Festival Theatre, has noted that whatever the appellation, there is something of a conundrum in that

‘by mounting such a performance a theatre is effectively signalling 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’ (interview 3.1.14).

Thus, in an attempt to be inclusive, the theatre may find itself being temporarily exclusive. Nonetheless, the promotion of such performances can be instrumental in raising public awareness and facilitating an increased understanding of autism and other learning disabilities as more members of the public, including staff and volunteers at theatres, engage with this sector of the community and local support networks. If theatre is to become more inclusive then what is taken from events such as relaxed performances must have some transferability. Such a possibility is recognised by Sarah Gregson, Learning and Participation Officer at NCE who reported how training in preparation for the relaxed performance of Jack and the Beanstalk in 2013 had heightened the front of house team’s awareness of autism and their ability to accommodate different audience reactions:

I think this will have a big impact because we have lots of groups including people with special needs in our shows, using our building, our cafes, 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. (interview 19.12.14)

One of the team of volunteers at the NCE echoed this perspective and the importance of such an initiative for social justice:

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. (interview 27.12.13)

**Autism as a case in point**

Understanding of ASD continues to develop though exactly how it is defined by the most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (APA 2013)* and the implications of this have attracted considerable controversy not least because of the problem of homogenising a set of people whose individual differences fall within a broad spectrum (Shore, S. and Rastelli, L. 2006). The National Autistic Society (n.d.) defines autism as ‘a lifelong developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with, and relates to, other people.’ Regarding ASD or indeed any special educational needs as a predominantly medical condition of the individual in effect absolves society from interacting with it. Conversely, a social model of disability regards disability as a product of the way society is organised and so attends to ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for
disabled people (Oliver 1990). In everyday life communication is generally regarded as a two way process. In a social model of disability the same would hold true for people with autism; the onus is thus not solely on those with ASD to communicate and relate to other people, but for other ‘neurotypical’ people to play their part in the process.

Some children with ASD, like many other children, may not have developed an awareness of the thoughts and feelings of those around them as other children of their age. However, their awareness of others may be awakened when their behaviour causes those others to react negatively. Visiting the theatre can represent a hurdle for children with ASD in that their behaviour may quickly be regarded as being at odds with what others attending the event expect or are prepared to accept. Ball (2013: 158) 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 don’t go even if they’d like to. 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 aware that their children’s responses or even their very presence may interfere with another audience member’s enjoyment? The evaluation of the Relaxed Performance Project provides evidence that relaxed performances help 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. (2013: 27)

People with ASD may experience over- or under-sensitivity to sounds, touch, tastes, smells, light or colours. Over- or under-sensitivity to sensate experience is not, of course, exclusive to ASD and this represents a challenge for theatres regarding what adjustments should be made to the performances aimed at greater inclusivity in terms of the use of theatre technology and interaction between performers and audience. Hurley argues that theatre sets out to provoke internal and external feelings by offering ‘super-stimuli’ that ‘concentrates and amplifies the world’s natural sensory effects.’ (2010: 23). 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 to either help avoid or ameliorate any adverse responses to over- or under-sensitivity.

Towards an inclusive audience

Current estimates suggest that 1 in 88 of the population may be on the autistic spectrum (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 2012) and there are up to 11.7 million people (18.25% of the population, Office of National Statistics, 2015) who may be considered as disabled in the UK (Masefield 2006). Attempting to include
more of this considerable number of individuals into the theatre audience makes economic sense. Far from being cynically and opportunistically commercial, however, such a project could represent a valid contribution towards social justice.

Although it is possible to speak of ‘an audience’, there may be

‘several distinct, co-existing audiences to be found among those gathered together to watch a show and that each individual within this group may choose to adopt a range of ‘viewing positions’ (Freshwater 2009:9).

Not all of 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 with the show. Bundy’s research into young people’s first encounters with theatre records that some

‘indicated that they experience pleasure when their own responses were affirmed by other people’s apparently similar reactions’ (2013: 156).

