

Ability-Inclusive Sensory Theatre in the United States

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines ability-inclusive sensory theatre, an immersive-participatory form of theatre centered on audience of young people with cognitive disabilities, as it has been practiced in the United States from 2007-2020. It argues that sensory theatre is primarily an aesthetic practice, subverting the notion that art practices around disability and youth must be either educational or therapeutic. The paper includes a history of the development of sensory theatre within the United States and the influences of the US educational and arts funding systems upon artistic practice. It argues the aims of sensory theatre are primarily affective rather than semiotic, allowing for a flexible cognitive engagement with the performance text. It catalogs methods of collaboration with audiences in both development and performance to determine to what extent these practices constitute co-authorship. The communication of risk within invitations to participate in the performance are analyzed for their alignment with the concept of “dignity of risk.” In the final chapter, the intra-audience viewing dynamics of immersive theatre spaces are placed in conversation with Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s visual rhetorics of disability to examine how the management of the audience’s gaze at times subverts and at other times reifies existing socio-cultural narratives around youth and disability.

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Introduction

Since 2007, the field of ability-inclusive sensory theatre has slowly grown in the United States, with a small but dedicated group of professional artists producing work centered on an audience of young people with cognitive disabilities. While these practices have gained artistic momentum, scholarship has not yet kept pace. In this dissertation, I present the first holistic examination of ability-inclusive sensory theatre practices in the US. My analysis begins with identifying the distinctions of US practice from the international field, and then moves to a general examination of the aims of sensory theatre practice, the significance of the agency generated in participatory episodes within performance, and the tensions of an immersive theatrical form which places young disabled people in a position to be viewed by other members of the audience. Through these analyses, I seek to articulate both the conscious aims of sensory theatre practice as well as the unconscious impacts of methodological choices around participation, affect, and intra-audience viewing. I find that, while there are specific practices that at times reify social narratives about youth and disability, as a whole the genre subverts social expectations by centering aesthetic experience rather than educational/therapeutic aims and affirming participant agency.

(Ability-Inclusive) Sensory Theatre

As a holistic naming convention, I find ability-inclusive sensory theatre to be the most useful term to describe this genre, as it describes both the intention (including an audience of people with cognitive disabilities who have been previously excluded from theatrical participation) as well as the methodology (engaging that audience through sensory experiences). There are other types of theatre, particularly other immersive theatres, which are highly sensory but without the same intention of including a historically excluded audience. However, sensory

theatre has begun to emerge as a field-wide term and ability-inclusive sensory theatre is an unwieldy term to use regularly, so I will be using sensory theatre as a consistent shorthand for the genre.

Sensory theatre fits into the genre of immersive theatre, a genre which is notoriously difficult to define. Immersive theatre is often defined based on what it is not rather than what it is (Warren vii–ix; Machon, *Immersive Theatres* 53–69). Josephine Machon, as part of a larger comparison between immersive and traditional theatres, offers these examples of common elements of traditional theatre unlikely to be used in an immersive production: “the audience remain physically separate to the action, seated in an auditorium or a cordoned viewing area, attending (albeit corporeally) in this spectatorial fashion” (Machon, *Immersive Theatres* 56). I use “immersive” to describe sensory theatre to indicate a physical design: there is no distinction of performer/audience space but instead the audience is immersed into the world of the performance, with the action happening around them. Sensory theatre is also participatory, a theatrical approach which Gareth White defines as simply “the participation of an audience, or an audience member, in the action of a performance” (White, *Participation* 4). Any theatre could be argued to be participatory to some extent because the audience is presumed to be engaged cognitively in the action happening onstage, physically involved through sharing the space with the performers, and offering conventionalized actions like laughter and applause. However, some theatre includes a far greater amount of participation than others and sensory theatre falls to the high end of that continuum. In the cases of both participatory and immersive theatres, what makes something cross into the immersive and/or participatory genre is usually the decision of the artist to define it as such.

As it is currently practiced, sensory theatre is also a part of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA), because the primary audience for the productions are young people (under the age of 25). The genre has origin points in Theatre for the Early Years (TEY) productions which are created for audiences who are six-years-old and younger. In practice, most sensory theatre participants fall somewhere between preschool and teen years. This is primarily driven by a historical precedence of working within educational environments which created a pattern of sensory practices spreading between companies who are already serving young audiences. The fact that this genre emerged first in the TYA landscape is likely due to a socio-cultural tendency to both associate developmental disabilities like autism with youth, and the greater willingness of funders to engage disability when it is paired with youth (Stevenson et al.). There is nothing about the practice itself which excludes it from being used to serve an older audience, and some practitioners I spoke with have intentions of expanding their work to include adult audiences. However, because the practice historically grew out of TYA and the genre currently serves almost exclusively youth, I will be referring to participants as young people throughout this dissertation.

With these contextual movements in mind, my personal definition of sensory theatre is a production which is...

- An **immersive** piece of theatre in which audience has **intimate sensory experiences**
- Built with a thoughtful structure that is **intentionally flexible** in its implementation to allow for **multiple avenues for engagement**
- Highly **permissive** of socially restricted behavior

- Designed, from its **inception**, with a core motivation to include an audience which has **previously been excluded** from theatre because of their **cognitive status**

There are other elements (such as a loose narrative structure, a small audience size, cultivating of caretaker relationships) which are common methods within sensory theatre but which practitioners play with in their implementation. The variations in those tactics indicate that these are areas of creative play rather than defining points of the genre.

A central ethos of sensory theatre is radical inclusion of disabled audiences. Maddie Zdeblick first proposed the application of the term “radical inclusion” to sensory theatre in her 2017 Bachelor’s thesis. The phrase originates from Suzan-Lori Parks, who uses “radical inclusion” to critique “plain, unadorned” inclusion which does not challenge “the notion of center” but instead allows participation but not leadership from marginalized people. Parks presents radical inclusion, in contrast, as “inclusion to the point of discomfort”, which Zdeblick puts forward sensory theatre companies are able to accomplish through “a complete reimagining of theatrical conventions that places the wants and needs of individuals with disabilities centrally in both process and performance” (Zdeblick, *Seesaw* 10). In this dissertation, I will use “radical inclusion” and the adjective “radical” to describe processes which strive towards this fundamental shift in the centering of the space.

Sensory theatre is distinct from sensory friendly performances. Sensory friendly performances are specific occasions when productions which were built for a “typical” audience make adjustments to the aesthetic and social environment to make the space more welcoming to a neurodiverse audience. Some common examples of sensory-friendly adjustments are dampening loud sound effects, leaving the house lights partially illuminated, and allowing the audience to move during a performance. Sensory theatre, in contrast, is built from the ground up

for neurodiverse audiences. Sensory friendly changes are often focused around avoiding sensory triggers rather than exploring a full range of sensory experiences. Sensory friendly adaptation also takes something *made for* a neurotypical audience and adjusts around the edges to allow in a broader audience – but the content was still made for the “typical” audience member. In addition to sensory friendly adaptations and sensory theatre, there are many pursuits that fall into the broader umbrella of inclusive arts – drama education programs which include young disabled performers (for example, the Hunter Heartbeat Method (Hunter)¹); performances and performance collectives created by disabled people; and artforms outside of theatre which are made to be consumed by a primary audience of disabled people. While these pursuits often overlap and can learn from one another, there is also value in drawing boundaries around them for the sake of building community with practitioners who are doing similar work. Without a name for a genre, it is difficult for artists to find one another for support and artistic sharing, and difficult for potential audience members to discern what type of experiences they are interested in having. For this reason, I find it important to explore the specific genre of sensory theatre.

Existing Literature on (Ability-Inclusive) Sensory Theatre

Sensory theatre is a relatively new genre and new object of study. As such, much of the literature that exists on the topic works primarily to describe artistic methods, overviewing the practices of various companies in the field and calling for the importance of the work as a means of cultural participation for an audience which has been historically excluded (Wood, *Critical*; Wood, *Performing*; Schoenenberger; Leigh, “Art”; Griffiths; Essex, “Co-operative”; Essex, “Interactive”; Mahoney, *Sensory*; Mahoney, “Space”; Zdeblick, *Seesaw*; Terribile; Webb,

¹ The Hunter Heartbeat method has also been used for the creation of participatory performances. As with many projects related to theatre and youth, the line between educational programming and performance can be blurry. However, based on my understanding of the Heartbeat method from Hunter’s book, I would classify the strategy of tending more toward the drama education end of that continuum than sensory theatre.

“Impossible”; Brown). These texts provide valuable information about artistic practice and the history of the field but tend not to explore sensory theatre from a theoretical lens. Additional literature exists in the form of quantitative and qualitative studies of audience reception based on caregiver responses (Giserman-Kiss et al.; Creech, *Tube*; Creech, *Bounce*; Varvarigou, *Mirror*; Varvarigou, *Light*; Varvarigou, *Uncancellable*), the methods of which will be explored in the conclusion of this dissertation.

The work which exists that engages deeply with the theoretical framework comes Nicola Shaughnessy, Melissa Trimingham, Jill Goodwin, and Gill Brigg. All of these scholars come from the United Kingdom and their writing reflects on specific sensory theatre experiences that the authors created or contributed to as artists. Shaughnessy and Trimingham’s multiple articles emerged from the *Imagining Autism* project at the University of Kent and deal with how the aesthetic choices in that project reflect the complex cognition of autism (Trimingham; Trimingham and Shaughnessy, “Material”; Trimingham and Shaughnessy, “Ecologies”; Shaughnessy, *Applying*; Shaughnessy, “Imagining Otherwise”; Shaughnessy, “Curious”). Jill Goodwin’s doctoral dissertation centers on her installation art piece *The Golden Tent* in schools to explore how simply “being” together in an educational space resists the neoliberal educational value on busy-ness (Goodwin). Gill Brigg’s doctoral dissertation on her theatre piece *The White Peacock* explores cultural exclusion and how sensory methods can be employed toward the construction of a fictive narrative and cognitive understanding (Brigg, *Theatre*). This dissertation is distinctive from existing literature due to its focus on the United States and perspective focusing on the entire field rather than a single art piece. This broader perspective moves the field forward by putting existing pieces of scholarship on sensory theatre in conversation with

one another as well as scholarship in related fields like participatory and affective, immersive theatres.

Audience Reception Studies

Historically, the audience has not been a central consideration in scholarship about theatre. As stated by Susan Bennett, “dramatic theory has often neglected the role of the addressee, the process of the audience’s interpretation” (Bennett, “Redux” 4). Her book *Theatre Audiences* (first written in 1990, second edition in 1997) traces historical approaches to audiences and argues that for much of history while playwrights may have been very aware of audiences, theorists largely ignore them. While there are some counterexamples provided in earlier eras, Bennett marks the emergence of two dramatic theories in the later half of the 20th century as the beginning of a serious consideration of the audience.

The first theory Bennett presents is performance theory, which borrows heavily from social sciences (such as anthropology) in an effort to create a new way of analyzing theatre which can encompass the “devaluation, or even total rejection of the text” in performance art (Bennett, *Theatre* 9). A common theme in this tradition is viewing a theatrical event through the lens of ritual and analyzing human behaviors as “universal”. The second theory Bennett presents is semiotic analysis which looks at how “the multivalent components of theatre” shape the audience’s reading of a theatrical event. Semiotics looks at how a signs and symbols are used to convey meaning, and the semiotic analysis of theatre looks to go beyond how an audience decodes the language of a written script to also look at the complexities of how every element of a “performance text” (including the script but also the actor’s bodies, movement, design, etc.) as well as conditions beyond the control of the artist (such as the historical moment) influence the audience’s reception of the performance text (Knowles, *Reading* 19). Both of these theoretical

avenues highlight the need that emerged to move beyond textural analysis as theatre “texts” became harder to define with the theatrical experimentation of the 20th century. Since Bennett’s monograph was published, various additional frameworks for studying audience reception have arisen, including the “cognitive turn” which looks to make sense of how the audience cognitively processing theatrical events (Knowles, *How* 85–91) and affect theory which looks at the audience’s emotional/visceral reaction to theatrical events (Carlson 9–15). Undoubtedly additional analytical trends emerged which fall outside the scope of this dissertation to explore.

This dissertation focuses primarily on audience reception work related to participatory and immersive theatre. This emergent field of research defines itself by the type of theatre being analyzed rather than the theoretical lens it employs. Some scholars write primarily from a cognitive and affective perspective (Machon; Alston, “Politics”), but many borrow liberally from a variety of audience reception scholars (White, *Participation*). I used a similar technique for my analysis, choosing which theory to privilege based on my observations of the genre. I find affect theory to be most applicable to analyzing sensory theatre. Cognitive analysis is used where necessary to understand affect theory, although it is not a major focus because it falls outside my expertise and because it has already been explored extensively by Shaughnessy and Tringham. Semiotics is used to analyze the debate in the field around narrative and what role semiotics should play in within the affective methods of sensory theatre. Performance theory is also used to analyze how sensory theatre performances “mark off” theatrical space (White, *Participation* 198) and how audience members relate to one another socially (Coppieters).

Models of Disability

While this dissertation is not an example of disability studies because it does not work primarily with texts or data from the perspectives of disabled people, I do call upon disability

studies to provide a framework of disability. This study aims to work within the cultural model of disability. The cultural model is an emerging model of disability; an addition to the three well-established models: moral (disability as a divine reward or punishment), medical (disability as a deficit to be cured), and social (disability as a political identity). My decision to engage with the cultural model stemmed from a desire to move away from the medical model of disability but also engage with questions around disability in a more holistic way than the politically focused social model. While some portions of this dissertation (particularly the section on audience participation) do deal with politics, other sections that deal with affective exchange and the social impacts of staring do not fit as neatly into the ills the social model focuses on. Anne Waldschmidt laid out the three basic assumptions of the social model:

1. disability is a form of social inequality and disabled persons are a minority group that is discriminated against and excluded from mainstream society.
2. impairment and disability need to be distinguished and do not have a causal relation; it is not impairments *per se* which disable, but societal practices of ‘disablement’ which result in disability.
3. it is a society’s responsibility to remove the obstacles that persons with disabilities are facing. (Waldschmidt 22)

Waldschmidt argues that this social model maintains its usefulness as a political perspective, particularly for lay people, and can be useful for some academic discourse. Yet the cultural model may be more appropriate for interdisciplinary examinations of disability and work that is interested in how disability interacts with culture in the broadest sense:

a broad conception of culture that denotes the totality of ‘things’ created and employed by a particular people or a society, be they material or immaterial: objects and instruments,

institutions and organisations, ideas and knowledge, symbols and values, meanings and interpretations, narratives and histories, traditions, rituals and customs, social behaviour, attitudes and identities (24).

The cultural model is a loose framework formed from social-science and humanities-based disability studies research that allows scholars to maintain a stance on disability as largely socially constructed but consider those implications beyond the context of activism and political identity. In the *Cultural Locations of Disability*, Snyder and Mitchell posit that a cultural model allows for a “fuller” concept of disability than the social model because it takes social oppression and physical impairment into account, but goes beyond each as it “designates disability as a site of resistance and a source of cultural agency previously suppressed” (Snyder and Mitchell, “Introduction”). This dissertation is interested in how sensory theatre does and does not provide cultural agency to the young people who attend these performances: the ways these performances frame participants as cultural leaders with rich cultural libraries, but also the traps that practitioners can fall into around protectionism and surveillance because of the cultural legacies of institutionalization and segregation.

Within the cultural model framework, chapter five deals with the work of Rosemarie Garland-Thomson on staring: how a stare shapes the experience of taking in disability and how visibly disabled people work to control a stare encounter. Garland-Thomson is a major figure in disability studies and her work on staring in conversation with aesthetic practices (including visual and performing arts) allows for a more nuanced analysis of the way audience members view one another within the participatory and immersive environment of sensory theatre.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a political viewpoint that affirms that cognitive variation is a valid part of the human experience and that the way neurodivergent people view the world is equally valid to how neurotypical people (people without cognitive disabilities) perceive it. The term was first coined by Judy Singer (Singer), but author Steve Silberman offers a useful summary:

the notion that conditions like autism, dyslexia, and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should be regarded as naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths that have contributed to the evolution of technology and culture rather than mere checklists of deficits and dysfunctions. (Silberman 16)

Because this dissertation is analyzing theatre through a neurodiverse lens and cultural model, it will not be analyzing sensory-inclusive theatre as a form of therapy, speculating on how the activities within the theatre space might help neurodivergent children overcome deficits, or examining the neurological processes that might be happening during participation in a theatrical experience. Instead, it is focused on how cognitive disability as a cultural concept is being explored within sensory-inclusive spaces. A “cognitive disability” refers to a cognitive variation that impacts the way that person processes sensory input and organizes information. While this is often lumped with intellectual disability, I see these two categories as distinct because cognitive disabilities do not necessarily impact a person’s intelligence² but rather their way of processing information.

The term “neurodiverse” refers to a group of people with a broad range of cognitive disabilities. “Neurodivergent” refers to an individual who has a cognitive disability. Which disability labels fall within neurodiversity is not clearly defined as the term is used by an extensive folk community rather than having a concrete, institutional definition. It is generally

² A fraught concept but outside this study’s scope to explore

accepted that autism, ADHD, and usually dyslexia fall within neurodiversity. I consider other cognitive variations such as dementia to fit within the label but will not be using the term to include mental health conditions such as anxiety and schizophrenia, although those are sometimes included in the term. That choice is made because sensory theatre generally does not center on mental health conditions.

The term “neurotypical” refers to a person who is not neurodivergent. The coalescence around the idea of neurodiversity led the autism community to turn a critical and satirical eye to the “neurotypical” community, a term coined in the Autism Network International newsletter. The term was initially meant to have a humorous bent, “With its distinctly clinical air, the term...turned the diagnostic gaze back on the psychiatric establishment and registered the fact that people on the spectrum were fully capable of irony and sarcasm at a time when it was widely assumed that they didn’t ‘get’ humor” (Donvan and Zucker 516). “Neurotypical” became a term which medicalized normalcy, pointing out that traits that normed people have are not inherently better, they had simply never been studied as a deficit. Furthering on this idea, in 1998, an autistic woman going by “Muskie” set up a mock website for the “Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical” and listed the effects of the condition, including “preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity” (Blume). The original site is no longer available, but copies of the ISNT mission still circulate in online autistic spaces. While the term began satirically, it is now used genuinely to describe people without cognitive disabilities, offering an alternative to framing people as “normal.” The term “allistic” is also used in the autistic community to describe those who are not autistic, but I have chosen the word neurotypical to reflect that sensory theatre serves various neurodivergences.

Internationally, sensory theatre serves a broad range of young people with cognitive, intellectual, and developmental disabilities. For reasons that will be explored in the coming chapter, much of the US works under what I call an “autism +” model, meaning much of the work here is made with an audience of young autistic people in mind but then expands out from the autism label to include young people with a broad range of neurodivergences. Because I am working within this autism + model, I find it useful to provide additional insight into the label of autism.