The relevance of this to relaxed performances is that they may represent a self-affirming social experience. If the response of some audience members to the theatre event disturbs others then what may be learnt is that somehow, confusingly, engagement leads them to experiencing the negative feelings of others: theatre can hurt and cause others to be aggressive. In a relaxed performance however, all members of the audience are invited to engage with the action however they wish. That other members of the audience 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 re-cognition. In this sense,

‘live theatre can make the familiar strange, and the strange familiar.’ (2013: 146)

A primary endeavour of a theatre hosting a relaxed performance must be to make the strange surroundings and the event familiar in order that the specially invited audience might re-cognise not just the fiction enacted upon the stage but the whole experience.

The success of the enterprise though requires the theatre to be well-informed about the target audience and organise its operation accordingly. This includes being actively involved in preparing that audience for the visit. One strategy for this is to provide 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 specialising in children with ASD. Such stories aim

‘to share accurate social information in a patient and reassuring manner that is easily understood by its audience.’ (Gray n.d.)
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 summarise the characteristics of the situation (Sansosti et al, 2004) while the use of pictures provide accurate representations of key concepts (Crozier and Sileo 2005).

By way of encouraging families to attend the relaxed performance of *Aladdin*, Newbury Corn Exchange prepared a visual story to show what a visit would entail. This resource was advertised on the website and freely sent to all those enquiring after or booking tickets for the performance. Pictures showed the front of the building, the foyer, smiling assistants in the box office and the auditorium etc. and offered the following 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 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 resource also gave specific information regarding the special arrangements that would be put in place for the relaxed performance. For example:

**The Quiet Area**
This is where you can go if you want to leave the show. There will be some activities for you to do.
A case study of Jack and the Beanstalk

The traditional English pantomime, or ‘panto’, is colourful and vibrant. Considerable use is made of stage technology, special effects, make-up and costume. There is also a considerable amount of lively interaction with the audience who are encouraged to cheer for the hero, boo the villain and call out stock phrases such as ‘He’s behind you!’ or catch phrases introduced by a certain characters. Sometimes the action moves from the stage into the auditorium or audience members are invited onto the stage for comic sequences and competitions that have been integrated into show.

The Relaxed Performance Conference Evaluation (2013) recorded that several parents had reported that their first experience of theatre had been pantomime. Due to the high levels of light, noise and audience participation and the unsettling effect that this could have on children with autism especially, it was considered that pantomime may not be the most appropriate genre to include in future phases of the relaxed performance initiative. However, in the UK the annual pantomime is a traditional family event and a popular outing for special schools:

We take our kids 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. (interview 16.1.14)

Panto is often the only piece of theatre many children will ever see and their memories of this can be profound. Bernard Beckerman (1970) 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 appealed to all of the senses. Just as Brechtian theatre sought 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’ (Freshwater 2009: 47)

the same dynamic is apparent in a panto.

As a result of the success of the Relaxed Performance Project and notwithstanding reservations about mounting a panto as one, 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:

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

Data for the case study was gathered by attending a staff training session at NCE 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 NCE and Chichester Festival Theatre; the Marketing Officer for Globe Education; Heather Wildsmith, an expert on relaxed performances from the National Autistic Society; a front-of-house volunteer at NCE; and the lead actor in Jack and the Beanstalk (who had previously worked on 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 Newbury Corn Exchange on January 4th 2014. The case study concluded that

‘there are no reasons why, given the appropriate preparations and adjustments, RPs of pantomime can’t be as successful as any other show and perhaps even more so given the nature of the form and its traditional standing as an annual family/school event’ (Kempe, 2014: 13).

A question arising from this research though was what longer term impact NCE’s inaugural production might have on the children who had attended and the community served by the theatre. In order to investigate this, further interviews were conducted following the relaxed performance of Aladdin (3.1.14). The names of all the children referred to have been changed.

**Furnishing the house that Jack built**

The relaxed performance of Jack and the Beanstalk was regarded by NCE and the parents interviewed as a success that could and should be replicated. The project received a good deal of coverage in the local newspaper which in turn led to enquiries about future relaxed performances. In preparation for Aladdin, parents from a local support group for families living with autism and a representative of the National Autistic Society were once again invited to advise NCE regarding adjustments to the production and front of house arrangement, and contribute to staff and volunteer autism awareness training. The theatre’s database of families which include children with special educational needs was used to advertise the performance and draw attention to the website which included a preview of the production and an invitation to attend a 45 minute long familiarisation tour of the theatre and stage. A visual story pertaining specifically to the production was sent out electronically as both PDF and Word documents so that parents/carers could
edit them and print out only those parts they felt their child would benefit from. A ‘list of surprises’ was also supplied so that parents/carers had the option of whether or not to share these in advance. The story contained pictures and details of the different characters and outlined the story in words and photographs. For example:

This is **Widow Twankey**. She is Aladdin’s mother and she does all of the laundry for the residents of Old Peeking.

![Image of Widow Twankey](image.jpg)

**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 National Autistic Society ([http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/leisure-and-environments/theatre-and-autism-guide.aspx](http://www.autism.org.uk/working-with/leisure-and-environments/theatre-and-autism-guide.aspx)) 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 emphasise 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 didn’t mind being talked to (an initiative that many adults would no doubt appreciate stand-up comedians employing!)

For the relaxed performance the hand dryers in the toilets were turned off, additional volunteer stewards were drafted in and briefed that the house would only be 75% full so if anyone wished to move from their allocated seat to a different area this should be possible. During the performance itself, lights were dimmed but not blacked out entirely in the auditorium, the use of strobes and pyrotechnics was either eliminated or reduced, and the volume generally lowered. NCE’s reflections
on their experiences with *Jack* and continued commitment to training staff and volunteers in the light of this paid dividends as is evident in this comment from the mother of 6 year old Fay:

She struggles with how to behave in social situations. When we first arrived it was quite hustley-bustley but again it was better this year because she knew what to expect. The staff were really helpful though. I thought they were more relaxed this year. Perhaps last year they were a bit anxious about what would happen, but this year it was all really smooth. It was all even better this year. (interview 28.1.15)

Repeating the experience certainly seemed worthwhile for Fay:

We did more of the visual story this year. She was more open to it. Last year she didn’t want anything to do with it but this year she asked lots of questions like, ‘will there be people putting dresses on?’ I said, ‘yes, it will be like last year’ and she remembered that so well so she had something to look forward to. She was very much herself and relaxed. I think this was partly due to familiarity: she’s been before. She knew where she was coming and what to expect. (interview 28.1.15)

**The impact of relaxed performances**

Responses from parents interviewed as a part of this research mirrored those of the Relaxed Performance Project in a number of ways, not least the effect on the behaviour of the children. In part this was seen as resulting from the adults being more relaxed. 9 year old Jay had not attended a relaxed performance before but his mother had brought him to *Aladdin* having heard about the success of *Jack* from contacts in the local support network:

I’ve pretty much given up on taking Jay to the cinema now as it’s just such a nightmare. He gets distracted and this distracts other people. I came along to the relaxed performance knowing about the way they worked so felt more relaxed about the whole thing and I think this made him more relaxed. I thought ‘it’s going to be OK because I won’t have to keep telling him to sit down’ and I didn’t. The atmosphere made it easier to pay attention. He didn’t move about at all. (interview 22.1.15)

Following the performance of *Jack*, 5 year old Ella’s mother had said:

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. (interview 20.1.14)
One year on and Ella’s mother noted that Ella, now aged 6, had ‘tolerated’ looking at the visual story of Aladdin whereas she had completely rejected the one offered for Jack. During the performance she had asked why Widow Twanky was a man dressed as a woman and this had led to a string of subsequent ‘whys?’:

One of the lovely things about a relaxed performance is that you can do a little bit of talking. On the other side, is that teaching them that they can do that in any performance? There’s a tension between how you’re preparing the child for the real world as opposed to giving them an amazing experience that there’s no way would they be able to access otherwise. 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. (interview 23.1.15)