Autism is a complex cognitive variation with multiple potential definitions. Desiring to avoid definitiveness and wary of medicalized definitions, instead present my own diagram that focuses on the elements of autism I find important for theatre artists to understand. In this chart, I have intentionally placed sensory processing at the top of the triangle because it has the most profound implications for aesthetic decisions. The three central elements to my definition are:

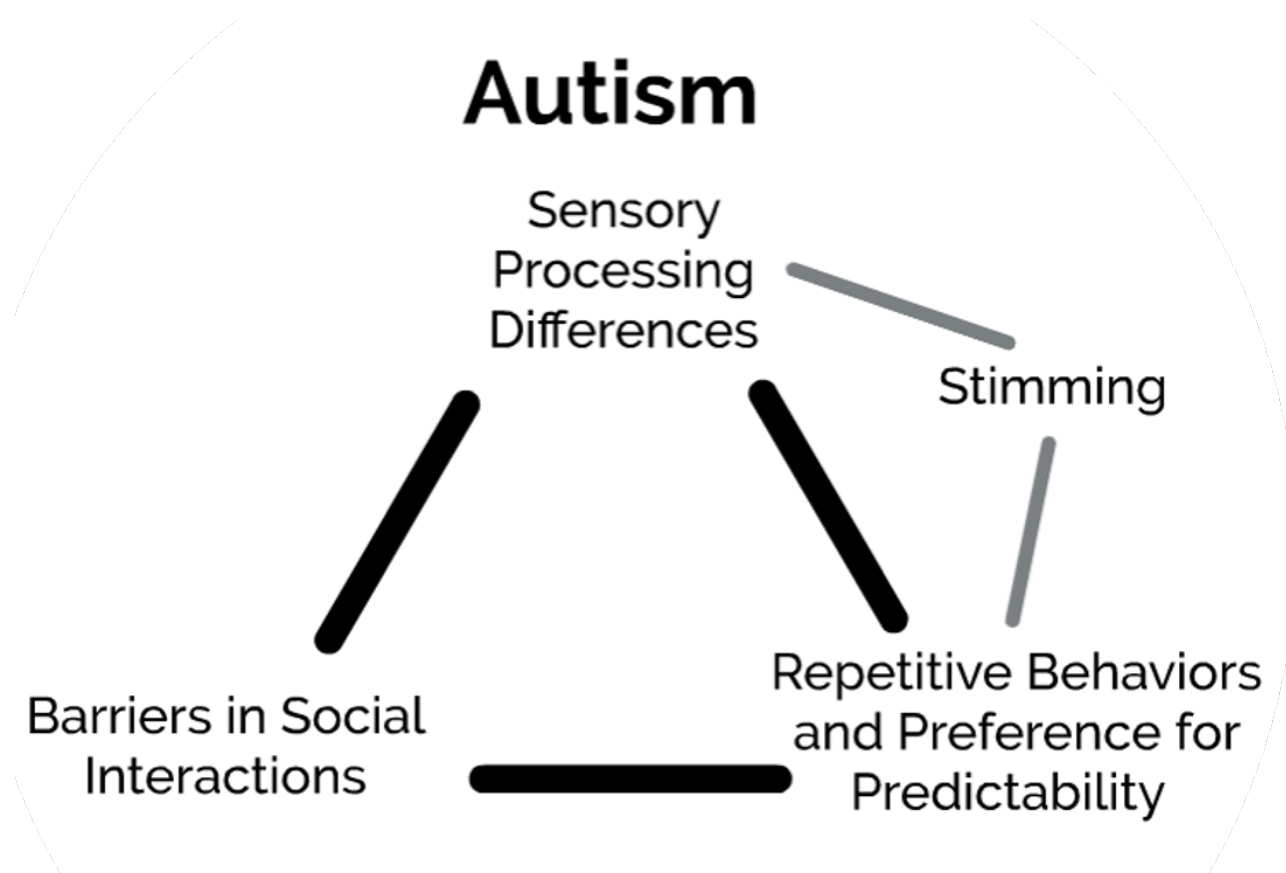


Figure 1. Diagram of autistic characteristics

- Sensory Processing Differences – Processing sensory information in a unique way. A noise that may be too loud for one autistic person may be not enough auditory stimulation for another.
- Repetitive Behaviors and Preference for Predictability – Preference for known experiences, environments, and routines. This preference may be due to the unpredictable nature of new sensory environments and experiences.
- Barriers to Social Interaction – Autistic people may find it difficult to read covert social cues and prefer not to engage in culturally valued social actions (for example, making eye contact). This may be due to being sensorially overwhelmed and navigating a sensorially hostile environment during developmental periods those social skills are developing differently for neurotypical people.

Also included on this chart is the act of stimming, which is the engagement in a repetitive behavior that provides sensory stimulation (for example: rocking back and forth for proprioceptive input, moaning for auditory/interoceptive input). This behavior is highly socially stigmatized but is employed thoughtfully in sensory theatre, which uses sensory episodes that include repeating sensory beats.

Person-First versus Identity-First Language

Some people in the disability community prefer person-first language (i.e. person with autism) and some prefer identity-first language (i.e. autistic person). Each use of language comes with intentionality: some find that because of dehumanization and stigmatization that often accompanies disability, language which puts the humanity of a person first is most important.

Others find that person-first language acts to *further* the stigmatization of disability, as the distance between the person and their disability descriptor implies a negative weight to the adjective. As Jim Sinclair observed:

Saying ‘person with autism’ suggests that autism is something bad—so bad that it isn’t even consistent with being a person... We talk about left-handed people, not ‘people with left-handedness,’ and about athletic or musical people, not about ‘people with athleticism’ or ‘people with musicality’ . . . It is only when someone has decided that the characteristic being referred to is negative that suddenly people want to separate it from the person.” (Qtd in Silberman 441)

In addition, in the autistic community the claiming of the term “autistic person” is often a political assertion of inseparability of autism from personhood. Jim Sinclair’s 1993 “Don’t Mourn for Us” speech, credited as the spark point for the neurodiversity movement, pushed back on the concept of grieving the neurotypical version of an autistic child, on the grounds that the neurotypical version of that child would be an entirely different person (Sinclair). Neurodiversity advocates have since embraced this philosophy, pushing against narratives of cures and emergence from autism to instead frame autism as essential to an autistic person’s being.

However, the neurodiversity movement is not universally embraced by autistic people. Certain self-advocates (see: Mitchell) have pushed back on the notion of neurodiversity because they do wish that some or all of the impairments they experience due to autism could be cured. Certain parents of children and adults who struggle with adaptive functioning feel their offspring have been forgotten in this celebratory philosophy of neurodiversity. Liz Bell, autism advocate and parent, had an argument with the neurodiversity activist Ari Ne’eman³ at a conference in

³ Founder of the Autism Self-Advocacy Network

2009. After that argument, journalists John Donovan and Caren Zucker interviewed Bell for their 2016 book, *In a Different Key*, and summarize her concerns as follows:

...the more activists like Ne’eman – talented, articulate, persuasive – proudly asserted their autistic identities, the more people seemed to forget about those with autism who had severe impairments. Bell has in mind those who would never speak, who had to be watched round-the-clock so that they didn’t wander out at night and drown in a river or a swimming pool, who needed their diapers changed at least twice a day, even as adults. Unable to give interviews, these members of the autism community rarely have their stories told on the evening news, leaving the public with a skewed understanding of just how debilitating it could be, and how much it undermined opportunities for a life well lived, to have what some families privately called, in defiance of the neurodiversity movement’s argument, “real autism.” (Donvan and Zucker 526)

The continuum of functioning makes it nearly impossible to speak cohesively about autism and complicates the notion of neurodiversity. One philosophy states that person-first language is most important for people like the ones Bell described because their personhood is most likely to be dismissed due to their care needs and barriers to communication. A counterpoint would state that using differing labels depending on level of function could be just another way to parse disability based on burdens to society. This is a eugenic concept, and one that is deeply tied into autism’s history as Hans Asperger (namesake of the “Asperger” label) promoted eugenic ideas and signed off on the euthanasia of at least one significantly disabled child in Nazi-controlled Austria while simultaneously championing the boys of “social worth” that he worked with (Donvan and Zucker 330–42).

Choosing the best language is difficult in a field which serves primarily young people, some of whom are nonverbal, many of whom are not yet at a developmental stage to form the sense of identity and political engagement necessary to make a choice between these two language options, and none of whom I spoke with for this project. As well, person-first language tends to be preferred in service fields like medicine and education which are likely to be a parent's first introduction to disability, while identity-first tends to be preferred in political and online spaces which are often discovered by young people in their adolescence or beyond. Parents are often the consumers directly being reached by Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) companies, placing companies in an awkward position when choosing language to respectfully market their productions. There was also a long period of time in which person-first language was put forward as the most respectful option, even by self-advocates (see: Deegan 10). Many practitioner interview quotes use person-first language for these reasons, and parsing language to identify political leaning remains nearly impossible.

In previous writing, I defaulted to person-first language in instances when I referred to a hypothetical young person or when referring to an autistic person whose language preferences I was not aware of. For this project, I have chosen to reverse that position. Despite the continued use of person-first language by many parents and members of service fields, the proliferation of identity-first language has now reached a tipping point in the disabled (particularly autistic) communities at which I feel the political alignment of identity-first language outweighs the risks of offending those who may come from an experience which has asserted person-first language as the only respectful choice. I aim in this dissertation to advocate for a version of sensory theatre with a clearer political alignment with the neurodiversity movement and will therefore

use language to reflect that perspective. To any neurodivergent readers who may prefer person-first language, I ask your generosity in considering this decision.

Positionality

I identify as a nondisabled – able-bodied and neurotypical – person and write this work from that perspective. Binary definitions of disabled/nondisabled are impossible, as no bodies or minds are entirely normative. However, I consider my health conditions nondisabling as they rarely interfere with my ability to engage in society and culture, and thus do not fall within my personal interpretation of the label under a social/cultural model of disability. I also do not identify culturally with any disability groups. I therefore consider myself to be an outsider to discussions of disability, and do my best to center voices of disabled people to understand these topics.

Interview Methodology

To conduct a study on this emerging field which has little published material, I chose to interview⁴ practitioners from professional theatre companies which practice sensory theatre. By “practitioner” I mean a person involved in the artistic process of sensory theatre productions. This could include writers, directors, devisors, designers, producers, and performers. I was particularly interested in interviewing practitioners who could be considered “founders” or who had somehow initiated the production of sensory theatre in their company/region. This was both because the project had a partially historical aim and because I was most interested in the perspectives of artists who are passionate about the work and could speak about it from a broad perspective.

⁴ The study design was reviewed by the University of Wisconsin-Madison Institutional Review Board and determined to meet the criteria for exempt human subjects under Category 2 of 45 CFR 46: Research involving the use of educational tests, surveys, interviews (not with children)

I identified seven professional companies who have produced their own sensory theatre productions in the United States (Chicago Children's Theatre, Bluelaces Theater Company, Trusty Sidekick Theater Company, Jumping Jack Theater, Parachute Players, Kaiser's Room, and Bricolage Production Company). The US also includes regular artistic practice within academic settings (including Seesaw Theatre at Northwestern University, productions at Michigan State University, and Gretta Berghammer's productions at the University of Northern Iowa), however, this dissertation focuses only on professional companies, because academic and professional settings have such different material constraints.

Using existing professional networks (including contacts from conferences and the online Upfront Performance Network Facebook group), I identified artists working in the United States who might be willing to be interviewed. In addition, at the end of every initial interview with practitioners I asked them to list who they considered "peers" in the field, and used their responses to supplement my list of interview subjects. In total, I spoke with 11 practitioners who represented one or more of the professional companies identified and conducted a total of 21 interviews⁵.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with questions designed to gather information about the history of sensory theatre in the United States, artistic methodologies, and how social rules are conveyed in sensory theatre spaces. I used the transcripts of these practitioner interviews as pieces of text in conversation with scholarly work on disability and audience reception to answer my research questions. Because these interviews were being used primarily as text and (except in a few places) I was analyzing the content of the responses rather than the speech patterns of participants, I chose to lightly edit quotations for concision and readability. Filler words and

⁵ I only spoke with performer Joshua Holden once because his more limited scope of knowledge based on working primarily as a performer meant a number of planned questions were not relevant

pauses have been omitted in cases where their inclusion does not contribute, in my opinion, to the meaning of the quotation. Original recordings and transcripts were maintained for data checking.

All practitioners interviewed but one identified unambiguously as neurotypical. One provided an ambiguous answer due to their expressed discomfort with classifying disability by binary labels, but called themselves “non-disabled for the purposes of this interview”. While I share the discomfort of forcing participants into binary disability categories, it is important to note that no companies who practice sensory theatre in the US are led by disabled people, a pressing issue in the field. As well, several practitioners expressed surprise at being asked about their ability status and indicated they had never been asked about their ability before, which reflects problematically on the broader culture in the US which has not sought to reflect on disability leadership within the field. One practitioner identified as Black, with all other practitioners identifying as white, indicating a significant lack of racial diversity in field leadership. There was a roughly equal gender split, with 5 men and 6 women participating. When considering these demographics, it is important to consider the possibility that these biases reflect my methodology of selecting practitioners to interview rather than the field itself. These demographics align with my experience, but that experience is limited.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter one explores how the genre of sensory theatre has developed within the United States, and what influences lead to the distinctions of sensory theatre practices in the US. I find that the US educational system has impacted both the aesthetics of performance by introducing specific tactics for engaging with neurodivergent audiences (for example, visual schedules and sparse language) and language for labeling audiences. I also find that the lack of state funding for

arts in the US has heavily influenced the formation of companies, with awareness of large cultural organizations and funders of cognitive disabilities directly impacting company's ability to produce work. The landscape around autism and the many controversial organizations and practices surrounding the diagnosis in the US puts companies in a difficult position when it comes to language, partnerships, and funding.

Chapter two looks at how meaning is generated in sensory theatre performances. I find the aims of sensory theatre to be primarily affective rather than semiotic and this affect-first approach creates a cognitively flexible environment. I argue for the validity of de-centering fictional narrative in sensory theatre if accompanied by a demarcation of theatrical space as distinct from the quotidian.

Chapter three moves on from a discussion of central aims to explore tactics sensory theatre artists use to collaborate with their audiences in both development and performance, and to what extent these collaborative practices constitute co-authorship with the audience. Chapter four continues the analysis of audience agency in collaboration, but from the perspective of the limitations audience members place upon themselves in participatory theatre. The invitations for participation within sensory theatre are profound in the context of a culture which does not provide many opportunities for agency for neurodivergent young people.

The final chapter looks at how the immersive format places spectators in a position to be viewed by one another, and the impacts of placing young people with disabilities in a position to be viewed. I explore Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's work on staring and the visual rhetorics which are constructed around the viewing of disabled bodies to raise the question of what frameworks neurotypical adult audience members bring to their perception of the young participants in the space

Chapter One: History and Development of Sensory Theatre within the United States

The history of sensory theatre in the US begins in earnest in 2007, but its international origins stretch back to the 1980s. Oily Cart in the UK was the first theatre company to document a method of sensory theatre which was specific to an audience of young people with complex disabilities. They are widely considered in the field to be the originators of sensory theatre. Without question, there have been intersections of theatre and disability throughout history, and Oily Cart co-founder Tim Webb credits several other companies for pioneering work for “people with severe learning disabilities” in the early 1980s including Interplay in Leeds and Theatre Centre in London (Webb, “Impossible” 96). However, Oily Cart has a large degree of visibility and influence so in this chapter I am interested in looking at how their particular sensory methodology was developed, shared, and then built upon in the US, and how the unique funding and social landscape of the United States then shaped the US field.

Oily Cart's influence has been widespread because they have exported their methodology to other artists around the world through their "International Sensory Lab" (formerly "Creating with the Cart") summer sessions which invite artist to visit London for an intensive professional development session. The founding artists of Oily Cart also frequently travel for collaborative processes with artists around the world. Through a combination of the summer sessions, collaborations, and digital media, all of the US artists interviewed for this project have been either directly or indirectly influenced by Oily Cart, and therefore Oily Cart's history is an important part of the history of sensory theatre in the US.

Oily Cart was founded by three core members: artistic director Tim Webb, designer Claire de Loon, and musical director Max Reinhardt. Webb and de Loon first met in 1971, at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre, where they both worked on Theatre in Education shows. De Loon

then met Reinhardt in 1977 through his work on educational and cultural programming for families in London. The three artists decided to come together to create shows for early years audiences, or “under-fives.” Both Reinhardt and Webb had experience working with under-fives from their work with Theatre Kit, which was, “one of the first [companies] in the UK to consistently make theatre for the very young” (Webb, “History” 4). In October of 1981, they produced their first show, *Out of Their Tree*, which was created for 3 to 5-year-olds (Webb, “History” 4).

Their work expanded to include disabled children in 1988 because of a request from a “Special Needs⁶” school to bring in a Theatre for the Early Years (TEY) show. Rather than present a TEY show to older children, Oily Cart asked the schools to work with them to develop an age-appropriate show which would consider the abilities of all students at this school. This eventually became their first production for young disabled people, *Box of Socks*. Based on this history, one of the most influential genres impacting sensory theatre is TEY. There are noticeable similarities: shows in TEY also often use sensory elements (although perhaps slightly less emphasized than in sensory theatre) and have an episodic structure. Much thought is put into the initial introduction of the children to the theatre space and establishing the ground rules of theatrical attendance by both gently teaching those rules and also making them more flexible than in a formal theatrical environment (see: Wartemann). I have proposed in other work that these genres share similarities not only because of their closely related history but also because they share an “emergent audience”—by which I mean an audience which the artists cannot assume has previously attended the theatre—making the establishment of the rules of the space so important to the work. However, while there are similarities in these audiences, it is important

⁶ A school that is exclusively offering special education

to emphasize their differences as well, and to understand the political importance of Oily Cart pushing back to create an "age-appropriate" show.

Treating older children with significant disabilities as essentially the same as young children is demeaning to their experiences and wisdom. Many have pushed back on "mental age" to describe cognitive functioning (ex: "he has the body of an 18-year-old but the mind of a 3-year-old") (Silverman). While some find these metaphors to be a useful shorthand when dealing with a person or system with no prior knowledge of cognitive or intellectual disability, the metaphor encourages an attitude of condescension, protectionism, and infantilization of people with a complex life experience. As such, I find Oily Cart's refusal to simply transfer a TEY show to a special school to reveal a political stance, whether the company would frame it in such a way or not.

Webb describes *Box of Socks* as follows:

Box of Socks (1988), took place over a whole school day. A trio of aliens from outer space crashed their spaceship into the morning assembly and spent the rest of the day wandering all over the school, mystified about life on earth. This turned out to be an empowering event for the students, who had to elucidate aspects of human behaviour from eating to writing to the extra planetary visitors. It was especially empowering for the group from the senior department who took an alien shopping for party ingredients and spent their time persuading the creature not to demand cake in the butchers and meat in the travel agents.

(Webb, "Impossible" 96)

Many TEY productions also feature characters who explore objects in unconventional ways, in many forms, and may involve some direct engagement with sensory objects. For example, the TEY show *Holzklöpfen* by German company Helios Theatre explored iterations of wood in the

forms of chips, blocks, sticks, and stumps; and led up to direct sensory engagement when the audience is invited into the performance space to walk along paths in the woodchips (Wartemann). Both genres de-emphasize narrative to instead emphasize joyful exploration of an environment. Some companies will create a single performance which will have TEY and sensory theatre iterations, for example Trusty Sidekick's *Campfire*.

In some ways the distinction between TEY and sensory theatre happens mostly through the grouping of the audience: who participants share the space with communicates a respect for real age by not lumping older, neurodivergent children into the same category as toddlers. But sensory theatre performances are also distinctive because they pull on previous experiences of sensory joy which can be repeated with the performer (and hopefully repeated again after the performance with their caregiver who shared in the experience). The experience is distinctive because it happens within a theatrical space, but the audience is assumed to have a rich sensory history, or what Gill Brigg (borrowing from Peter Coia and Jardine Handley) calls a "unique cultural library" (Brigg, *Theatre* 71). One way this is reflected is the frequent practice of pre-show surveys which ask about the audience member's triggers and sensory preferences (Brewster McGinley; Santa). This information is practical but also politically important - treating the audience member as a person with an expansive sensory history and affirming the agency of the audience to control their sensory environment.

In *Box of Socks*, Oily Cart focused the development process on appealing to the broadest possible contingent of students at this school. Webb writes about the challenges of creating their first show for disabled children with an entire school as a target audience, because of the vast range of ages and abilities within the target group:

... we found the school contained an enormous range of abilities. Some of the older students were both highly verbal and mobile. On the other hand there were young people with complex sensory and intellectual disabilities who needed assistance with most everyday activities. Of course, there were also a great number of young people between these two extremes and we saw that no one form of theatre was going to satisfy the requirements of everyone in the school. (Webb, "History" 4)

This quote highlights the diversity within the disability community. Sensory theatre is made to be flexible and intimate because the population being served is heterogeneous.

In noting the complexities of this audience, it is important to note that this wide approach to disability is less common in the US, where sensory shows tend to center around autism. Oily Cart creates shows which serve multiple disability categories through a flexible structure which can be amended depending on the make-up of the audience for that particular production. For example, the published script of their show *Blue* includes customizations for the show depending on the make-up of the particular audience, and a suggested timetable for a full day at a school which includes 4 separate performances (Brown 57, 71). This method has been less popular in the US, likely due to a differing approach to both labeling and educating disabled students which makes it less common in the US to find students with differing disabilities all within one space. Instead, sensory artists in the US tend to focus around specific disability labels to communicate with their intended audience.

US companies tend to work with what I would call an autism + model: centering their work around the label of autism but making shows as flexibly as possible to include children with a broad range of cognitive disabilities and adjusting on the fly to accommodate physical or sensory disabilities (ex: visual impairment). There are multiple potential reasons for this. One

may be a heightened focus on autism in the US. All of the artists interviewed for this project were prompted to begin working in this field either because they were connected with an educational environment that focused around autism, because they were commissioned to create for an autistic audience, or because they encountered a company already making sensory work. This suggests that the broader institutions which shape the experience of disability in the US tend to place greater focus around the specific label of "autism". It may also be partially due to a difference in diagnostic labeling between countries. The UK and many other anglophone countries use the label Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) which the US does not⁷. Many artists creating sensory work in those countries use PMLD and/or "complex disabilities" when describing their audiences, neither of which would carry much meaning for an audience in the US. The US disability system tends to eschew broad labeling such as PMLD, placing primacy on specificity of diagnostic labeling - for example, requiring students who have a special education diagnosis to fit into one of thirteen categories⁸, one of which is autism (*Sec. 300.8 Child with a Disability*). Since many parents are introduced into the world of disability through either an educational or medical diagnosis for their child, and parents ultimately make ticket purchasing decisions, diagnostic labeling is often the most easily understood terminology for communicating with audiences.

The issue of labeling audiences is a fraught one. All practitioners interviewed for this project expressed a desire to be as inclusive as possible when it came to their audiences (and

⁷ The UK uses the term "Learning Disability" in a similar way to how the US uses the term "Intellectual Disability", not to indicate a particular learning challenge such as Dyslexia

⁸ 13 categories of disability listed under IDEA: "an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, an other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities" (*Sec. 300.8 Child with a Disability*). These are generally counted as to as "thirteen" categories because hearing impairment and deafness are considered distinct categories despite being listed together.

students for educational programming), and many expressed a desire to move away from labeling their audience all together. But to be radically inclusive in language has the potential to devolve into such generalities that the language loses all meaning. This push and pull was perhaps best expressed by Maddie Zdeblick, founder of Parachute Players:

I think families and teachers and everyone in the disability community has been so conditioned that they don't belong, that they will see any narrow label as evidence of their further not belonging. So saying, 'This is a space for autism and others.' Everybody else who's not autistic is going to say, 'That's not for me. I'm not just an 'other,' I'm really special. I'm different. Nobody wants me.' And so you're just reinforcing that stupid thing that tells people that they don't belong. And so I try to keep it as broad as possible. I wish that I could just say disabilities. But I do think it's important to say developmental or intellectual or something of that sort. Because the sensory-based aspect of the show is designed for those populations in mind. And so I don't want people who are primarily experiencing physical disability to come in and be like, 'Why are you asking me to touch things? This is kind of dumb.' Not that I wouldn't welcome somebody who is in a wheelchair and has no other disability into our space, but it's not designed with that population in mind. Sometimes I also say 'students with sensory-seeking or sensory-avoiding behaviors' because I feel like that kind of encapsulates a particular thing about our audience. Because we try to have a spectrum of lots of senses, few senses; you can choose your sensory engagement level. But sometimes that is too jargon-y for families, and they're like, 'I don't know what that means, my student doesn't belong.' Like damn it, why don't we belong again? So, it's the balancing act to try and keeping it as specific as possible

so people know what to expect, and also as broad as possible, so everyone feels included because they are. (Zdeblick, Intv.)

This push and pull of labels is perhaps one reason the field has still not fully settled on a national or international term to describe the genre of sensory theatre, much less its focal audience. At the same time, grounding the work in the label of autism is not entirely a constraint. The diversity within the autism spectrum means that trying to serve the entirety of the spectrum results in a highly flexible and accepting show. Mahoney pointed out: "If you're really thinking like holistically about the autism spectrum you're inevitably going to catch other neurodiversities that are out there" because of the broad range of communication and sensory considerations that go into creating a work that welcomes all people on the autism spectrum (Mahoney, Intv.). The tensions around labeling seem particularly present in the US because the education system does not group students in a way which allows artists to simply enter a place in which the young people present will be their desired audience. Whether coordinating with schools or advertising to the public, it nearly always falls upon the artist in the US context to express not only what is on offer but also who this art is for.

The last likely reason for the different approaches in the US to the question of labeling comes from the historical origins of sensory theatre within the US. The artists who first engaged in sensory making in the US all came from a starting point of working with young autistic

people, and from there their artistic curiosity sparked productions which would inform the current landscape in the United States.

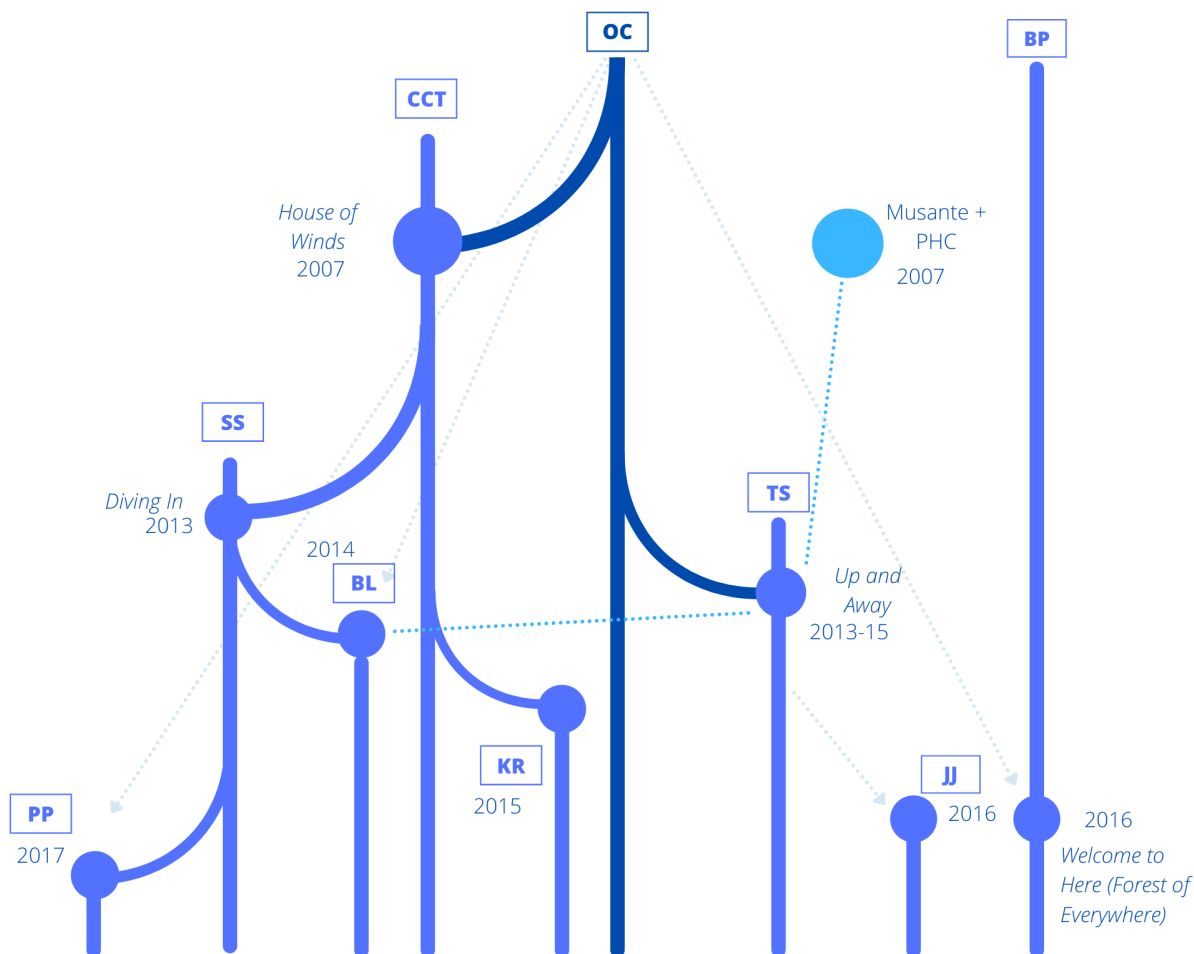


Figure 2. Diagram of company collaborations and influences within the US

Key



This chart covers the years 2007-2017 (before the Big Umbrella Festival)

Figure 3. Diagram of company collaborations and influences within the US Key

In 2007, two entirely unrelated experimental projects became, to my knowledge, the first productions of sensory work performed in the United States⁹. Unfortunately, only one of these productions has extensive documentation: *House of Winds*, created in partnership between Chicago Children's Theatre and Oily Cart. The other production, an untitled immersive piece created by Peter Musante and colleagues in partnership at the Princeton House Charter school, only exists in memory. Based on the information available, the productions have interesting parallels. Both involved an artist who had recently begun working with an artistically

⁹ Using my personal definition of sensory theatre as defined in the introduction

experimental company (Oily Cart and Blue Man Group), and who chose to experiment with applying those artistic methods in an educational environment that serves young autistic people.

Jacqueline Russell, the founder of Chicago Children's Theatre, began working in a contained classroom for autistic students at then-Agassiz Elementary School¹⁰ in 1997 (Kenaz-Mara). While running the education department of Lookingglass Theatre, she took a call from the school asking her to find a teaching artist to work in a classroom of autistic kids. After struggling to find a teaching artist who felt prepared to teach this population, she began hosting drama sessions in the classroom herself (Russell). After working in this classroom for years, she learned about the work happening at Oily Cart and reached out to the British Consulate to make a connection. She eventually attended their summer session and then brought Tim Webb to the US to work with Chicago Children's Theatre on a pilot production, which would eventually be called *House of Winds* (Russell). This process is captured in a documentary about the process (Shaw) as well as newspaper articles from the time (Jones, "Play"; Jones, "Arts"). *House of Winds* played for only a few performances on October 18th, 2007 for an audience of invited students in the classroom that had been working with the artists of CCT (Holden; Jones, "Play"; Jones, "Arts").

In working with Oily Cart, Russell discovered that to make a show centered around autism, rather than Oily Cart's more broad disability focus, the approach to the show would need to be adjusted:

...[Tim Webb] definitely said you are the autism person. We [Oily Cart] are not specialist in autism. I had been doing work with autism for nearly a decade at that point. And he said, 'We should meet your community, meet your kids get to know more about autism.' One of

¹⁰ Agassiz was renamed Harriet Tubman International Baccalaureate World School in March of 2021 due to Louis Agassiz's legacy of scientific racism (Masterson)

the things we did was we brought in an autism specialist from Rush¹¹, and made sure that we were really immersed in the understanding of autism. And that's very specific. (Russell)

One example of a differing approach due to centering the work around autism was the decision by CCT to include a visual itinerary of the plot in the set design—something that would be visible throughout the performance and revisited as the action progressed. Russell recounts in that in their second collaboration, she and Webb disagreed about the importance of a visual itinerary that was incorporated into the set design. While Webb didn't share the vision, the autism consultants in the room pushed for its inclusion. Russell incorporated symbols that represented each episode of the show in order, displayed on the sails of the ship that the show was set upon so that after each episode had passed, the sails could be turned around to indicate progress through the performance (Russell).

Now visual itineraries are common in not just Red Kite shows but also many sensory shows in the US. This technique was pulled from visual schedules which are frequently used in classrooms because it allows autistic children to preview upcoming events and prepare for transitions. Some companies incorporate all or parts of this visual schedule into the social stories provided to their audience ahead of the performance, allowing for a greater level of familiarity with the show content. The centrality of the visual schedule into the sets of many US performances shows how these pieces take many of their strategies from the educational supports around autism.

House of Winds was themed around the winds of the 4 seasons, with sensory episodes inspired by weather patterns. The boundaries of the space were established with some simple white fabric suspended from above, creating the feeling of a contained, almost tent-like space.

¹¹ Autism Assessment, Research, Treatment and Services Center at Rush University System for Health

Based on documentary footage, the performance included many sensory episodes with hand and electronic fans, musical instruments, rocking chairs, and blankets all used to engage the audience. The performers interacted closely with the audience and the rules of the space were flexible; the children were free to get out of their seats and explore the space. At times participants chose to dance along with the music being played and sung. At one moment captured in the footage, an audience member is given a pile of paper scraps to represent snow. Initially, she seems unsure about how to interact with the paper but then she gets out of her seat to approach a large fan where, mimicking Webb from earlier in the performance, she lets the scraps of paper fly in the airstream of the fan.

At the end of the performance, the children dance away from the space holding paper fans that have been gifted to them by the performers. The documentary chooses to end the *House of Winds* segment on a long shot of one young boy joyfully descending the steps out of the performance space while dancing, suggesting visually to the viewer that the children attending the show will continue to be impacted by the performance beyond the walls of the theatre (Shaw).

Meanwhile, in Orlando Florida, Peter Musante was developing his own sensory experience for young people in an autism charter school. Musante is a performer who had recently landed a job working with Blue Man Group. While the details of how they first came into contact are not entirely clear, Musante recalls that in Orlando he connected with the vice principal of an autism charter school, Princeton Charter House, which "serv[es] children with Autism in grades PK-5th" (Princeton House Charter School). Their collaboration began with an idea to bring Blue Man into the school to potentially do a show or artistic workshop with the students, but quickly the Blue Man construct was dropped in favor of the artists simply

embedding themselves at the school and getting to know the students—much in the same way Oily Cart first came to develop *Box of Socks* and similar to Jacqui Russell's experience of working for years with children in an autism classroom. Musante estimates that the artists spent "three or four months" working with the students before their culminating performance (Musante). While Blue Man Group was not officially involved, Musante does draw a connection between the kinds of artistic methods Blue Man Group is interested in and the work he did with the Princeton House students:

It was just erasing any artifice of who you are and who the audience is. And the separation between the spectator and performer. They're always trying to not so much put on a show as much as they are trying to ask a question about, 'What do you think about this? How can we work together?'...That's really present in all the work that I've made, is trying to call out artifice. And find ways to let your genuine interests—and usually that takes form of sensory interests, creating opportunities for people to offer sensory material—and have that be kind of a bridge between the audience and performer (Musante)

Musante's description of the way a Blue Man character invests their attention into the audience is reminiscent of a quote from Tim Webb about the way Oily Cart approaches their audiences: “we are able to scrutinize the reactions of the young people, and their adult companions and adapt what we are doing to individual responses. The Oily Cart has to watch the audience members far more intently than they watch us” (Webb, “History” 8). Despite Musante not having (at that time) any experience with or connection to Oily Cart, similar methodologies—perhaps shared only by some connection to the world of performance art and immersion—emerged as important to how an artist approaches their work with an audience of young disabled people. Musante also draws connections between the relationship between audience and performer and the use of

sensory materials. He sees sensory materials as opportunities to create a relationship between the audience and performer, which is reflected in his later work with Trusty Sidekick.

Musante's group developed a "sensory fair" out of their work with the Princeton House students. This fair included a narrative element along with self-directed sensory stations. The first 30 minutes were unstructured time in which students could visit various stations focused on isolating particular senses (such as a tactile station in which students stuck their hand into an obscured box and used their sense of touch to select an item which would then be placed on a pegboard). At each of these stations, the sensory activity the students undertook contributed to one of six blocks that served as a piece of visual art which, at the conclusion of the show, was revealed to fit together to form the name of the school. This completion process was accompanied by a basic narrative (Musante).

This basic outline of the show is interesting because it shares several elements with Russell's collaboration with Agassiz school. Both performances were heavily influenced by a long period of time working in an education environment specific to autistic children, and both were heavily influenced by what they observed in those classrooms. Musante even credits the physical materials used in classrooms as inspiration for the sensory design: "[the] tactile station was informed by our observations of how tactile the classrooms were with (what I now know to be described) as fidgets and different objects that were kind of strewn throughout the classroom that we witnessed" (Musante). This is similar to Russell's choice to incorporate a visual schedule into the set. As well, both chose to make works that placed value on the sensory experience but did have a loose sense of narrative. Also, both included some physical objects that students were able to keep after the performances (the school name in Musante's case and hand fans in Russell's case).

Musante recounts that his work on Princeton Charter House did not come to full relevance again until he began working with Trusty Sidekick on *Up and Away* in 2013. Chicago Children's Theatre continued their sensory theatre work to developed a full arm of their company, "The Red Kite Project" which creates sensory productions and drama education opportunities for autistic youth. In 2008, CCT and Oily Cart continued their collaboration to create *Red Kite, Blue Moon*, the first documented public-facing US performance, which premiered at the Chicago Children's Museum on Navy Pier on April 17, 2008 (Holden). Russell attributes CCT's long-term investment in work for autistic children to the downturn in the economy. The 2008 Great Recession forced the company to scrap their plans to produce their first ever large musical commission and, instead, a board member suggested to take the partnership with Oily Cart and "make that what the company is doing right now" (Russell). This is an example of the specific economic conditions of the US influencing funding—with funding models which are often significantly different from the UK and Europe¹²—which in this case opened the door for a non-profitable model of theatre to be produced. Sensory productions are never a profitable enterprise and so the reality that *any* production would be unprofitable opened the door to creating small-scale, intimate performances.

After *Red Kite, Blue Moon* CCT created *Red Kite Roundup* in 2010 (Kenaz-Mara). In addition to being the second sensory show produced in the US for a public performance, this show is also significant because one of the cast members was Stephane Duret, who would eventually go on to found his own inclusive theatre company.

A few years after *Red Kite Roundup*, in 2012, students at Northwestern University in Evanston (a close suburb of Chicago) would begin their own process of wondering what a more

¹² Historically, the UK has provided more state funding for theatre than the US, although government funding has been declining in recent decades (Essex, "Co-operative" 112)

inclusive version of TYA might look like. One of those students, Alison Mahoney, was working in a public school classroom in Evanston as part of her drama education curriculum while also producing and directing TYA work as part of her theatre studies. In her classroom, there were several neurodivergent students who were mainstreamed¹³ during drama class who she realized would be excluded from the types of TYA shows she was currently working on (Mahoney, Intv.). As a result, in collaboration with several friends who had similar interests, Mahoney pitched a one-off project to her extracurricular student theatre group called Theatre Stands with Autism (TSWA). The group wanted to devise a piece with young autistic people in mind and decided to approach Jacqueline Russell for help. After gathering methodological insights from Russell, the group eventually created their first devised piece for young autistic people, *Diving In*, in 2013 (Mahoney, Intv.). The students who founded TSWA group would go on to found their own professional theater company in New York devoted sensory productions and related educational programming, Bluelaces Theatre Company, in 2014 (Bluelaces Theater Company, “History”). The student group at Northwestern would continue past the graduation of the founders. It was eventually re-named Seesaw Theatre, which continues to this day as a standing student theatre group at Northwestern who creates sensory productions, classroom workshops, and host an annual conference. Seesaw's continued work inspired Maddie Zdeblick, who worked with Seesaw throughout her time as an undergraduate and started Parachute Players in Seattle in 2017.

In addition to TSWA creating *Diving In* in 2013, this year also stands out as the year when Lincoln Center Education (LCE) would first commission Trusty Sidekick to create a piece of theatre for children with autism and their families, leading to the most visible sensory

¹³ Placed in a typical education environment but receiving differentiated instruction

production produced in the US up until the date of writing. Indeed, looking at the full timeline of sensory events (see appendix), 2013 is the beginning of a period of a great expansion of sensory work in the US. From this point the history shifts from the impetus for productions coming primarily from artists working within classrooms who felt curious about how to apply their theater skills working with this population, to artists being prompted to apply that curiosity via commissions from larger organizations.

This prompts the question of why this increased interest from larger institutions occurred. One possibility that seems almost certain is a greater awareness on a socio-cultural level of the existence of autism. With more children being diagnosed as on the autism spectrum¹⁴, it seems likely that more organizations were becoming aware of a population that existed which was not being served by their current programming. Other reasons may be the related increase in sensory friendly programming throughout the arts and cultural sector, raising organizational awareness about the possibilities of modifying artistic programming to serve a broader audience. Indeed, in at least one case a theatre company was first commissioned to make a sensory friendly version of artistic programming but instead chose to take on the more substantive process of developing a sensory production (Dixon). This interest in and awareness of sensory friendly programming likely opened funding opportunities, both in the sense that large cultural institutions thought to budget for inclusion of neurodiversity in their programming and in that outside granting organizations became interested in funding applied theatre that worked with neurodiverse audiences. Another possibility is the continual expansion of sensory theatre internationally, and organizations becoming aware of the possibilities of the artform based on viewing international

¹⁴ The reason behind increasing diagnoses (extensive screening, expanded definitions, a genuine increase in incidence, etc.) is extremely complex and hotly debated, and will not be explored here. What is important for this study is the way that increases in diagnostic labeling impacted a socio-cultural awareness of autism.

work. Ultimately, a full exploration of this question would require further interviews with members of funding organizations, which falls outside the scope of this study but could be an interesting point for future academic analysis.

Paul Brewster McGinley, the now managing director of Trusty Sidekick and the audience engagement manager of *Up and Away*, speculates that LCE chose Trusty Sidekick for this commission because of the immersive work the company was already engaging in. Members of LCE had seen Trusty Sidekick's TEY show *Shadow Play*, which featured sensory and immersive elements:

....there's video projection, there's a lot of cardboard, and there is a very blurred line between the audience and the performance where there's a lot of audience interaction.

And there was a lot of pre- and post-show arc. So prior to the show, kids made a telescope that was then used in the show and then the show ended in a dance party that then devolved into hanging out in the space and continuing to dance with shadows.