Grandin and Barron (2005) insist that children with ASD learn by doing and so need direct experience and live interaction in order for social skills to become ‘hard-wired’ in the brain. In an interview following the performance of Jack, mother of 6 year old Harry, who has Asperger’s syndrome and ADHD, associated Grandin’s philosophy with ‘the school of hard knocks’ which she saw as a necessary factor in bringing up all children. (interview 28.1.14) She had some reservations about relaxed performances serving to unnecessarily mollycoddle children like Harry but shared the view that they were a safe place to find out more about the child’s responses to different sensory and social experiences. One year on Harry’s mother proffered that:

Last year he saw both the relaxed and mainstream production and preferred the mainstream with all the noises. This year we went to see the mainstream performance of Aladdin but he didn’t seem that interested and kept asking when it would end! He is happier to go to theatre now because he has been exposed to it. In his case, as he also has ADHD, the length of performance makes it difficult. I did take him to a performance of My Teacher is a Troll at the Corn Exchange not long ago. He really enjoyed that play. (interview 6.1.15)

The important point here is that while Harry didn’t attend the relaxed performance of Aladdin, his attendance the previous year had become a factor in his preparedness to attend mainstream performances, one of the stated intentions of the whole relaxed performance initiative. This comment from Jay’s mother suggests the initiative is having this particularly desired effect:

We’ve been to a couple of things before but it’s always been hard. This was so much better. I think I would feel more confident going to an ordinary show
now because Jay might feel he is a bit more relaxed about what it involves. (interview 22.1.15)

Further to this, relaxed performances have been perceived 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. (interview with parent 17.12.13)

The relaxed performance as a learning environment

Children’s memories of visiting the theatre can last an entire lifetime. Director Ann Bogart 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’.’ (Bundy 2013: 157)

A primary aim of theatre, and most especially panto, 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 Aladdin had was in the talk of the children following the visit. Both Ella’s and Jay’s mothers reported that their children had enthusiastically told others about the show:

He was really keen to tell people about it. He remembered the catchphrases like when Billy the Genie kept saying ‘Give us a ring’ and the audience had to say ‘ding dong!’ He thought Widow Twanky’s belly dance to ‘All About That Bass’ was really funny so he has been showing that to everyone! (interview 22.1.15)

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 empathise with either real or fictitious characters (Mitchell 2007). Rather, distinction needs to be made between imagination and social imagination, that is, the ability to recognise what others may be thinking and feeling if it is not expressed explicitly. All of the parents interviewed for this study strongly refuted that this equated to the lack of ability to engage in drama and dramatic play (Kempe 2015). Nonetheless, a persistent trait of ASD is to take things literally and see things as they are on the surface. An example of this was Jay’s insistence that Widow Twanky was a woman:
I explained that it was man dressed up but he sees things as they are. He does that with all the characters Justin plays. (n.b. Justin Fletcher is the star of the children’s television show *Something Special* which caters especially for children with special educational needs.) He thinks Mr Tumble is someone completely different from Justin. What he sees is what it is. (interview 22.1.15)

Ella’s mother similarly noted that Ella would routinely cover her face when she encountered someone out of the context in which she is used to seeing them, for example, a teacher in the High Street. Pretending to be someone you are not lies at the heart of acting just as suspension of disbelief lies at the heart of the art form of drama. Exposing children with ASD to the possibilities of this aspect of human behaviour through inclusion in the theatre may represent an important step forward in their socialisation.

A notable effect of the relaxed performance on Ella was the opportunity the event gave for another aspect of socialisation that wasn’t being offered in her formal educational provision:

She put her feet on the seat in front so I asked her how she thought the person there may feel about her doing that and she said ‘sad.’ So I said, well it’s probably best if you don’t put your feet there then, and she took them down. Now the opportunity for me to say that to her wouldn’t necessarily come up in another situation. She had to be in a social situation for that social learning to take place. This makes me sad because that’s the problem with her education at the minute. Because she can’t cope in the mainstream she is in a unit which is trying to facilitate her access into it. But all her learning is happening with adults, so she’s not getting the socialisation in a group with other children. The biggest thing she needs now is to be in social environments, but she’s just in a bubble with a few adults. (interview 23.1.15)

A similar incident was reported by Jay’s mother:

It’s about acceptance isn’t it? It’s no good pretending kids like Jay can just go along with everything the same way that the rest of society can but this has given him the chance to be in a social situation where he can fit in. A boy sitting behind him was given some keys to keep his hands busy but then he kept hitting Jay on the head with them. A steward saw this and said we could move and the boy’s teacher was very apologetic but Jay just said it was OK and not to worry. Another boy was making quite a lot of noise but he accepted it for what it was. It’s like he saw that this behaviour was a sort of the norm in this social situation. It makes you 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. (interview 22.1.15)
Fay’s mother also saw the social experience as one that could help Fay ‘be herself’ without fearing the consequences of not conforming to expected norms. The term ‘autism’ derives from the Greek word ‘autos’ meaning ‘self’: autism suggests an absorption with oneself. The social situation of a relaxed performance allowed Fay to see, to some extent, a reflection of herself in others with important side-effects:

Having other people joining in like she was helped her. There was a boy behind us who was quite vocal. She asked me ‘why is that boy making noises?’ So I said, ‘the same reason you are - he’s enjoying himself,’ which she accepted. It allows her to be herself and this makes me feel more relaxed because you’re with like-minded people. (interview 28.1.15)

Such social learning is not confined to children with ASD or other complex individual needs. Reflecting the notion that relaxed performances could play a part in raising awareness and understanding in the broader community, a Scout leader attending Aladdin with his troupe of Cub Scouts stated that:

We came along to this performance because this was the date that suited us best. I knew it was a special performance but that’s fine. In fact, a few of our boys have individual needs and the way some of the lights were kept on in the auditorium and the sound level turned down a bit was quite helpful for them. 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. (interview 3.1.15)

An adult accompanying a similar group of Beaver Scouts said:

To be honest, I only found out this was to be a relaxed performance two days ago. It hasn’t made any difference to us at all. All I was aware of is that everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. (interview 3.1.15)

A teacher who accompanied a group of teenagers from a residential school for children with autism noted that:

Our group did attract a few looks from other audience members. Two little girls near us seemed especially fascinated when a couple of them made noises. I don’t think it does other members of the public any harm to come across our students at events like this though and it’s certainly good for our students to be able to spend time in public places like the theatre. (interview 21.1.15)

The devil in the detail

Following the relaxed performance of Jack and the Beanstalk a number of interviewees expressed some regret that the visual and sound effects had been tempered to such an extent. 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’ (interview 20.1.14). Teachers at a special school for autistic children who had seen the mainstream performance of *Jack* 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. One of these teachers attended the performance of *Aladdin* and maintained that:

You don’t really notice much of a difference between the relaxed performance and the ordinary one though our students do like the loud noises and special effects even though some of them wear ear defenders as a matter of course. Even the flashing lights don’t seem to bother them: I’ve never seen an epileptic fit brought on by this in the theatre. (interview 21.1.15)

Relaxed performances attempt to cater for as wide an audience as possible. This means recognising the needs of those who are both under- and over-sensitive to sensory stimulus. There was, thus, general agreement among those interviewed for this research that if adaptations are to be made it is best to tone effects down because of the serious distress over-stimulation can cause. A case in point involved 5 year old Fay’s visit to *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Arriving at the theatre in need of the toilet she immediately became anxious because of previous bad experiences with the noise of the hand-driers. On this occasion though she was able to read the sign that said the driers were turned off and visibly relaxed. According to her mother, the memory of this contributed to her going to *Aladdin* in a more relaxed manner.