And that full arc of engagement kind of became part of the fabric of our work. (Brewster McGinley)

If Brewster McGinley's interpretation of what about Trusty Sidekick's work interested LCE is correct, this suggests that those driving the commission had some sense of the existing sensory landscape. LCE potentially sought out a company with experience creating common elements of sensory theatre: multi-sensory elements, blurred lines between audience and performer, narrative arcs that extend beyond the confines of the theatre. The commission sparked a year-and-a-half long development process, during which Trusty Sidekick worked with Oily Cart as well as multiple US artists with previous sensory experience, including Alison Mahoney and Peter Musante. The production that was eventually created, *Up and Away*, was notable both for this

considerable coming together of experienced artists during its creation as well as its eventual reach.

Likely due to the significant resources from LCE, *Up and Away* had the most polished and elaborate production elements of any sensory performance in the US. Every family attending shared a "hot air balloon" basket with one other family, including a suspended inflatable that acted as the balloon. The production also had intricate costumes and an extensive library of sensory elements. *Up and Away* had multiple initial runs (April and September-November 2015) and then was remounted for third time at the Big Umbrella Festival in April of 2018. The Big Umbrella Festival was the first ever international festival of sensory work, featuring performances from Trusty Sidekick, Oily Cart, and Sensorium from Australia. Many artists in the US and from around the world attended the festival as well as professional development workshops offered alongside performances, and the festival became a common touchpoint for the various artistic possibilities of the genre.

Up and Away influenced other US artists even before its remount for the Big Umbrella Festival. In 2016, two colleagues in Pittsburgh began meeting about creating theatrical work for young autistic people. Stephen Santa, who had experience working with young autistic people as a teaching artist, and Rebecca Covert, who has a son who is on the autism spectrum, began having regular coffee meetings about their vision for a theatre company after Covert found a video online of *Up and Away*. Seeing the possibility in the model, the two formed Jumping Jack Theatre and approached the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust for funding for their new venture. The Trust informed them that money was already budgeted for "something like this" in the spring of 2017, prompting them to quickly put together their first production, *The Light Princess* (Santa). This is another example of funding driving the product, just as with CCT focusing on inclusive

programming during the recession. *The Light Princess* was an unusual sensory production because of its large audience size (capacity around 60) and setting on a proscenium stage. The rush to make use of existing funding and fit the production into an well understood model created those constraints, which Jumping Jack has since moved away from. Each of their subsequent shows have been made for smaller and smaller audiences, until their latest piece, *Starshine*—made in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic—which takes place in a traveling trailer and is made for a single performer, audience member, and a companion. Santa spoke to the reason for this microscale production being not just pandemic safety but also the capacity of the show to fit into an environment the participant is already comfortable in. He observed a high proportion of no-shows for performances and learned from asking families why they did not make the performance:

From talking to them, it was just, ‘We wanted to come but something came up today’ or ‘The change in routine, the change in scheduled just wasn't working for them today. And we just couldn't get there.’ So, we thought, ‘What if we could create something that eliminates the change in routine for them having to travel to us? And why can't we travel to them, and take that part of the equation out of the picture?’ So, the idea of us being able to just roll up to their front door was very exciting to us, and them having just to come outside and already be in a comfortable space that's their home or their school or their library. And just experience theater. (Santa)

This is the smallest scale sensory production I am aware of in US, quite different from Jumping Jack’s first production. In contrast to that first performance, this show was funded through a grant from a local theatre department to pay for the scenery within the trailer, and when I spoke with Santa the company was in the process of applying for additional grants and launching a

crowdfunding campaign asking donors to purchase a performance for a child. Santa mentioned the decision to hold off on a crowdfunding campaign until the trailer already existed, speaking to the proof-of-concept burden often placed upon companies in the US funding landscape. If donors do not have a visual concept of what a sensory theatre performance is, they are less likely to provide financial support for a project.

Returning to the impact of commissions on the development of sensory theatre work in the US, an additional significant commission took place also in Pittsburgh and also in 2016. Bricolage, an immersive theatre company producing work primarily for adults, was approached by Children's Theatre Festival about creating a sensory friendly version of one of their ongoing projects, *Midnight Radio*. The artistic director of Bricolage, Tami Dixon, felt that *Midnight Radio* was not well suited for sensory friendly programming and that more could be done to serve a neurodiverse audience by creating something from the ground up. This began a research process which eventually resulted in *Welcome to Here* (later revived as *The Forest of Everywhere*), an open-world immersive experience for neurodivergent young people.

While this event follows a pattern of larger cultural institutions acting as the impetus for new work, it is unusual in that Bricolage is the only company in this history that does not create work primarily for young audiences and because it is the only company for whom immersive theatre has become a central part of their artistic identity (other companies like Trusty Sidekick engage in immersive work, but Bricolage primarily bills themselves as an "immersive theatre"). Dixon researched companies like Oily Cart and Trusty Sidekick but had less direct collaboration with other sensory companies than many of the artists interviewed for this project. Perhaps partially as a result of working more independently, Dixon created a production which was unusual for the field in the way the audience is left to their own devices to explore mini-

narratives. Within the forest space were multiple “caves” of self-contained narratives that audiences chose to explore at their own pace rather than taking the entire audience through a shared narrative experience, a structure Dixon called an “open world experience” (Dixon).

The last movement of companies are those that were founded by artists who had the opportunity to engage with sensory work elsewhere and felt compelled to bring that work to a new home. Kaiser's Room was formed in New York City in 2015 by Stephane Duret, who had previously worked with Jacqueline Russell on *Red Kite Roundup*. Duret was inspired to form his own inclusive theatre company as an extension of his Broadway acting career and his time working as a "playroom friend" for an autistic child named Kaiser. This playroom experience is intriguing because Duret was hired to work by Kaiser's parents as part of a method called "Son-Rise", in which facilitators spend long periods of time interacting with an autistic child through behavior mimicry (Autism Treatment Center of America). This method is controversial in the autism community for both promising "cures" for autism (objected to by both the scientific community who hold that curing autism is not possible and neurodiversity advocates who do not believe that autism should be cured) as well as for charging high sums to parents who wish to enroll in their workshops and running a “quasi-religious” organization (Borrell). Despite the controversial claims of the method’s founders, Duret insists the family and team he worked with did not believe in curing autism, but rather were interested in the way the Son-Rise method calls for acceptance and deep attention paid to the autistic person (Duret). Duret described how that philosophy ended up impacting his artistic practice:

I started working with Kaiser, and that was where my approach was a little bit more fine-tuned. My approach of meeting individuals where they are, as opposed to trying to get them to come to where you are. Again, holistic acceptance. Just like full, unabashedly, body

acceptance. And just how, if love is the intention, and if support is the intention, then you can do no wrong. But also preparation is key. So all of these little tidbits that have kind of become our curriculum, or the tapestry of our organization. (Duret)

This history is intriguing because there are clear similarities between how Duret speaks about his interactions with Kaiser and the audience connections cited by Webb and Musante earlier in this chapter. However, the methods emerged from Duret's experience working in a controversial, therapeutic philosophy that he then placed in conversation with artistic practices, such as Michael Chekhov movement work (Duret). Could cure narratives of the Son-Rise method creep into the artistic work, despite the steps of distance between the Son-Rise founders and Duret? Do those intentions become actively subverted through re-purposing the methods to become artistic practice?

These questions are a part of navigating the significant controversies that exist within the community about what therapies are effective and ethical. Many parents struggle to find adequate care for their children and may turn to controversial methods to find support they find lacking in the medical community. This is not an issue unique to the US. As summarized by Shaughnessy, "Although there is no 'cure', a booming autism industry sells interventions in the form of behavioural therapies, diets and drugs, and books are also big business" (Shaughnessy, "Imagining Otherwise" 322). In addition to concerns about financial exploitation of parents, cure narratives and intensive therapies like ABA are criticized by activists as counter to the dignity of neurodivergent people. Which "experts" then should companies rely on when searching for insight into autism? How does the expertise they pull from inform the final production?

Particularly present in this landscape of controversies is Autism Speaks. Autism Speaks is the largest fundraising organization in the US related to autism and is also considered a hate

group by many neurodiversity advocates due to its historical focus on cures and exclusion of autistic people from leadership positions (Luterman; Henry and Henry). The group is also controversial due to their long period supporting research into the theory that vaccines cause autism, past a point when most considered that theory scientifically supportable (Donvan and Zucker, chaps. 40–41). With the United States now facing the broad repercussions of vaccine skepticism alongside the significant pushback against Autism Speaks from self-advocates, companies are in a difficult position when it comes to accepting funding. Some find it an ethical use of funds if the chapter of Autism Speaks they work with has disavowed some of the more controversial positions of the organization, while others have a firm stance against ever accepting money from them.

Even less visibly controversial questions like the appropriate method of education can place companies in an uncomfortable position. Brewster McGinley recalled that, as a part of the development process for *Up and Away* the artists intentionally sought to work with schools with differing educational methodologies:

I remember that there were three different schools chosen because of three different approaches to education for folks with autism. And at that time, we really did not want to...we did not want to sort of have any judgment on a methodology of education, because they were all happening. And we wanted to create a piece that was welcoming to all types of education. And so we did go and visit classes that were ABA, and were wondering how could a show that is really centering 'no wrong way,' interface with ABA methodologies? And how are we welcoming folks into a theatrical space where they are allowed to be, but we're not undoing what the school's goals are for that education for that space? And also honoring the others. (Brewster McGinley, Intv.)

ABA refers to Applied Behavioral Analysis, a controversial method because scientific literature supports its "effectiveness" but many activists find the methods used in ABA abusive and argue it is effective only in teaching autistic people to better pass as neurotypical. While most ABA practitioners now do not use "positive punishment" (application of an aversive stimulant), ABA's founder Ole Lovaas did and is widely criticized for his early experiments which used cattle prods to shock children when they engaged in a behavior he wanted to train them out of (ABA Programs Guide; Silberman, chap.7). How ABA is applied varies widely in current practice, and an analysis of its various iterations and their ethics is outside of the scope of this paper. Brewster McGinley's hesitation in discussing ABA reflects the sensitivity of this topic and the desire in many artists to not pass judgement on methodologies and therapies which are outside their area of expertise—even when those methods may be applied in ways that conflict with the accepting goal of a sensory theatre space.

While companies can never fully avoid controversial topics when dealing with autism, I would assert that the field is in a position to take a more considered stand on some topics related to neurodiversity. Companies should develop steering philosophies around how they believe autism, neurodiversity, and disability should be framed in their spaces, and then hold themselves to a standard of only partnering with experts who align with their own philosophies—or, if an intentional choice is made to work with a group which has an opposing philosophy, to explicitly name how they plan to relate to that philosophy and what steps they will take to ensure the artists who will be working closely with autistic youth maintain the company's commitment to affirming the agency of the young people who enter their spaces.

The final company which was founded by an artist with previous experience with sensory inclusive theatre is Parachute Players, which was formed in Seattle in approximately 2017. The

founder, Maddie Zdeblick, began creating sensory theatre as a freshman in undergrad, where she first encountered Seesaw Theatre:

It was the first time I'd ever heard someone use the words 'theatre' and 'disability' in the same sentence, and it blew my mind. They were blowing bubbles at the audience and bringing fabrics around for us to touch. And I was like, there's something so cool going on here. And I don't know who these people are, they seem a little bit just outside my realm of comfort, and I'm really excited about it. So I immediately reached out to the group over email and said....I don't know, something along the lines of like, 'My name is Maddie and I have to do this, like I have to be in the room with you' (Zdeblick, Intv.)

Zdeblick's company was the first on the West Coast of the US, and she recounted how a lack of awareness of the genre and consistent language around sensory theatre made it difficult to find collaborators: "It's not like I could post online, 'Who else does ability-inclusive sensory theater? Come audition.'" (Zdeblick, Intv.). This demonstrates the importance of further academic work on this topic alongside artistic collaboration and expansion, because terminology and awareness of the shared history and aesthetics of this genre will allow for more artists to connect with one and expand their work.

Zdeblick is an interesting example of sensory theatre maker because part of her motivation to engage with the genre was the exclusion she experienced from cultural events as a child as a result of having a brother with cerebral palsy who expressed "his enthusiasm in ways that aren't always socially acceptable" when attending the live performances they both loved (Zdeblick, Intv.). This is interesting not just because personal, familial experience shaped Zdeblick's perspective but also because of how *unusual* I found that narrative to be among the artists that I interviewed, despite a frequent socio-cultural assumption that all neurotypical and able-bodied

people working with disabled people must have a family connection that explains their investment in the community. In fact, when I asked Alison Mahoney about how she first became interested in sensory work, she shared that she has become "wary" of that question: "I feel like there's so often the tendency for like, women who work with disabled people to get asked the like... 'That's so inspiring, Why are you interested in doing that?' And there's the assumption that I have a sibling." (Mahoney, Intv.). I believe what Mahoney is criticizing in this assumption is not the lived experience of having a sibling with a disability but rather that the underlying assumption that artists are motivated by a sense of sentimentality, rather than aesthetic and intellectual rigor. This sentimental narrative does not fit Zdeblick, who has translated her artistic practice into scholarly work (Zdeblick, *Seesaw*) and who in interviews offered a pushback on "inspiration porn"¹⁵ narratives which pull about an sentimental rather than aesthetic motivation:

I feel like a lot of people share these moments of like, 'Wow, I was engaging with this audience member and their eyes lit up', or 'They said this thing they'd never said before and how cool.' And for me, it was less that and more just realizing how many possibilities were opened when you include more voices in a creative process. And what a cool design challenge to be able to consider everyone's access needs in the process of crafting a piece

¹⁵ "Inspiration porn, a term coined by the late disability activist, Stella Young, refers to the objectification of people with disabilities in media, which serves the purpose of making the consumers, people without disabilities, feel good. There are three main types of inspiration porn. The first occurs when a person with a disability receives praise for participating in a 'normal' activity such as joining their school's football team or being invited to homecoming by a person without a disability. The second type of inspiration porn occurs when a person with a disability 'overcomes' their disability in order to participate in a specific activity. A common example of this type of inspiration porn is viral videos of people who are deaf getting their hearing aids for the first time or a news story about a child with a prosthetic leg running a race. The third type of inspiration porn occurs when a person with disability receives assistance from a person without a disability and then the person without a disability is glorified for their service to humanity. For example, [a] headline [of] a famous football player who sat with a boy with autism at lunchtime." (Trumpower). For more, see Stella Young's TED Talk (Young).

of art. I definitely—I don't love the inspiration porn, like this one person did this really cool thing and I made their life great. I don't consider myself to be capable of doing things like that for specific people or even wanting to. It's more just that when you open up the creative process to include more representatives of humanity, art gets better. (Zdeblick, Intv.)

The sentimental and wonderous rhetorics of disability (explored in chapter 5) that Zdeblick pushes back on here did emerge to some extent in other interviews I conducted for this project. What role stories like that can and should play in the profession has clearly not yet been debated and settled in the field as a whole. There is a frequent pushback in sensory theatre practice to the concept of the artform being "therapeutic" which indicates awareness of the hairiness of ethics of representing this art as anything other than aesthetic. But does it consistently indicate a stance on the concept of therapy itself for autism? While there is a clear sense of the value of aesthetic experiences for young neurodivergent people, other ethical stances around how disability should be framed have not yet come to the fore.

Sensory theatre's development coincided with many other phenomena in the realm of theatre for youth: Theatre for the Early Years, artists working in classrooms and taking inspiration from the aesthetic ideas presented in classrooms, and large cultural organizations supporting the creation of inclusive artistic pieces. All of these movements were necessary for sensory theatre to find its current position in the US. Artists in the US have created their own distinct take on the sensory theatre which exists internationally, taking a different approach to how they label and think about their audiences, as well as the questions of where their productions can take place and how they are funded. The economic downturn of 2008 and subsequent resignation that theatre productions would lose money regardless of what was

produced was an impetus to experiment and in the 2010s greater funding became available for theater which served a neurodivergent audience. Hence a small but significant presence of sensory inclusive theatre emerged. As with most theatre, sensory productions have been largely interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. Interesting digital work has been done in addition to innovations like *Starshine*, but as other scholarship exists on that topic (Mahoney, “Space”; Varvarigou, *Uncancellable*) and those approaches are substantively different from in-person performances, I have chosen not to address those works in this chapter. In the next chapter, I will begin laying out theoretical groundwork on the aims of sensory theatre by exploring its use of affect.

Chapter Two: Meaning in Sensory Theatre

There are various ways an audience can derive meaning from a performance. Often, the term “meaning” is used to indicate cognitive understanding: the audience engaging with the meaning of the performance through analyzing performance text. Semiotics looks at the way this meaning is conveyed. The audience “reads” the signs presented in the performance text and interprets what those signs may signify¹⁶. Through interpretation of those signs, the audience comes to understand the significance of what the artist has presented onstage. But cognitive understanding through semiotic analysis is not the only way to derive meaning from a performance. Meaning can also be generated through a shared understanding of an emotional state, sensory exploration, and having an affective experience in community. This chapter will explore how affect is privileged over cognitive meaning in sensory theatre performances and how artists go about creating an affective experience for the audience.

While I am presenting semiotics and affect in contrast to one another, I am not proposing these are incompatible ideas, rather parallel ones. I believe affect is privileged over semiotics by the artists creating sensory theatre, but that does not make semiotics absent from the performances. Ric Knowles, similarly, proposes how affect theory can be used in parallel with semiotics: "At its best, affect theory can bring to semiotics the capacity to mediate between the intensely personal and the social, and can motivate the study of meaning by demonstrating that, and perhaps why, it matters to us" (Knowles, *How* 85). Similarly, affect theorists do not see their

¹⁶A sign is something which represents something else: the signified. According to Esslin, there are three types of signs: an icon which represents what it signifies by a direct image of that object (like a photograph), an index sign which gains meaning through its continuity to the object it depicts (like pointing at an object), and symbols which have no immediate recognizable organic relationship to their signifieds, but instead relies entirely on convention (like the agreement that the sounds D, O, G together refer to a specific species of animal) (Esslin 43–44). Semiotic analysis of theatre involves breaking down the various icons, index signs, and symbols in a performance text to identify how they produce meaning by indicating various signifieds.

analysis as fully separate from cognitive engagement: "affect and cognition are never fully separable" (Gregg and Seigworth, 2-3). Theatre scholar Josephine Machon also advocates for seeing affect as intertwined with noetics: "semantic sense cannot be disassociated from somatic *sense*" (Machon, "Embodied"). Clearly, an affect/cognitive binary is too simplistic. But what I am interested in exploring here is how the letting go of a particular semiotic meaning to a theatre piece allows space for flexible cognitive processing for a neurodiverse audience.

The aim of sensory theatre is affective, meaning the artists are primarily looking to influence the sensory/emotional responses of the audience. The privileging of affective experience is not unique to sensory theatre. There are many theatre scholars—particularly those who study post-dramatic and immersive productions (both of which, arguably, sensory theatre falls within)—who have used affect theory to investigate the sensorial, emotional, and physical impacts of intimate performances. It is also not a unique idea in TYA scholarship, which sometimes privileges affective experiences as part of pushback against didactic dramatic literature. For example, Beth Junker proposes in her book chapter "What is the Meaning": "The meaning is to make laughter bubble, to make the roof of the theatre symbolically rise, to make tears burst, to make silence noisy" (Juncker 15). Audience reception studies of TYA look at affective impact, although in a way which is tied up in semiotics rather than its own object of study (see: conclusion), whereas I propose here affect should be considered as both the tactic and goal of performance.

Affect theory as an overall concept is difficult to define. In fact, in *The Affect Theory Reader* (2010) the editors state in the introduction, "There is no single, generalizable theory of affect" (Gregg and Seigworth 3). While not proposed as a definition of affect, Ben Highmore offers a potential generalist definition in his contribution to the reader on the topic of aesthetics

and affect. He traces changes in the approaches to cultural inquiry to an eventual way of thinking in which "a body would be understood as a nexus of finely interlaced force fields" (Highmore 119). I find this "force field" metaphor a helpful indication of the general concept of affect: the study of how the body is impacted by and has impacts upon other bodies and the environment surrounding it. However, this definition is also extremely broad, so thankfully Highmore goes on to narrow his focus to affect within the realm of aesthetics as concerned with: "critical studies of emotions and affects, of perception and the management of attention, and on studies of the senses, the sensorial, and the human sensorium" (Highmore 119).

Alyson Campbell offers perhaps the most useful introduction to affect theory as a lens to extend "meaning" as understood in the arts:

Contemporary affect theories have emerged across the range of visual and performing arts as a way, albeit contested (Hemmings 2005), of analysing the impact of art and culture that is not based solely on the hermeneutic pursuit of unearthing 'meaning', but tries, in addition, to theorize the lived/felt experience of cultural events. (Campbell 304)

Marla Carlson, who applies affect theory to her analysis of performances with/depicting autistic people and animals, offers that: "Affect offers to literary theory aesthetics, and performance theory a conceptual framework within which to take both embodiment and felt experience into account" (Carlson 9). Both of these grounding concepts (if not actual definitions)—that affect theory is interested in "lived/felt experience" and "embodiment and felt experience"—offer that affect theory adds to the ways in which arts scholars can understand "meaning" through examining the embodied experience which includes emotions, perceptions, and sensory experiences.

Because affect can be a nebulous concept, it is useful to differentiate between affect and emotion. Adam Alston says that historically the attempt to answer this has meant “an endless grasping towards the origins of affective and emotional experience” (Alston, “Politics”).

Therefore, as there is no singular definition on which to rely, I have chosen to use definitions from Marla Carlson for this analysis. Carlson differentiates "affect" from both "emotion" and “feeling”. Pulling from other theorists but ultimately forming her own definitions for clarity in her writing, she proposes the following 3 distinct categories for discussing these nebulous concepts (Carlson 10-11):

- Feeling: "individual experiences of sensation." This is the most personal and inexpressible level, and therefore nearly impossible to make the subject of academic scrutiny.
- Emotion: "that which is conceptualized, named, performed, and thus interpreted by others." Emotion is the categorization and sense-making of feelings. The labeling of feelings makes them much easier to study but this labeling distances scholars from the inarticulable essence of the feeling.
- Affect: "what circulates between individuals and their environment including but not limited to other individuals." In this definition, affect happens at an interpersonal and communal level, and is therefore—in my opinion—the level most under the direct control of the artists creating performances.

This definition, along with affect definitions from other authors, makes clear affect is a broader category than "emotions". For example, the sensory impact of deep breathing might fall into the "feeling" that circulates between individuals. This interoceptive sensory moment will impact one's emotions but happens at a more fundamental level than the labels that can be applied to

those impacts (such as "calm" or "relief"). As well, Carlson's interpersonal focus means that difficult-to-articulate senses of connection and the formation of a relationship with the other people in the room also fall within affect.

Using Carlson's definition of affect, I assert that affective impact is the ultimate goal of sensory theatre. The emotional impact on the audience and the connections created between performers and spectators, as well as amongst spectators, are given priority while cognitive understanding is given secondary and optional status. Artists create an environment for those emotional and relational experiences through cultivating a particular affect in each moment of the performance. This is supported by other academic literature on sensory theatre, including quotations from artists interviewed by Ellie Griffiths (Griffiths 11), Shaughnessy's theory of neuroaesthetics (Shaughnessy, "Imagining Otherwise" 332) and Goodwin's privileging of affect as a way of "being" together which uses Simon O'Sullivan's critique of semiotic approaches to art history that have "drowned out the central role of affect in art" to assert the goals of sensory spaces which transcend linguistic knowledge (Goodwin 41)¹⁷.

How can affective cultivation create "meaning"? Alyson Campbell applies several affect theories from the realm of musicology to a theatrical creative process which centers the affective. In particular, she uses Jeremy Gilbert's "affective analysis" to explore the bifurcation between the

¹⁷ Goodwin's focus on the affective and the way it opens cognitive meaning to people of varying abilities supports my argument; however, she uses the concept of "sensory" and "linguistic" beings to support her analysis that sensory spaces allow for all participants to engage as sensory beings, a concept I hold some discomfort toward. This language comes from the book *Sensory-Being for Sensory Beings* by Joanna Grace (Grace) and has been cited by other sensory theatre scholars as well (Wood, *Critical*; Wood, *Performing*; Mahoney, "Space"; Mahoney, *Sensory*; Varvarigou, *Uncancellable*). Grace's founding argument is that people who have acquired language (linguistic beings) experience the world and time in a different way from those who have not (sensory beings) and that each group can benefit from a sharing between the two perspectives. Grace's work has clear applications to sensory theatre perspectives and she provides useful ideas for engaging with various sensations in order to better connect with "sensory beings". However, I worry that this language is overly binary and limiting, and because Grace's book contains no citations indicating how she came to develop this theory, I find it to be out of place in an academic analysis. Therefore, while I am interested in how affective experience is used in sensory theatre spaces, I will not be using a sensory/linguistic being analysis to make this assertion.

"signifying order" which "relies on cognitive systems to decode and interpret their meaning" and "intensity or affect" which "works immediately and directly on the body". These two categories parallel the semiotic/affect categories explored so far, but this bifurcation is not an indication that these two processes are opposed, rather a useful framework to understand how the two work together. Campbell goes on to borrow from film theorist Paul Gormley to state that affect creates "a 'body-first way of knowing': first, we experience an affect corporeally but 'this material bodily response subsequently becomes meaning'" (Campbell 314). She offers this concept that the affect at the moment in which a sensation is first taken in creates an initial way of knowing through the body, and then a later process of assigning a cognitive meaning to the experience ("ultimate 'meaning'") that is shaped by the affective experience through which that experience was initially filtered: "this ultimate 'meaning' is dependent upon the impact/intensity/affect of the 'event' experienced through the body in the theatre – even if it was not directly, or literally, 'signifying' in the moment of its presentation in the theatre." (Campbell 314). This concept of the affective processing of a theatrical moment impacting its later recollection and sense-making is also present in Josephine Machon's work applying cognitive science to theatre. Machon states that the sensory or (syn)aesthetic impact of the moment when information is first processed leads to a kind of "hypermnesia," an unusual enhancement of memory. The affect surrounding the memory is never lost: "the original visceral experience remains affective in any subsequent recall. Any ensuing intellectual analysis is influenced by this affective state; the analysis and articulation of that analysis becomes invested with that rich and felt quality of experience" (Machon, "Embodied"). I find this proposal, that the later cognitive meaning is shaped by the earlier affective understanding intriguing. I would propose that where

sensory theatre goes beyond some other genres is the level of focus upon the affective conditions which leaves cognitive processing entirely open.

Most sensory theatre does not rely on textual or cultural allusions. There is no assumption of previous cultural knowledge to enter the space—both in the sense of understanding the conventions of theatre and in the sense of needing a previous cultural lexicon to pull from. Even in cases where the artists might have used a piece of text for inspiration (like the use of *Around the World in 80 Days* to inspire *Up and Away*) the performance text does not assume any level of familiarity with the base text. In fact, in the case of *Up and Away*, Musante pointed out that the characters don't even use hot air balloons in the original Jules Verne text—this image comes from the movie adaptation—and yet hot air balloons are the central aesthetic around which *Up and Away* is built (Musante). The text and adaptations of *Around the World in 80 Days* acted as a jumping off point for the artists but within the eventual product it mostly shows up in the character names¹⁸ and the loose association with hot air balloons.

The resistance to cultural allusion is reflected when Musante talked about an immersive theatre festival he produced after *Up and Away* for which he pulled on similar techniques, particularly in terms of how to make a piece accessible to every age by resisting assumptions about previous knowledge required to enter a space: “we’ll know what to do in the moment with whoever arrives, because it’s about the intimate relationships. So we’re not thinking this is for people who’ve definitely graduated elementary school because that prior knowledge is necessary” (Musante). Through the close relationship between performer and spectator theatre can be created that does not require prior knowledge – even at the most basic level of an elementary school education. Cultural sophistication is associated with education but here

¹⁸ The Fogg family of characters who are led Phineas Fogg

Musante points to fundamental assumptions about cultural knowledge which can be resisted through sensory techniques.

This is not to say that audiences are coming in with no cultural or textual references to pull from—one should not assume that a significant disability makes a child a blank slate. All people engage in a process of making sense of the world around them and are influenced by their cultural context. The spectators are likely involved in the rich cognitive processes of Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator*, in which the audience is engaged in an expansive internal process of making sense of a theatrical event (more on Rancière in the next chapter). Rather, what is significant is the lack of assumptions made by the artist about what those references might be. There is no allusion one must grasp to make sense of the world or assumption of behavior one must engage in to make the performance go according to plan.

The signifiers that sensory theatre performances do have are those of sensory experiences. For example, an artist might pull out a spray bottle to create the experience of “rain”. Rain is being signified by the sensory experience of feeling the water fall on to ones skin. However, what is significant about this sensory allusion is that the sensory experience is *actually* happening in that moment regardless of whether the spectator is understanding its connection to the signified rain. One can enjoy the real-time sensory experience of the water and that experience is equally legitimate to one which engages with the signified. Continuing the Musante quote above: “we’re going to create a playground with variations of how to engage. And if you want to get into the intellectual processing and deep conversation, great. But if you want to just play with stuff with your hands with another person, equally great” (Musante).

While Musante proposes that a purely affective experience is “equally great”, it would be inaccurate to claim that there is no semiotic dimension to sensory work nor that there is no

debate in the field about its application. Gill Brigg, a researcher and practitioner in the UK, focuses much of her work on the importance of creating theatre experiences which make clear to young people labeled with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities (PMLD) that they are engaging with a fictive narrative. She uses the term “emotional narratives” to describe the type of fictive narrative that she finds missing in other sensory work and seeks to accomplish in her own work. “Emotional narrative” is never given an explicit definition, however, her intentions for the term are made clear in the way she contrasts her work with that of Oily Cart:

The company [Oily Cart] creates playful and joyful theatre but Webb does not place importance on the notion that the audience is experiencing ‘a play’, with its attendant emotional peaks and troughs. There are emotional moments within Webb’s work but they tend to be triggered somatically, for their own sake, rather than serving a specific narrative purpose. (Brigg, *Theatre* 87)

The somatic emotion she attributes to Webb (and which I would argue many US practitioners engage with) could be considered primary affect, whereas Brigg seeks a secondary affect based upon cognitive understanding of the semiotic signifiers.

Brigg sees this emotional narrative component as important because of its ability to cultivate the skill of “aesthetic distance”, particularly as defined by TYA scholar Shifra Schonmann (Brigg, “White” 81). “Aesthetic distance” refers to an appropriate balance of remaining interested in the onstage events but understanding the events are fictional so the spectator does not “lose” themselves in the fiction, which Schonmann fears may make the emotional experience too intense (Schonmann 65). The question of the appropriate aesthetic distance also comes into debates outside of TYA (Brecht and Artaud, Rancière’s *Emancipated*

Spectator), but both Schonmann and Brigg are concerned specifically with how young people come to develop the skill of understanding aesthetic distance.

Returning to my earlier example of the use of water and equal weight whether received as an object itself or as a signifier, Brigg and Schonmann would disagree with my assertion that the reception of the water as only water is equally valid. In fact, in discussing the setting of her play *The White Peacock*, Brigg discusses the rich sensory potential of real objects but, importantly, sees the sensory elements as important for evoking a fictional environment and for their symbolic associations, but not as sensory objects in and of themselves:

Integral to the ability of the audience to access ‘garden’ was the need to make it truly interactive. The pond needed to have real cold water, the stones around it needed to be real stones and so on. Thus the signifier and the signified were one and the same. The objects, for members of the audience such as Rose, became the primary means to her understanding the location of the plot. In addition, the pond carried indexical meanings such as playfulness, adventure and exploration, available to those members of the audience who were able to access the play on this additional level. (Brigg, *Theatre* 257)

While Brigg says the “signifier and signified are one and the same” she means that it gives concrete entry into the fictive setting of “garden” rather than the material setting of the performance happening inside a school. The cold water is not just water to be appreciated for its coldness, it is garden water. Its sensory evocations have the further purpose of creating a fictional environment, directing both the spectator’s affective experience of water and their cognitive understanding of “garden.”

Brigg sees an ethical dimension to this use of signifiers to create aesthetic distance: “signifiers needed to be very robust to create a clear demarcation between fiction and reality. An

emotional experience without a clear outer cultural frame could be mistaken for a real emotional experience by learning disabled audiences. This would be a manipulative and unethical outcome” (Brigg, *Theatre* 247). This assertion is compelling, because it raises the question of the line between co-produced affective environments and emotional manipulation. Brigg’s play *The White Peacock*, around which much of her scholarship is set, very intentionally creates moments of fear during a storm which upends a tree. Brigg recounts taking great care in creating this sequence. When evoking the emotion of “fear” it is easy to see why understanding the difference between fiction and reality becomes ethically important. In that instance, Schonmann’s call for aesthetic distance makes intuitive sense. But, what if the emotion being evoked is joy? In that case, is there less of a call for aesthetic distance? Or, is it still emotional manipulation but merely pleasant manipulation that therefore does not raise the same intuitive dis-ease?

There are many contemporary productions, particularly those in the immersive genre, which try to make use of direct affective impact. For example, Lundahl & Seidl’s *Rotating in a Room of Images*, an immersive theatre performance for general audiences, employed the sensory experiences of flashing darkness and touch to guide spectators through a disorienting space, and multiple theatre scholars have written about the piece to explore affect in theatrical experiences (Machon, “Embodied”; Alston, “Politics”). Alston even recounts how the darkness specifically triggered fear, which impacted his agency in navigating the space (Alston, “Politics”). Would that production be considered unethical because it “manipulates” emotions through sensory experiences? What is the line between “manipulating” an audiences’ affect and simply using aesthetic choices to create an affective impact, which is arguably the aim of all art?

In the case of *Rotating in a Room of Images*, even if the participants were mostly disengaged from semiotic decoding, they did understand that the world they stepped into was

“fictive” in the sense of being constructed by an artist who had an aim of creating an affective impact and—very importantly in a production which used intentional sensory disorientation—that the safety of the audience had been considered. When imagining a person walking suddenly into a room with the lights flashing on and off, then suddenly encountering a hand to lead them forward, the notion is terrifying outside the context of understanding the notion of “theatre”. This disorientation indicates that even if the affective experience triggered is not fearful, there is an importance in a sensory theatre audience understanding the distinctiveness of the space they are entering.

Gareth White refers to this process as “marking off”, making the aesthetic space special and distinct from the everyday, and Turner would refer to it as crossing a threshold into liminoid space (White, *Participation* 198–99; Turner). This marked off, liminoid space was also raised in Goodwin by applying Turner’s concept of *communitas* within liminoid space to the state of “being” accomplished in her installation art (Goodwin 111). The idea of a threshold into theatrical space holds weight in sensory theatre productions, as artists put a great amount of effort into designing a flexible and transparent process for entering the performance space. Oily Cart refers to the transition space between a lobby and performance space as an “airlock” through which the audience acclimates (Brown 21). Brigg discusses how design and music created a sense of “portentousness” which marked off the beginning of *White Peacock* performances (Brigg, *Theatre* 250) and asserts that this demarcating is the “single most important component” of shaping the audience’s awareness of a theatrical frame (Brigg, *Theatre* 245). Brigg’s use of music and the Oily Cart metaphor of changing pressure, an interoceptive¹⁹ and proprioceptive²⁰

¹⁹ Internal sense of one’s body. For example: hunger, temperature, heartbeat, etc.

²⁰ Sense of orientation within a space and the boundary where one’s body ends the space around one’s body begins

affective change, indicates that this marking off may be possible to achieve primarily affectively rather than cognitively.

I find it useful to distinguish between the idea of a fictional narrative and the marking off of a theatrical space. I would assert that one can convey that the space formed in sensory theatre is theatrical without a need for cognitive engagement with a fictional narrative. Participants who have a purely affective experience within a transformed environment are having an experience which is theatrical and meaningful even without any engagement with the semiotics of an intended narrative. The “somatic emotions” Brigg attributes to Oily Cart’s work can have a narrative arc in the sense of taking a participant to highs and lows of feelings such as excitement and relaxation. Ethical engagement with those highs and lows can come from a continual process of consent and the participant’s agency to fully disengage from an experience they find unpleasant, rather than through aesthetic distance from that affect. It is important that participants understand this experience as theatrical in order to explain why these affective experiences are being presented, and to understand their optionality, but not because theatricality relies on a fictive narrative.

Brigg’s motivation for introducing aesthetic distance to sensory theatre comes from a concern with equitable cultural participation. In both her thesis and an article based on the same project, she cites Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child rights to “rest and leisure”, “play and recreational activities”, and “cultural life and the arts.” Brigg is interested in what barriers exist for cultural participation for young people labeled as having PMLD. She explores the myriad social stigmas and accessibility barriers that exist for these young people when entering a theatre space in her dissertation, but ultimately finds that there is a more central worry of a lack of accessing the cultural product itself (in this case, a play):

The reason why Polly [a young person labeled as having PMLD] has been denied access to this cultural construct rests on the centrality of the verb ‘to understand’ in Western culture. My experience of working in this field has led me to think that the challenge for Article 31 lies not with the nature of the audience but rather with the nature of theatre making itself. (Brigg, “White” 82)

Brigg puts forward that sensory experience can be used to unlock meaning, allowing young people labeled as having PMLD to come to a cognitive understanding of a fictive narrative through the use of sensory techniques. She critiques “Western culture” (which would include both the UK and US) for being too narrow in how it offers opportunities for understanding. Brigg’s argument continues from this quote to explain that, from her perspective, audiences labeled with PMLD must be given the tools to engage with fictive worlds and narratives, because “to define theatre as a sense experience is to take away the need for meaning to be cognitively constructed as well as sensed” (Brigg, “White” 86). She pushes back on Susan Bennet’s presentation of alternative theatrical movements as providing cultural participation for those who have been marginalized because Bennet “does not recognise the responsibility of dominant ideologies to create theatre accessible to, and involving, marginalised groups” (Brigg, *Theatre* 36). Through these invocations of cultural accessibility, Brigg presents the opportunity to engage cognitively with narrative in a theatre space as a question of equal access to arts and culture.

I do not share Brigg’s concern that primarily affective theatre falls short of full cultural participation. First, as outlined above, the affective experience is very much bound up in cognition and therefore an experience which is semiotically agnostic does not necessarily exclude cognitive engagement. Even when the cognitive experience is not being guided by the artists, I believe a more self-directed cognitive experience is happening for the spectator (see:

next chapter on Ranciere’s “Emancipated Spectator”). Secondly, is not necessarily true that Western cultural participation in theatre relies on narrative and fictive engagement. It is certainly one element and one which has been historically privileged, but considering sensory theatre’s development at a time when immersive, interactive, sensory productions and the study of the production of affect within these theatres is on the rise generally (something which Brigg acknowledges as just beginning to emerge at the time of writing her thesis in 2013 (Brigg, *Theatre* 61)), I find it legitimate to consider purely affective theatre as part of a broader cultural trend. Were these purely affective approaches limited to audiences with significant disabilities I would worry about them as potential avenues for cultural segregation but with highly enculturated audiences paying high prices for highly affective, immersive productions such as *Sleep No More*, in the current cultural context valuing affective impact does not limit neurodivergent audiences.

Accessibility of dominant cultural spaces should be balanced with an understanding that access into neurotypical culture is not the only legitimate avenue for cultural participation. In the case of autistic audiences²¹, we have myriad examples of autistic people expressing joy in their personal sensory worlds. Theatre which celebrates their “unique cultural library,” (Brigg, *Theatre* 71) without using it towards a neurotypical aim of narrative and fiction, is also legitimate. As Shaughnessy and Trimmingham asserted, “The autistic community has its own culture that meshed inextricably into the neurotypical cultures that we as practitioners and researchers brought into the [theatrical space]”. Looking at examples from autistic authors, in her second memoir *Somebody Somewhere*, Donna Williams describes her process of growing up as a

²¹ While Brigg was working with a population of people labeled as having PMLD, I would argue that because of the lack of communication opportunities with a PMLD audience there is reason to accept the gift that the autistic community does have members who have been able to eloquently express their relationship to sensory affect and apply some of those lessons even to audiences who have been assigned a different label.

young autistic person as moving from "my world" into "the world". When she was a part of "my world," she understood that "things never thought or felt anything complex but they gave me a sense of being in company...people were always third-person; they imposed upon an already present sense of company" (Williams 67). Williams describes the friendly feeling she got from familiar objects such as her bed and coat. Part of the process of moving into "the world" was a feeling of abandonment because things were no longer imbued with personalities when she separated herself from "my world" (Williams 70). This example of the depth of experience of an interior world—and the personal meaning which may be imbued to objects and sensory experiences which the artist and other members of "the world" may not be privy to—shows how the an open approach to cognitive experience is necessary to create a rich experience for an audience with broad cognitive variation.