Fay’s enjoyment of *Jack* had some quite remarkable effects on her speech and play in the weeks following (Kempe 2014) including her replicating specific aspects of the theatre experience. This was evident again following *Aladdin*:

She does a talk down to calm herself down at bedtime and I noticed that she’d lined all her birds and the rest of the menagerie of toy animals up and she was sat like they were the rows of audience and she was singing to them. That’s still going on now three weeks later! (interview 28.1.15)

Getting everything absolutely right for every child is an unrealistic expectation and there are no guarantees that all children will like the event or find it a turning point in their lives any more than children involved in drama as a part of their mainstream education will find it a catalyst for the development of their confidence or interest in the theatre. Nonetheless, theatres can still learn from parents how best to tailor their provision just as parents may learn more about their children by giving them new social experiences. Ella’s mother was intrigued that the part of the visual story that had caught her daughter’s attention most was the picture of the quiet space (see above):
She saw a little model of Peppa Pig (n.b. a popular children’s television character) and was excited by the idea that he was going to be there. We went to the performance and she really enjoyed it but just before the interval she said she wanted to go to the quiet space. When she got there Peppa Pig wasn’t there and she was a bit upset. That’s why she had wanted to go to the quiet space. So, a question: 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. (interview 23.1.15)

**Conclusion**

What this anecdote illustrates is that tiny details that may appear inconsequential to many can have a profound significance for children with ASD. The need to attend to such details clearly represents a challenge to theatres wishing to make their programmes more inclusive by offering relaxed performances. However, the challenge is not insuperable and an increasing number of theatres are taking it up. A relaxed performance of the RSC’s *Matilda* has been staged at the Cambridge Theatre in London and the National Theatre has offered relaxed performances of both *War Horse* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*. A second ‘autism friendly’ performance of *The Lion King* was staged in April 2014 while relaxed performances of pantos have been seen in Newcastle, Birmingham and Colchester (*The Independent* 22.12.14): evidence indeed that the door to the treasure cave that is mainstream theatre is being opened to an audience which has hitherto been largely excluded from its magic. This comment from Fay’s mother illustrates that the magic created by relaxed performances doesn’t stop when the show finishes though:

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. (interview 28.1.15)
References

APA (American Psychological Association) (2013) Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM 5), APA, USA


Arlington, Texas: Future Horizons


London Evening Standard (2.8.11) Theatre accused of ‘outrageous discrimination’ against autistic boy


Article 5 ‘Open sesame!’ How panto can pave the way for inclusion in theatre


Notes on Author

Andy Kempe is Professor of Drama Education and a Teaching Fellow of the University of Reading. He has extensive experience of working with both trainee and serving teachers in the UK and abroad. His work with students of all ages and abilities has informed numerous articles and chapters covering a wide spectrum of issues in drama, English and arts education, and teacher training. The GCSE Drama Coursebook has been a standard text in many schools since the first edition was published 25 years ago. Recent publications include ‘Looking back, moving forward: Drama, Disability and Social Justice’ (with Sonali Shah), in Finneran, M. & Freebody, K. (2015) Drama & Social Justice: Theory, research and practice in international contexts, and ‘A Kind of Integrity: explorations in history and drama’ in Anderson, M. & Dunn, J. (2013) How Drama Activates Learning: Contemporary Research and Practice. His most recent book Drama, Disability and Education, was published in 2012.

Professor Andy Kempe
University of Reading
4 Redland Road
Reading RG1 5EX
England

Tel: 0118 3782678
E mail: a.j.kempe@reading.ac.uk
‘This article was first published in Drama Research: international journal of drama in education Volume 6 No 1 April 2015 at: www.dramaresearch.co.uk It is one of a wide range of articles on drama/theatre in education available by subscription to the journal at: www.nationaldrama.org.uk/journal/subscribe/ Access to the journal is free to members of National Drama. Join National Drama at www.nationaldrama.org.uk/membership’

Drama Research is an innovative, international refereed e-journal that provides a forum for practitioners and researchers across the spectrum of drama in educational settings. We encourage, gather and publish research-based articles from established and new writers to promote knowledge, understanding and dialogue about drama in learning contexts.