Furthermore, based on William's recounting of the richness of her personal world and the affective focus of the artists creating sensory theatre, I would posit that the emotions and relationships which make up the affective experience are a goal in and of themselves without requiring further cognitive meaning-making. Even if a spectator somehow had no cognitive engagement in the performance (impossible considering how they are intertwined, but as a thought exercise), the sensory and emotional experience does not require additional layers of meaning in order to be *meaningful*. This is affirmative to an autistic way of seeing the world as presented by Mel Baggs. In their short film "In My Language", Baggs pushes back on the concept of a "language" requiring symbolic meaning to be legitimate. The following quote is taken from a passage which is accompanied by the visual image of Baggs flicking their fingers through water:

Many people have assumed that when I talk about this being my language, that means that each part of the video must have a particular symbolic message within it designed for the human mind to interpret. But my language is not about designing words or even visual symbols for people to interpret. It is about being in a constant conversation with every aspect of my environment. Reacting physically to all parts of my surroundings. In this part of the video, the water doesn't symbolize anything. I am just interacting with the water as the water interacts with me. Far from being purposeless, the way that I move is an ongoing response to what is around me. Ironically, the way that I move when responding to everything around me is described as being 'in a world of my own' whereas if I interact with a much more limited set of responses and only react to a much more limited part of my surroundings people claim that I am opening up to true interaction with the world. (Baggs 3:14-4:24)

Russell, who frequently uses Bagg's film in her trainings on autism (and through whom I first encountered the film when I worked as an intern at Chicago Children's Theatre in 2014), cited Baggs in her reasoning for resisting story in Red Kite performances. It is clear from this passage that her philosophy on story is quite different from that of Briggs:

When I've worked with kids with autism, they're just so much more turned on by just the light glimmering in the window bouncing off of your watch, the time that they can just sit and play with a feather or listen to the sound of a bottle cap spinning...I guess I try to put myself a little bit more into that world and think about how do we just keep moving into those moments where we just purely enjoy the sensory for what it is and stop giving it a story. I'm always asking people to stop attaching a story to everything. I don't feel that that story speaks that much to people on the spectrum as much as the actual experience of the

relationship to the object... I think [Baggs] really expresses that so beautifully. When people say like, '[They're] playing with the water, like, what's the meaning?' And [they're] like, 'It doesn't have to have any meaning.' Like, I love that. (Russell)

Considering this alternate way of accessing “meaning”, I find it important to view sensory work as cross-cultural—a bringing together of neurotypical and neurodivergent cultures—rather than an opening of neurotypical culture to neurodiverse audiences. This cross-cultural perspective is perhaps best captured by Alison Mahoney’s discussion of neurotypical bias in how artists begin their creative work and her attempts to find a different starting point for one production she worked on, *SUDS*:

With *SUDS*, I was hoping to move us into a direction where we were starting with a sensory experience as an impetus for devising. In *Out There*, in *All Aboard*, and then with *Trusty* in *Up and Away* and in *Campfire*, those pieces all started with a narrative-based theme or a setting or an idea. And I have questions about how effective...or not, effective is the wrong...like what are we trying to affect? I don't know...It feels like there's a neurotypical bias in that, right? Like, because I'm interested in the idea of making a show in outer space, I'm then trying to take that as my base and create a bunch of sensory experiences that I can sort of jerry-rig into this theme. But with *SUDS* I was like, 'Well what if we actually start from the sensory? What if we start from this idea of sitting on the ground watching a washing machine spin around in a spin cycle?' That's a sensory experience. Can we build from that, as opposed to thinking about like, 'What sensory experiences might we have in outer space?' (Mahoney, Intv.)

It is important to consider the “neurotypical bias” that is present in current cultural spaces.

Perhaps spaces created primarily by autistic and other neurodiverse people would not focus on

narrative or aesthetic distance, but rather sensory experience for its own sake. Due to living in cultures in which neurodivergent people have largely been locked out of cultural participation, it is important to consider the potential of sensory theatre to expand what makes up Western culture.

Taking this assertion of the centrality of affective experience in sensory theatre space, how do artists go about creating the affect they desire in a theatrical space? Through sensory experiences. One reason for the focus on the sensory is that sensory experiences are the clearest way to impact someone's ineffable "feelings" to then trigger personal emotions and interpersonal affect as described by Carlson. As well, the focus on sensory experiences is likely in part because sensory theatre in the US is grounded in autism and, as outlined above, the autistic community has a rich relationship with sensory objects.

Highmore points out how our sensory experiences are often synesthetic (bleeding one sensory experience into another), for example, "the cacophony of crunching might actually be part of the 'flavor' of potato chips" and that our language reflects the ways that "senses and affect bleed into one another" such as the terms "sweetness, sourness, and bitterness" both describing a sensory taste and holding an emotional resonance that can be used in situations that do not describe physically tasting (Highmore 120). Josephine Machon's work on (syn)aesthetics likewise highlights how theatre experiences which employ highly sensory environments create opportunities for sensory moments to influence other senses, other elements of affect, and cognition (Machon, "Embodied"). These theories point to the potential of directed sensory experiences forming the condition for impactful interpersonal affective experiences. Below is a word cloud I generated of language used by sensory theatre practitioners which describe the sensory elements employed in their art practice.

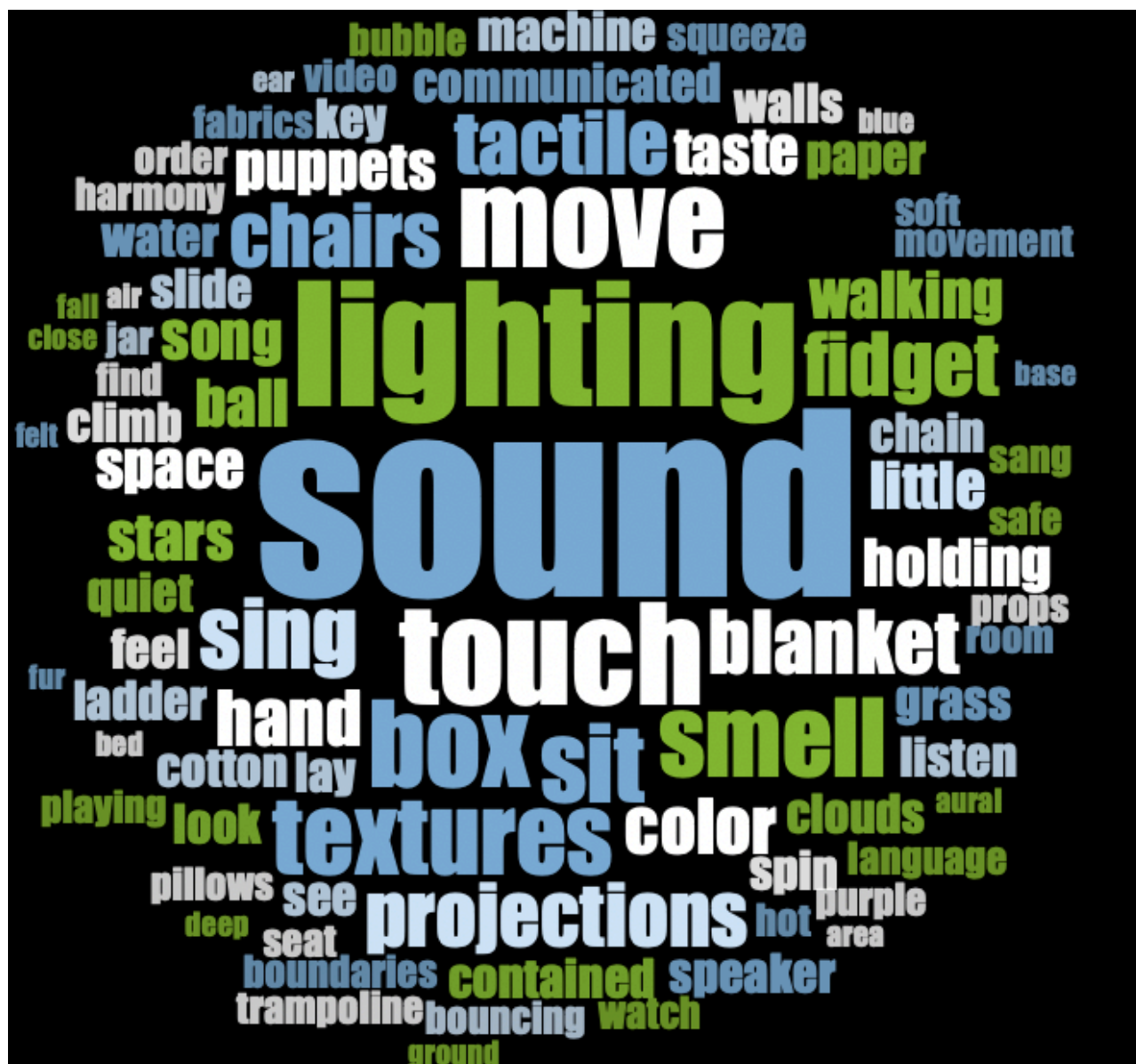


Figure 12. Word cloud of sensory elements mentioned in interviews

The close connection between these sensory elements and affect in sensory theatre productions is made clear through a number of quotations from artists which slip seamlessly between describing a sensory experience and an emotional experience. The line between a sensory descriptor and an affective descriptor is nebulous, and in many of the affect definitions considered above the sensory would be considered a part of the affective experience. However, I am interested in how a sensory experience triggers an affective response that goes beyond the

sensory. To make these connections, in the following section I have highlighted **sensory terms** in green and **broader affective terms** in yellow to see how the purely sensory bleeds into a broader affective experience.

Many shows have an affective structure, with episodes of energetic excitement as well as soothing calm. Samantha Leigh recounts the affective structure of “design[ing] the audience’s experiences” by placing a calming episode of “almost lullaby energy” before a higher energy episode that transitions the audience out of the space (Leigh, Intv.). Many shows follow this structure of working almost anti-climatically in the sense of placing their calm period near the very end of the performance, as the last episode before the audience’s energy is brought back up to transition them out of the space. Russell recounts methods that Chicago Children’s Theatre uses to create these calming episodes:

Every show, we really work in how we create like that **calm down** technique. I really love in one of our shows, we had one of those **big beautiful...yoga ball?** You know, they **expand** and **deflate**. We would just pull that out. And it was just time to take these **deep breaths** together. And just making sure there's a **visual** cue for it. And then there's also just the **sound** of everybody **breathing** together and I'm telling you all those things work (Russell)

This is an example of a dynamic sensory object (expanding and deflating yoga ball) creating a visual cue that that when followed by the people in the space (deep breathes together) it becomes its own sensory-affective cue (sound of everybody breathing together). This breathing technique employs the senses of sight, sound, and interoception together to create a shared affective state of calm.

Emily Bruner, a performer in multiple sensory productions, recalled how the audience's reaction to the central calming episode of *Up and Away* called the "Cloud Canyon" indicated how their affective state had shifted:

There were just so many moments where children who maybe started the show **unsure**, or maybe **unwilling to really sink into the experience**, by Cloud Canyon, UH, oh my gosh, we are **laying on the ground**, we are **cuddled** with **blankets**, we are **playing** with the **lanterns**, we're **hearing** the **twinkles** of the **wind chimes**" (Bruner).

In those quotation, Bruner moves seamlessly between emotional and sensory language, indicating how the sensory actions are themselves evidence of affective engagement. The actions of laying, cuddling, playing, and listening are all used as evidence of security in the experience.

When describing the sound design in the *Forest of Everywhere*'s immersive set, Dixon naturally oscillated between descriptors of musical elements (harmony) and their affective outcome (safety): "the sound designer, Sarah Pickett, designed it so that all the **sounds** if they were triggered at once could be **harmonious** and would be at a **harmony** that was **gentle** and **pleasing** and **safe sound**" (Dixon) Thinking more about sound, Dixon also draws contrast between the feeling of being "bombarded" with words with the soothing nature of touch in a texture-focused part of the set: "You weren't going to be **bombarded** with **words**, you were hardly going to be **bombarded** with **sound**, you were there to **touch fur** and **touch pine cones** and **touch grass** and **touch pointy things**...it was a **lovely** space" (Dixon).

This affective-sensory connection can even work in the other direction. Peter Musante recounts how when families first enter the lobby space before a show, because there is inevitable sensory challenge to that transition, the performers were conscious of using positive affect to counter the sensory challenge of the space: 'It's a Herculean challenge to make the entry **simple**

and clear and avoid sensory overload when you enter a new space. And so the way that we approached that challenge was to treat the family when they entered with real open, generous, welcoming vibes” (Musante). This presents sensory elements and affect balancing one another: when the sensory elements are out of the artist’s control, they can counter with their own affect. When sensory elements are within the artist’s control (as they usually are within the performance space), there is more room for affective flexibility, which is needed because it is unpredictable how spectators might respond to sensory elements.

Thinking more about Carlson’s definition of affect as a shared experience ("what circulates between individuals and their environment including but not limited to other individuals" (Carlson 11)), there are also examples from artists of how sensory episodes can create intra-audience connection. Russell’s example above of everyone in the space breathing together is one example. Musante also recalled how a large piece of fabric that the entire audience was asked to hold during *Up and Away* created a sense of community: "everyone holding the same object around a very large room and feeling connection. Like if someone...50 feet away is shaking it, you're going to get that vibration in your hand." (Musante). The affective experience of the entire room is being shaped by the sensory choices of everyone in the room.

Below is an additional word cloud of broader affective terms used during the interviews to capture the range of affective outcomes artists observed connected to their performances. Some words listed may have been paired with a "not" or otherwise described as something to be avoided. Therefore, this represents a range of possible affects which are either cultivated or avoided in creating performance rather than a list of emotional outcomes of a performance.



Figure 13. Word cloud of affective words used in interviews.

It is clear from practitioner interviews that many of them define success for their productions through their affective impact. Sometimes these affective moments are interpreted directly through spectators, but often (because the spectator's reactions are idiosyncratic and difficult for performers to read without caregiver translation, and because audience members may not use spoken language to communicate their feelings) these affective reactions are told through a combination of spectator actions and caregiver translations. One example which was

mentioned multiple times was a story of two siblings hugging for the first time. The fact that multiple artists recalled this same instance speaks to both its emotional resonance as well as the possibility it has become a repeated story for artists working in those companies. Note how both quotations recount both the moment of the hug but also the parent's reaction to and decoding of the hug:

We had one brother and sister, and I believe the brother was neurodiverse and the sister was neurotypical. And the parents said that they'd never ever seen the brother hug the sister. And after the show, or at the very end of the show, he did. And just because, I guess, that the way things transition so gently for him and just the experience that they all had together. And every day was just filled with those kinds of moments. (Leigh, Intv.)

There was a family that came. And it was an audience member and their sibling and their two parents. And after the show, we had had a really great show together, everything was hunky dory. And in the lobby, I witnessed the two siblings hugging each other. And the parents were just like, sobbing, just sobbing, sobbing, sobbing. And it was the first time those siblings ever hugged. And it was the first time that the audience member had ever initiated a physical form of contact with a sibling. And so that was just like, 'Oh, wow, what we're doing is really touching a nerve and touching hearts in a major way.' So enough of those kind of just like, 'Aaaah,' moments made me want to advocate for these audiences and for this type of work. (Bruner)

In both stories, while the hug itself is noticed it is the additional information offered by the parents it was the siblings' *first* time hugging that gives the moment true significance. In Bruner's telling as well, the parents "sobbing" is the clearest affective cue within her recollection

of the moment itself. Both artists also cite these moments as motivations for doing their work, because of the frequency of moments like this and the depth of those experiences.

In another example, performer Joshua Holden tells a story of both a child's reaction and his caregiver's follow-up:

A little boy said to me, that was the best thing I've ever done in my whole life...And his mom came up to me afterwards and she was crying and she said, 'For him to say that was such emotion was incredible.' And I love that. Yeah, I mean, just like a bunch of quotes from parents really." (Holden)

Holden's mention of quotes from parents refers to a journal he kept during the run of Chicago Children's Theatre's first sensory production, *Red Kite, Blue Moon*. Russell recalls that many of the performers kept these journals (Russell). Holden's journal acts as an intuitive form of data-collection on audience reception, indicating what felt important to a performer to capture at the time. The complications of documenting audience reception will be explored in the conclusion, but Holden's impulse to record the affective responses ("best thing I've done", parent crying), indicates a focus on the affective impact over a cognitive engagement with narrative.

Multiple performers recounted crying after performances because of the intensity of emotions they experienced (Bruner; Leigh, Intv.). Sometimes that intense emotion was due to positive experience, like the above example of siblings hugging for the first time. But sometimes artists were also overwhelmed by negative experiences, such as this story that Holden pulled from his journal:

I wrote about seeing these three old guys come in, I think that were like 17 or 18, that had a development—I'm not sure what the words are, but their developmental state?

Developmental age was about six months. And it was devastating. I was devastated. I

mean, we did this show and there wasn't much—I couldn't—we didn't really reach them at all. We didn't—nothing really got to them. Or at least what from what I could see, I didn't—my definition of a successful moment was really challenged throughout this process—but from what I perceived, I really didn't, really couldn't read anything from them. And it just left me with such a weight on my heart and thinking, 'What's going to happen with these guys?' Like, they're never going to live on their own. And if you're a caregiver, your definition of how to receive love from someone like this is so, is just...I don't know how to do that. I wouldn't know how to do that. And so that was, it was hard. That was really hard to be exposed to people on that, that end of the spectrum and just, I'm with them for half an hour, and then they go off with the rest of their lives, hours and hours and hours of their day with their parents or their caregivers. And it just yeah, that was one of my most...Most of the negative experiences that I had, were just seeing kids that were really on the lower functioning side of the spectrum. And for someone who had not been really exposed to autism and feeling like, 'Okay, now I have a grasp on it.' And then I'd, we'd meet another kid and I'm like, 'Oh my god. Okay, now I have another grasp.' But that was always the stuff that really, really, really hurt. (Holden)

This quote points to the fact that, while much of the affective experience described to me in interviews was positive, the world outside of the theatre space makes its way into the theatrical space by nature of worry about a spectator's life outside those walls. The way this performer tried to connect with these audience members but struggled to find a version of "success", a clear moment of connection, and his "devastation" for the projected barriers for those spectators, would have inevitably influenced the experience of everyone within the space, especially considering the close intimacy between performers and spectators within sensory shows.

On top of a performer's affect experience shaping the affect of the entire space, caregiver affect influences the space. I provided examples above of caregivers experiencing joy due to their observation of the positive affect of young people. As well, many caregivers express relief due to there being a public space in which their child is fully welcome:

I remember when we first did *Red Kite, Blue Moon*, the whole first audience were the kids from Agassiz that I'd been teaching, and we made invitations for every child. We really wanted it to feel like a special event. And this one mother, her child was 9 or 10 years old, and she said he'd never gotten a birthday party invitation ever, it was the first invitation he'd ever received. And it was so meaningful to them. And then she said, 'We are so self-conscious about his behavior that we don't even like to go to Dunkin Donuts, because people just won't stop staring at us. And we feel like we're bothering people because of just the way he behaves.' And it was a very, very emotional experience. (Russell)

As Russell says, hearing these stories from caregivers and creating an experience in which their entire family feels welcomed is a "very, very emotional experience"—one that influences the affect of the entire space. This mother's experience was shaped by the way her child was viewed differently in a sensory theatre space than in a typical space like Dunkin' Donuts. The impact of staring upon affective experience is complex, and an exploration on how the intra-audience viewing shapes the affective space will be explored in chapter five. The affective experiences artists strive to create are to some extent within their control as they design sensory experiences to be shared with and among their audiences, but affect is ultimately generated through a combination of the personal, interpersonal, and cultural; which means artists can only hope to guide the affective experience but never definitively shape it.

Sensory theatre artists use sensory episodes to create an affective experience for their multi-layered audiences. The affective experience in the space circulates between individuals, creating an opportunity for connection and meaning-making. By focusing on this affective experience, artists can create a theatrical experience in which cognitive engagement is highly flexible, allowing for a neurodiverse audience reception. What relationship between affective experience and semiotics artists should strive for is a matter of debate, and ultimately each artist is free to make their own decision on what role fictive narrative should take in their space. But the centrality of the affective experience and the marking off of sensory theatre spaces as distinctive is a commonality throughout the field. This affective privileging fits into a larger trend in theatre which suggests that this method for theatre can be considered both highly accessible and highly culturally sophisticated.

Chapter Three: Audience Collaboration in Sensory Theatre

All practitioners interviewed for this project spoke about their efforts to create a highly collaborative and participatory process which included both the perspectives of a neurodiverse group of collaborators in development and the creation of flexible, participatory episodes in performance. In one example, practitioner Peter Musante frequently used the phrase theatre “for and with young people on the autism spectrum and their families” to describe Trusty Sidekick’s process of creating *Up and Away*. The repetition of the phrase “for and with” indicated this was used as a mantra to guide that artistic process (Musante). This raises the question: what does it mean to work for and with? What is the significance of audience collaboration, particularly within sensory theatre in which the dynamics of age, disability, and caregiving create complexities to the notion of collaboration?

Living up to the ideal of working “for and with” is complicated. Gareth White, in his book on audience participation, uses James Thomsons’ analysis of applied theatre’s “politics of prepositions” when thinking about audience participation. White asserts that audience participation can ensure both “for” and “with,” but may not reach the level of a theatre “of” or a theatre “by”. Particularly the phrase “by” is difficult to attain because it implies a shared authorship, a notion he says may only be achieved in specific moments: “When authorship is shared, in a balance that will be specific to the moment of interaction, these labels might apply, but if the participant has been reduced to the status of the object of performance, perhaps they cannot” (White, *Participation* 72). This chapter will examine White’s concept of “shared authorship” in conversation with sensory theatre. Do the approaches that artists take to work “with” their audience reach a level of shared authorship? Does that shared authorship suggest a greater amount of audience agency than in a typical theatre experience? Why might this matter?

Practitioners work with participants both in development (when the show is being written, or more often, devised) and in performance by interacting with and responding to audience participation as the performance happens. I use the term “practitioner” to refer to a wide range of potential roles on an artistic team—directors, writers, designers, devisors, performers, etc. Because many sensory theatre pieces are devised, there are often no clear demarcations between these roles.

In development, these practitioners take on the role of the “procedural author” who “write[s] the rules by which the text appear[s] as well as writing the texts themselves”—meaning the person in charge of both the narrative and aesthetic elements that shape the performance text as well as the ludic (play) experience (Hamlet quoted in White 31). The procedural author designates both the ground rules of the space as well as how those rules will be communicated during the performance. This is a role taken on both during development but also in performance. Performers must keep the structural roles of the space in mind when responding to the choices of participants—a balance Rebecca Savoy-Fuller²² refers to as the “architect-clown zones” in which immersive performers must move seamlessly between maintaining the structure of the space and responding with playfulness and presence to the affect of the spectators (Savory Fuller 236-238). The performers who implement the performance text must keep the procedural structure in mind during performance by implementing carefully crafted invitations to participation which accurately shape the participant’s expectation of what that participation will entail.

²² Dance theorist Jennifer Essex first proposed applying Savoy-Fuller’s architect-clown construct to sensory inclusive dance pieces (which share much of their structural DNA with sensory inclusive theatre) (Essex, “Interactive”).

In performance, practitioners take on the role of “empathetic improviser” which entails an intense, body-based way of reading and responding to the reactions of participants who will likely be communicating non-verbally during the performance. This terminology is specific because, while all theatre involves some level of reading and responding to the audience, the level of present-ness with an audience for whom verbal communication may be a barrier and for whom this may be their first experience of theatre, is particularly high. This term comes directly from practice, as I first heard it used on a panel presentation from Jonathan Schmidt-Chapman of Trusty Sidekick (Schmidt-Chapman). Some sensory theatre scholars have used the term “intensive interactionism” to describe the same technique (Goodwin 50; Brigg, *Theatre* 71; Shaughnessy, “Curious” 190; Mahoney, *Sensory* 20) but I prefer empathetic improv because it is clearly grounded in theatre rather than therapy. While I see the utility of using “intensive interactionism” in contexts that demand research-based proof of the effectiveness of the techniques used (such as a grant application to a funder), I am concerned that the term has a therapeutic connotation which could medicalize the interactions within sensory theatre. Therefore, I will be using procedural author to describe the role taken on by practitioners during the development phase as well as in performance moments when they must stay present to the “architecture” of the rules of the interaction, and empathetic improviser to describe the present, “clown”-like perspective practitioners take on in performance to respond to the audience.

To ask whether collaborations with the audience reach the level of co-authorship, it is necessary to define the audience for the genre. Who is the audience being served in sensory theatre? How do practitioners identify the audience to work “with”? Particularly before the performance, how do they know who will serve as good models for the audience that will show up to the performance?

To answer this, I borrow from Marco De Marinis, an audience reception scholar working mostly in semiotics. De Marinis proposes that there are two spectators: the Model Spectator—who the procedural author has in mind when they are creating the work—and the Empirical Spectator—who shows up at the theatre on the day of the performance (De Marinis, *Semiotics* 166). Since practitioners cannot create work if they have no mental model of their audience, and it would be infeasible to ask every individual spectator to show up twice to develop a show to their particular needs, how do sensory theatre practitioners construct a theoretical Model Spectator, and then go about working with appropriate collaborators to access that Model Spectator while in development?

I asked practitioners who, of the people in their performance space, they considered “part of their audience”. I consistently heard that both participants—young, neurodivergent people—and their caregivers are a part of the audience, but received inconsistent answers on whether the participant was given priority and centrality in the audience or whether the caregiver and participant were of equal weight. Some artists view their work as primarily for participants with the caregiver experiences and connections as a secondary benefit, while some saw the connection formed between the young person and the caregiver as a primary aim of their performances. One interviewee, Alison Mahoney, has even written scholarship partially about the role of the caregiver in sensory theatre (Mahoney, “Space”; Mahoney, *Sensory*). However, while I have never observed a development process from start to finish, I would challenge the notion that caregivers are given equal weight as audience members in development by the majority of sensory theatre companies. Much of the development processes described to me focused on understanding neurodivergence and finding ways to rehearse materials with neurodivergent young people. When families were consulted, it was mostly on how to build a space which was

welcoming for the participant, rather than on how to make the space welcoming to their caregivers. In performance as well, caregivers are generally approached in a secondary way to support a participant but rarely approached for an experience centered on the caregiver. Even where the aim is the connection between the caregiver and participant, in practice artists tend to feel they can anticipate the needs and reactions of the caregivers with more ease and therefore their perspectives are not considered and solicited in the same way. With these caveats in mind but acknowledging that caregivers serve an important role in performance and that some artists have expressed a desire to center their experience alongside the experience of the participant, I have chosen to include both the caregiver and participant under the umbrella term “Model Spectator” for sensory theatre. Within the Model Spectator construct the roles of participant and caregiver remain distinct, so I will also use the terms “Model Participant” and “Model Caregiver” where appropriate. There are other people who may be present in the audience, but the complexities of these additional layers will be explored in chapter five.

How, then, do artists construct their model of these spectators? The Model Caregiver is fairly easy to define—a person with a pre-existing relationship of providing care for a participant. This could be a parent, guardian, teacher, or professional care worker, the common element being a sense of responsibility for the participant. Defining the Model Participant is more difficult because sensory theatre attempts to resist assumptions about the participants coming to the theatre. To construct an accessible theatre experience, the Model Participant is assumed to have no pre-existing knowledge about what it means to attend theatre. This is not an assumption made to be pejorative, but rather a challenge to the procedural authors to construct an experience which does not rely on prior knowledge of theatrical conventions. As well, it is difficult to know the ability level, communication preferences, sensory preferences, etc. of the

Model Participant. Practitioners resist pigeon-holing audiences based on diagnostic labeling, but even when grounding the work in autism, the vast nature of the autism spectrum means that diagnostic labeling would often not even be helpful for constructing a Model Participant. How then do procedural authors anticipate the wide range of needs and preferences which may show up in their spaces?

Based on my experiences of sensory theatre as an audience member as well as the ways artists have described their development process, I would venture that the Model Participant is a young person whose behavior could be considered “disruptive” in another theatrical context. In my assessment, what is profoundly important about sensory theatre is its ability to serve an audience which would be excluded from other theatre spaces due to their non-normative behavior. There are also less disruptive participants who may greatly benefit from sensory theatre and I do not exclude them from the model to lessen the importance of their experience, but the disruptive participant is essential to center in this conversation because they are likely to be excluded from other spaces. While this model is my own proposition, I find it broadly lines up with the way sensory theatre practitioners seek empathy with their Model Participants.

Some participatory and immersive practitioners working outside of the TYA field have expressed dissatisfaction with their inability to know their audience ahead of time. In her essay on participatory theatrical experiences, Sophie Nield quotes writer and theatre maker Chris Goode from his blog, *Thomson’s Bank of Communicable Desire*, lamenting the lack of knowledge about an audience during the process of developing a piece of theatre:

I care deeply what the experience is of people who see my work. But . . . I can’t take them into account while I’m making . . . because I don’t know who they are. When we talk about ‘the audience’, we’re talking in a kind of generality that precisely matches the generality of

our own makings. We're talking about the phantom audience that we, as makers, project, out of an admixture of experience, hearsay and blind anxiety....This ghostly audience contains little or nothing that is individually distinct; it is 'the audience' that we worry about in advance. (Goode qtd. In Nield 534)

However, Tami Dixon, who is the only practitioner interviewed who comes from an immersive but not TYA background, already had a regular practice of bringing model audiences into the rehearsal room from early stages of rehearsal, indicating the use of audience in development is a relevant practice for some immersive makers. Dixon spoke about how immersive theatre creates conditions in which the practitioners must know their audience on an individual level, and that this knowledge of the audience as made up of individual people rather than a singular monolith inevitably leads to thinking about accessibility because the audience becomes people with needs rather than a monolithic unknown:

Sometimes in traditional theater, we think of them— even actors talk about them, 'Oh, the audience was great tonight, the audience sucked tonight,'— we think about them as this one being clapping and laughing and moving together. When you separate them from each other, you have to look at them as individuals. And when you start looking at people as individuals, you can't make assumptions about who they are or what they need. (Dixon)

This suggests that both immersive theatre and working with the audience in advance are accessible choices on top of being aesthetically useful.

Working with an audience in the development process is logistically difficult but is already a relatively common practice within TYA. TYA necessitates an acknowledgement that the artists in the room are poor proxies for the audience due to the gap between adult artists and their young audiences. This shows up in terms like "children's dramaturgy" (Henry), "youth respondent

method" (Leahey), "community-engaged dramaturgy" (Pederson) in published scholarship, as well as "interactive dramaturgy" (in Pederson) and "collaborative spectatorship" (Cooper and Scheirmeyer) in conference presentations, and "youth dramaturgy" from Suzan Zeder (Zdeblick, Intv.) in an unrecorded lecture. All of these terms share in common a concept of working with young people in the development process and using artistically interesting moments from those development sessions within the eventual performance text. Most of these terms (except collaborative spectatorship) do not explicitly address how youth influence the performance within the finished product but I suspect that many of the products created from these audience-collaborative development processes do contain an element of flexibility since the expressiveness of young audiences necessitates a flexible product. Scholarship indicates a strong existing emphasis within the TYA field of collaborating with Model Spectators in the development phase to serve an audience population that the practitioners are often not a part of.

What tactics do practitioners employ to reach their Model Spectators? Below is a diagram depicting the various ways practitioners go about collaborating with their audience during the development and performance phases of sensory theatre.

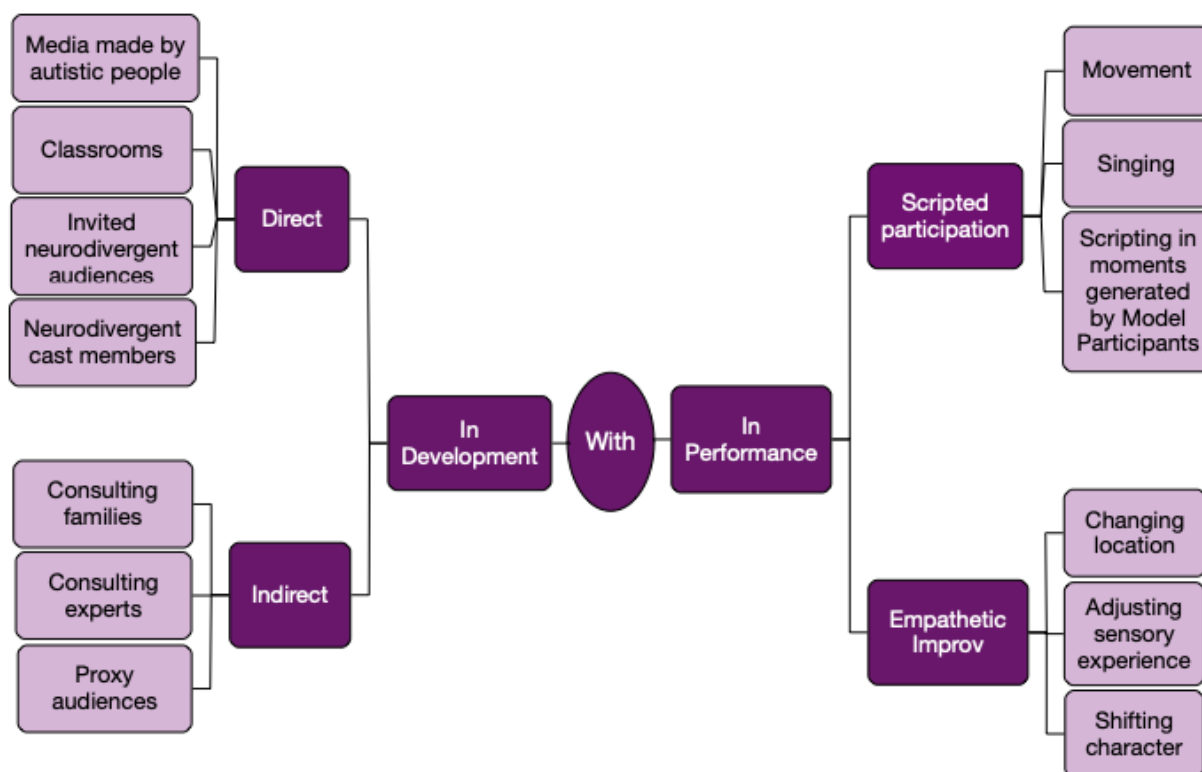


Figure 4. Diagram of the ways practitioners collaborate with their audience in sensory theatre

Tactics of accessing a Model Spectator in development can be broadly categorized as direct and indirect ways of working “with”. I use this terminology to differentiate between methods which work directly with disabled people and those which rely on proxies. While artists expressed that caregivers are also often a part of their Model Spectator construct, I find it important to differentiate between strategies which rely on caregivers and other indirect consultants from those that consult autistic and other cognitively disabled people directly. This is both because (as stated previously) I find that artists are often consulting these caregivers primarily as means to better understand neurodivergent people and because of the calls for ethical research which includes autistic and intellectually disabled people directly in research rather than relying on proxies (Strnadová and Walmsley; Nicolaidis et al.; March et al.; O’Brien et al.). A common thread in this dissertation is how communication barriers for autistic people

have made it difficult for both artists and researchers to work with this population directly, but also the ethical need to find ways around those barriers so the perspectives of neurodivergent people are given priority over the perspectives of caregivers. This dissertation does not meet that bar but I hope my future research will.

There are a number of sources practitioners have called upon in order to better understand neurodivergence from a direct source. One is to consult media produced by autistic people. Russell cited Temple Grandin's squeeze machines as an inspiration for one sensory episode, and the short film "In My Language" by Mel Baggs as insight on the relationship between autistic people and sensory engagement (Russell). Zdeblick also emphasized using video clips and other content from disabled people in early training sessions for performers who have been cast in sensory theatre productions (Zdeblick, Intv.)

Another is collaboration with invited audiences. Some artists invite neurodiverse families into rehearsals from early stages (Dixon), but because that is logistically difficult, more often this takes the shape of either neurodivergent adult groups being invited in (Dixon; Mahoney, Intv.; Santa; Leigh, Intv.) or workshopping of materials in classrooms (Brewster McGinley; Holden; Shaw; Leigh, Intv.; Musante; Zdeblick, Intv.; Russell; Santa). In the case of neurodivergent adult test audiences, artists appreciate this method as a way to get more considered feedback from an older audience. Many of the groups consulted are also theatre artists, which means practitioners receive the additional benefit of an outside artistic perspective. For artists who have worked in classrooms, there were often two functions to the experience. One was the testing of sensory materials: discovering what worked well for audiences, testing the timing of how long a sensory experience would hold attention, etc. The second benefit was introducing inexperienced and nervous performers to an environment of young autistic people. For example, Russell discussed

how the experience of meeting a classroom allows actors to “get it”: “Afterwards, we come back, and it's always one of my favorite things to do, because then when we debrief, they are just completely on fire, like they now get it. And they can't stop talking about that one kid that they met and connected with” (Russell).

In some ways, the benefits of testing sensory materials and introducing novice artists to the Model Participants could be accomplished in any setting, so why choose a classroom? There are likely multiple reasons. One could be historical precedent: as covered in chapter one, the two initial spark productions in the US happened in collaboration with a classroom setting. Oily Cart's origins of working with disabled audiences also comes from a collaboration with a school and they continue to work closely with schools, and are even located in the annex of a primary school in London (Oily Cart Theatre, “Contact”). This historical influence from schools has impacted the aesthetics of sensory theatre: the use of fidgets, visual schedules, and intentionally sparse uses of spoken language are all aesthetic choices one would find in both a special education classroom and a sensory theatre performance. Another reason is ease of accessing a large group of neurodivergent young people. As mentioned in the first chapter, the fraught nature of labeling an audience combined with the need to gradually build up the trust of neurodiverse families means that accessing an audience while the show is still in development is logistically difficult. Lastly, the framing of classroom work as a “workshop” allows for episodes to be experimented with early in the process without the same pressure on the artists to perform as they would for an “audience” – even one invited for a preview performance. This allows for greater attention on observing the reactions of Model Participants rather than successfully “performing” an episode. Classroom visits also benefit the participants as a drama education opportunity, and in some cases it presents an opportunity for the Model Spectators and Empirical

Spectators to align when the same classroom is invited to the final performance. This tactic has been used by Chicago Children's Theatre, Jumping Jack, and Trusty Sidekick, but more intensive classroom collaborations (for example, visiting a school for an entire week) are more common internationally (Sensorium Theatre, *Jub Jub*).

The last way neurodivergent people act as collaboration partners in development is through the casting of neurodivergent performers who become involved in the devising of the performance. Zdeblick stated that one of the three performers of *Polka Dots* identified as neurodivergent and autistic. This was an important condition of her work, stating, "I would not feel comfortable creating a show like this without an artist with disabilities in one of the leadership roles" (Zdeblick, Intv.). The use of "leadership role" indicates the power difference in status as "artist" versus "participant" or "collaborator". Neurodivergent artists are given explicit power as co-authors, while other participants exist in the space of less certain prepositions as laid out by White at the beginning of the chapter.

Indeed, the lack of disabled people involved at the level of decision-making power is likely the most pressing issue with the artform as it currently stands. Several artists mentioned this as an ethical stand they've either taken or intend to take in the future, calling on the disability advocacy slogan "nothing about us, without us". Tami Dixon provided an example of when an autistic cast member provided feedback that the script of her show had "too many words" and how that feedback led her to a drastic change in the way language was used in the show, showing that the presence of neurodivergent people throughout the artistic process can have profound impact on the work:

When we got to the point where, after all of this time, I was able to develop a script from all of the devising we had done, and all the games we played. [I] brought it in and read

through it, and everybody was excited about it. Almost everybody. I was confronted with cold water—the reality of when our autistic actor said, ‘There’s too many words.’ And I was like, ‘But I’m a writer, my words! So important to tell the story.’ And I had to just go, ‘Okay, this is why you are here to help us not do things in the way we would normally do them.’ And as challenging as it seemed to me at the time, I had to go, ‘Right, okay, we’ve just been learning that people communicate through other ways, aside from language, aside from words, and relying on the experience, and less talking to deliver the story.’ So that was our first kind of big lesson. Back to the drawing board. And I was grateful for them being there and feeling comfortable enough to be honest about that. Because we’re sensitive about it, us creators, we’re sensitive about our work. So, then...we found an amount of text that felt comfortable and sharpened the storyline so that that kind of text could be minimal and we could tell it with movement, or we can tell it with images (Dixon)

This paring down of the script was the first big change to *Forest*, and Dixon attributes this major change to the feedback of the neurodivergent actor, demonstrating the level of influence allotted to a person when they are explicitly a part of the creative team. Dixon went on to describe how additional beta tests of the material still were not working until, two days to opening, she chose to radically shift the experience from a timed, immersive narrative to an open world experience in which audience members could visit the various “caves” of the forest for a sensory narrative at their own pace. This collaboration with neurodivergent people at multiple levels of the process indicates how complex and iterative this approach to creation can be.

Turning to indirect collaboration, artists often consulted indirect experts like family members and people with a professional connection to autism (educators, therapists, etc). As stated earlier, the role these caregivers play in this consultation is usually to provide feedback on

how to make the performance accessible and engaging for participants, rather than primarily acting as proxies for other caregivers. Duret gave the example of collaborating with Faith Clarke, who is both a parent of a son with autism and the founder of a service that connects neurodiverse families to caregivers with training in autism (Andersen; Clarke). Clarke visited the performance space during the development phase to give feedback:

She was kind of an autism whisper... When you walk in there [the performance space], the lights were on, and she was like, 'The lights are humming in a really weird way. So let's keep [that] in mind.' And that as soon as she walked in there, [there were] a set of stairs that went up to the office space. She was like, 'We're gonna have to block those stairs off somehow, be it with a curtain, with a—' we actually used, there was this old church pew, and we put the pew in front of the staircase so nobody could get up. So, we maybe took forty-five minutes to an hour, where we just walked around the space, and were like, 'This could be a hazard, this could be distracting, this could be a problem.' So we got the space 'autism-proof', was what we called it. (Duret)

In this example, most of the feedback being provided has to do with what might be dangerous or distracting for a neurodivergent young person. In this way, the caregiver takes on primarily a role of acting as a vocal proxy for the Model Participant. However, one could also argue that the accounting for those dangers is ultimately serving the caregiver experience, as it would decrease caregiver anxiety about those dangerous or distracting elements, ultimately shaping the caregiver experience in performance. An analysis of the assessment of risk within participatory performance will be covered in the next chapter.

As was explored in the first chapter, which "experts" artists consult has profound implications for how autism and other neurodivergences are constructed in these spaces, and

therefore artists need to engage with controversial and uncomfortable topics around autism when making this work. One way artists have dealt with this is by intentionally seeking many expert viewpoints in order to have a sense of the full landscape around autism, such as Brewster McGinley discussing Trusty Sidekick's approach of visiting classrooms with multiple educational philosophies.

The most controversial approach within the field is that of “proxy audiences” in which experts who have experience working with neurodivergent young people—whether through previous sensory theatre experience or from other settings—take on disruptive behaviors during rehearsal to give the performers an opportunity to practice with additional variables. Some practitioners find this practice useful and insist that the proxies are taking on particular behaviors but not mimicking autism, while other practitioners find the practice to be an unethical practice of embodying an experience which the proxies do not live. Mahoney provided the most direct critique of the practice:

I think there's something really problematic and messy about asking neurotypical adults to adopt certain behaviors that they don't actually have sort of...any sort of physical or psychological impulse to do...It feels icky, right? I think having neurotypical adults pretending to be autistic is gross. And I don't think that it instills a sense of respect for the audience, among the people who are be[ing]— acting as proxy audiences. And I think that's maybe the number one thing for me in this work is that we need to respect our audience
(Mahoney, Intv.)

Certainly, once artists have a level of knowledge about neurodiversity and its expression within sensory theatre they do cross over into the realm of experts who may then be able to provide useful behavioral examples but there is also considerable concern about the embodiment of those

characteristics—just as with concerns about a nonblack actor embodying a Black character. However, that metaphor is also imperfect because it could convey an overly binary notion of neurological diversity (although race is also not a binary category). Drawing too strong a line between neurodivergence and neurotypicality can be detrimental to the artistic process and the empathy that sensory theatre is meant to engender. Stepping back from the specific question of a proxy audience, Musante spoke to how letting go of the expectation that practitioners needed to act as proxies for the Model Spectators opened up the artistic process:

I think [at first] we saw what our job was as a real challenge. A challenge of understanding what it would be like to be in that position, a young person on the spectrum, possibly with mobility limitations, to the traditional experience of theater. So, the big learning for me was it's not like you will read a lot of books and do some exercises, and then you'll be able to empathize in a proper way. But we all learned to respect our own sense of our experience. Our own truth was varied amongst the...20 of us who were there, let's say. And I think we gave ourselves permission, eventually, to use our real responses to this. Whatever exercises we had brought in, or Tim and Amanda had brought in, as that was all that we needed to honor at that stage. Rather than like, discounting our own experience, because it wasn't the same as our audience. It's like, 'No.' I think we learn to value our experience and document it and share it and learn from it about what's interesting, what's fun, what's unpleasant. And not think that it's separate from our audience, but just sit. Just know that that process is what was going to get us to making work that was inclusive. (Musante)

Musante points to the fact that sensory preferences and affective processing are not unique to neurodivergent people. One benefit of these performances is how both neurodivergent and neurotypical people can appreciate the affective elements, allowing for a communal experience

of art, as argued by Goodwin (Goodwin 41). However, the observation of a shared affective understanding should not be read as a dismissal of the importance of including neurodivergent people in decision making nor to dismiss the notion that there is a limitation to the understanding that neurotypical artists can gain through observation and empathy exercises. Artists therefore must take a multi-faceted approach to including a broad range of neurodiversity in their development process.

Shifting to the performance phase of a production, procedural authors use the material they developed through in-development collaboration to create the performance text. This means Empirical Spectators encounter an experience which has been informed by people with a shared perspective. In addition, the procedural structure of sensory performance is made with an intention for audience participation, creating the potential for Empirical Spectators to act as direct collaborators. This may come from moments built into a show which allows for expected forms of participation, which I call “scripted participation” because the manner of participation is generally the audience filling in a blank which is already accounted for in the “script” of the performance text. Scripted participation may be things like participant singing along to music, moving to a new area within the performance space, or blanks in the script to be filled in with information like a spectator’s name. In addition to scripted participation, performers call upon their roles as empathetic improvisers to respond to spectators in a less narrowly scripted way, like carefully watching how an audience member reacts to a sensory moment and adjusting its delivery, going outside of the theatre space with an audience member who may not want to be in the full performance area, and even shifting the intention of their character to match the participants energy level or preferences.

These multi-faceted approaches to collaboration open the possibility for co-authorship with the audience, presenting the possibility for the exercise of agency within sensory theatre performances. However, to fully consider the link between participatory theatre and agency, it is important to examine the existing scholarship on the topic. Does participation—physically taking action in the space—impact the meaning that the audience derives from the performance? Can physical participation be equated to a great amount of agency? There are two major theorists who are at odds over this question: Augusto Boal and Jacques Rancière. I am not the first scholar to use these two theorists as anchor points in a discussion of participation, as White also includes a comparison between them in his book (White, *Participation* 15–24). In this chapter, I am interested in how these theorists come into conversation with the range of participatory options available in sensory theatre.

Augusto Boal put forward in his theory of the Poetics of the Oppressed that the separation of the audience from the actors—the establishment of the notion that some people are meant to act while others are meant to watch—is an inherently oppressive notion, one which encourages the oppressed to see themselves as passive subjects (Boal, *Oppressed* 119). To counter this oppression, Boal created the Theatre of the Oppressed format in which the audience is gradually taught physical exercises which re-activates their ability to intervene in the drama, culminating in Forum Theatre in which the action of the plot is literally stopped and the audience invited to come into the playing space to take on a role and try out their solution to the conflict. Boal uses the term "spect-actors" for these agents to more accurately describe their role as "active observers" rather than passive spectators (Boal, *Rainbow* 40). Boal puts forward that these actions within performance act as “rehearsal of the revolution”, meaning the spectators taking these actions are more likely to spark a revolutionary action in their own lives because of their

practice of intervening in situations of oppression in a fictional situation (Boal, *Oppressed* 122).

Boal's methods have been used widely²³ with the focus of creating a performance which explores an issue of social justice.

While sensory inclusive theatre in the US has not, to date, produced any works with an explicit social justice theme, the methodologies of Boal interact with this genre because of its radical inclusion of physical intervention as part of the experience. Unlike Theatre of the Oppressed, the narrative structure of sensory theatre is not changed by the audience intervention. But, as argued in the previous chapter, the narrative structure has only a marginal importance to the overall meaning of sensory theatre. Therefore, the influence of physical action on the narrative is not of great importance to its potential meaning. Many sensory episodes script in moments for physical interaction: clutch this prop, feel this water spray, hold this parachute together. Like Boal's theatre, the spect-actor's participation in the sensory episodes is what gives it meaning, as their value of those experiences is affective experience of interacting with the sensory moment.

In addition to the scripted moments of participation, there is a wide acceptance of participant-driven actions in the space. Running, jumping, yelling, rocking, and any other stimming which feels pleasurable are all affective expressions which are celebrated within sensory inclusive spaces, even when not directly invited by the procedural author. An additional layer to the flexible participation of sensory theatre is radical acceptance of refusals to participation. Some audience participants choose to withdraw from sensory moments, observe from afar (sometimes even out in the lobby) and remain passive. In the radically inclusive attitude of sensory theatre, this is considered an equally valid way to engage with the experience.

²³ Boal's practices have been internationally both by practitioners who have directly engaged with Boal's theories and by others who were unaware of Boal but created similar interventions through simultaneous invention

To better understand this mode of viewing, it is useful to look at a theorist with a profoundly different perspective on audience: Jacques Rancière.

Rancière's theory of the emancipated spectator was written in response to Artaud and Brecht's contrasting but related theories of audience engagement (sensory overload versus detached intellectualism) as each of their theories relate to the manipulation of aesthetic distance. However, in this chapter I am interested in how his theories sit in contract with Boal's notions of physical participation as emancipatory. Rancière fully rejects the notion that watching is in some way equated with passivity. Instead, he asserts that we should understand the viewer as actively engaging with the material presented, actively making connections and conclusions, and that our imposing of a hierarchy between saying, seeing, and doing is itself oppressive. Instead, we should understand the spectator as a "pupil or scholar" who:

...observes, selects, compares, interprets. She links what she sees to a host of other thing that she has seen on other stages in other kind of place. She composes her own poem with the elements of the poem before her. She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way - by drawing back for example, from the vital energy that it is supposed to transmit in order to make it a pure image and associate this image with a story which she has read or dreamt, experienced or invented. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them. (Rancière, 13)

According to this way of understanding the spectator's experience, the audience might be physically still, but in no way should that be equated with passivity. While this audience member might have a more subtle impact on the performance because their rich internal processes are harder for a performer to read, we must assume that they are "compos[ing their] own poem" while experiencing the performance.

Rancière's work, while not focused on youth or disability, can be read as radically inclusive in the way he discusses the repertoire of information from which a spectator might pull. He does not fall into assumptions about the knowledge base of the spectator, but instead offers that the spectator is associating the theatrical event with a story not just read previously but also "dreamt, experienced or invented". This makes clear that those without educational privilege due to age or disability are in no way excluded from doing the critical work of an emancipated spectator.

Rancière is generally interpreted to be neutral about physical participation because, theoretically, the cognitive engagement he describes can happen alongside a wide array of physical engagements. However, White has argued that Rancière's theories, when put into full context of the education theories he endorses, should actually be read as actively against physical participation because it necessitates an awareness of fellow participants which negatively impacts the spectator's ability to engage independently with the performance text (White, "Theatre"). As this section focuses on the impact of participation on the relationship with the performance text rather than intra-audience relationships (the subject of the next chapter), I will be using Rancière as he is commonly interpreted—even if that is not his original intention.

I argue that Boal and Rancière can be placed together in the context of sensory theatre to consider a theatre which is both physically empowering and cognitively open. This presents an opportunity for universal design in performance, in which physical participation is welcome in equal measure to passive consideration, and the cognitive experiences of the emancipated spectators are unique to each participant, with their affective experience privileged over understanding the semiotic meaning of the performance. I am interested in how Boal and Rancière raise the notion of the emancipatory potentials of participation in performance, whether that participation is active or passive. I believe this approach allows for the greatest amount of

agency from an audience. But, while this notion works well in the abstract, it then raises the question of what specific practices from procedural authors might limit audience agency. To what extent might agency through participation be merely illusionary, ultimately under the control of the procedural author? Multiple scholars of participatory-immersive theatre have explored limitations put in place by the procedural authors (Bartley; Bishop; Freshwater, “You Say”; Freshwater, *Theatre*; Heddon et al.; Nield; White, “Theatre”; White, *Participation*) and raised objections to the illusions of participation which must be considered before drawing a conclusion about the level of agency offered to participants in sensory theatre.

To become more granular in the discussion of participation, I offer additional terminology from White (White, *Participation*). One way the procedural author holds power over the space is through setting the horizon of participation. This “horizon” (a term which White re-purposes from Susan Bennet) is the sum total of potential outcomes of the participatory action that both the participant and the procedural author account for: “a limit and a range of potentials within that limit, both gaps to be filled and choices to be made” (White, *Participation* 59). In other words, the answer to the question, *what might happen if I/they accept this invitation to participate?* Procedural authors must both design the horizon of participation and design how that horizon is communicated to participants through an invitation to participate.

White offers a list of types of invitations that may occur in a performance (White, *Participation* 40). The first is overt, which is a clear instruction about the nature of the participatory event. This does not mean that the invitation is verbally explained—an overt invitation can be a nonverbal cue or a design choice—but somehow the overt invitation communicates explicitly whether and how to participate. The second is implicit, in which the participant does not need an overt invitation because the procedural author can rely on

established convention. White's example is the British Panto tradition in which certain call and response lines are established within the genre and therefore the audience is not instructed on the lines within the performance itself. The third is covert, in which the audience is not privy to the information that their action is a part of theatrical performance. White offers the example of Boal's invisible theatre in which participants are never informed that what they are participating in is theatre, as well as a soft beginning to a performance in which the participants believe they are outside the theatrical frame and are covertly drawn to continue their participation while the theatrical frame is established. The last invitation is accidental/uninvited in which the spectator reads an invitation to participate which is not there, either through genuine confusion or defiance.

Procedural authors can limit the agency of the audience at the moment of invitation if the invitation is covert – offering only limited information about the horizon of participation, assuming the audience's complicity in the moment rather than asking for explicit consent. Helen Freshwater provides an example of a participatory-immersive performance she attended, *Uncle Roy All Around You*, in which the rules were intentionally cryptic and the ending involved a promise to "help" another participant in the future with no further information on what that help might entail (Freshwater, *Theatre* 71). Freshwater presents this experience as challenging the notion that participation and agency are linked at all, a question she believes the procedural authors were intentionally raising.

In this game the player's complicity is taken for granted, and he is required to commit to helping another player without knowing what form that help might take or when he might be called upon to do so. The model of interaction presented is one in which freedom to choose is profoundly compromised by the limitations of the system in which choices are made. These shows' exploration of the limitations of interaction provokes in me a profound

unease about the connections between participation and agency, both within the theatre and within the broader cultural and political sphere. Does the link between the two have substance, or is it merely an illusion? (Freshwater, *Theatre* 70–71)

This methodology of challenging the link between participation and agency through covert invitation can be intriguing for some performances, but the approach could be unethical in sensory theatre practices. The participant is unlikely to have a pre-existing construct of theatre and strong sense of narrative convention to be challenged through covert invitations and is in a position of already having limited agency due to their age and ability status. Instead, sensory theatre takes the opposite approach of overt requests for consent. This does not necessarily mean verbal consent (although this can be a component – some social stories even include “yes, please” and “no, thank you” language models to prepare audience members to communicate their consent (Bluelaces Theater Company, *SUDS Social Narrative*)) but can include things like a performer modeling the experience first, or simply holding an object out within reaching distance to see if the participant chooses to then take the object. This consent process creates a sensorially welcoming experience to the participants, whose processing of a sensory episode cannot be predicted ahead of time. Procedural authors must create invitations which give participants enough information about an upcoming sensory experience so the participant is able to make an informed decision about their engagement with each sensory episode.

After the invitation is issued, performers can limit the agency of the participants through the way they respond to participation. Scholar Helen Freshwater has critiqued certain participatory performances for violating spectators’ boundaries, “the complicity of audience members is assumed: they are coerced, rather than liberated; manipulated, rather than emancipated; instead of agency, they receive entrapment” (Freshwater, *Theatre* 65). She

references an uncomfortable moment when performers “pin down an alarmed-looking audience member and appear to perform an impromptu gastric endoscopy using a fibre-optic camera” (Freshwater, *Theatre* 64–65). What is intriguing about this example is that the show described is the 2005 London premiere of the Blue Man Group. Her interpretation of the show, which she analyzes using a review from Lyn Gardner—a British theatre critic who is generally enthusiastic about participatory theatre and who has written enthusiastically about Oily Cart performances (Brown)—is wildly different from the reflections Musante provided about his time performing with Blue Man. Freshwater also notes that “the commercial success of the show indicates that these stunts clearly have a widespread appeal”, indicating that perhaps the critical reception was, in this case, particularly idiosyncratic (Freshwater, *Theatre* 65). But Gardner and Freshwater’s responses sit in fascinating contrast to Musante’s reflections in the first chapter about how his experience working with Blue Man taught him to carefully watch the audience. How can these two be simultaneously true? I suspect the disconnect comes from what the performer *does* with the information they gather from watching an audience. One can be interested in another person and choose to use that curiosity to push or even violate their boundaries—in fact, enthusiastic curiosity can naturally lead to such violations. Picture a puppy overly excited to meet a new person and nipping at their face. But one can also be *cautiously* curious and interact by asking gradual, nonverbal questions; allowing a continual cycle between invitation and response to guide the interaction, which fundamentally guides empathetic improv. Creating a participatory experience which foregrounds consent involves not only the careful observation of the audience but also a grounding in empathy for their reaction to each interaction.

Designing overt invitations and choosing empathetic responses create the opportunity for more audience agency in performance, because both empower informed and continual consent

from the participants. This greater agency is particularly important in a society and culture which so often limits young disabled people—through a paucity of services as well as through social stigma. Sensory theatre creates a space in which free expression of neurodivergence is celebrated. I find many tactics of sensory theatre to be empowering to participants, yet they never fully break into a realm of completely uninhibited agency because to enter into a theatrical frame means agreeing to boundaries set by a procedural author. However, just because a choice limits agency does not mean it is inherently unethical – rather, the ethical dimension comes from having the full information available to choose to release that agency.

As is the case in nearly all TYA settings, participants most likely did not make an independent decision to attend the performance (van de Water 42–43). Caregivers nearly always make the decision as to whether to see a performance and what performances they will attend. On top of that, for emergent audiences the lack of a pre-existing construct of “theatre” limits their ability informed decision about whether attending “theatre” is something of interest (Brigg, *Theatre* 15, 163–64) and audiences with significant disabilities may have very little control over how they spend their time generally (Wood, *Critical*). Some sensory theatre artists address the lack of a theatrical framework for a portion of their audience through classroom drama workshops which then culminate with a performance, allowing the audience to have some sense of what it will mean to attend “theatre” and some of the sensory episodes that will be featured in the show (Brigg, *Theatre*; Russell). But the logistics of this would be very difficult to implement for every audience and it does not solve the first problem of the audience not choosing to be in a position to engage with drama. Often, the best that artists can realistically do is establish what it means to attend “theatre” once the audience first arrives and offer off-ramps for participants to opt out of or modify the experience as it happens, which (in general), they successfully do.

In addition to limitations through the invitation design, White also challenges the notion of audience co-authorship because the procedural author has created the framework of the performance, an unequal relationship because the participant does not shape the framework of the procedural author:

Although the horizon is arrived at for each participant through their interaction with the invitation given, rather than a direct imposition, it is through controlling these aspects of a procedure that theatre practitioners—procedural authors—can to a degree keep control of the actions of their participants, and hence the performances that arise from their procedures. Complete control of these actions is not possible, but there are a number of ways in which performances will be suggested and limited, so that what happens remains within a horizon and its terrain has been largely foreseen by the procedural author. First, they construct this horizon in ways that are available to theatre makers and authors of more conventional kinds - defining the immediate pre-theatrical frame and the outer theatrical frames - and provide many of the resources that the participants will use in their performances. In the selection of the setting, and in the writing of the performance, continuities are implied between the performances to be given in the participatory frames and the performances given by the participants or known by participants, in other parts of their lives. (White, *Participation* 61)

While I agree with White's assessment that the procedural author's ability to shape the theatrical frame gives them a greater amount of authorship, sensory theatre disrupts this imbalance to some degree because of procedural authors collaborating with Model Participants within development. This is not to say that those Model Participants have equal influence on the procedural authorship as those in the space who have been designated as artists, but it is to say that there is a

greater amount of influence on the horizon of participation because those Model Participants have likely expanded the procedural author's understanding of the range of responses each invitation (overt or accidental) might receive. If one assumes that the Model Participants have been appropriately selected to stand in, to some degree, for the Empirical Participants, then the Empirical Participant is offered a greater amount of agency because their proxies have influenced the procedural rules of the space.

In addition to the issuing of invitations and the framework of the performance, the level of control for the Empirical Participant is significantly limited by the number of choices which are truly offered at a moment of invitation. A number of scholars have written critiques of participatory-immersive performances which promise an open landscape of potential choices but in reality manipulate the moment to offer only an A or B choice. Freshwater sums up this point by saying:

much of what now presents itself as participation in contemporary performance is really nothing of the sort. Performances which seem to be offering audiences the chance to make a creative contribution only give them the choice of option A or option B – or the opportunity to give responses which are clearly scripted by social and cultural convention. (Freshwater, “You Say” 405–6).

One example of A or B choices presented like expansive horizons comes from Sean Bartley's critique of *Sleep No More*. Bartley challenges language he has seen from Punchdrunk's artists of “empowerment” and “possibility” because within *Sleep No More* because “the space and the movements of the actors in it are constantly limiting and constraining; they prevent the narrator-

visitor²⁴ from exploring the full range of choices” (Bartley). He provides the example of rotary phones throughout the set which a participant may choose to answer if they hear it ringing, in which case they will be given further instructions by a cast member. While this presents further tracks for audience members to follow, Bartley points out there are ultimately only two choices available in that moment: “Even if a narrator-visitor ‘chooses’ to answer the phone, she is simply responding in one of two predictable ways to a stimulus provided by Punchdrunk. The tail cannot wag the dog, and the narrator-visitor cannot escape the influence of Punchdrunk's restraints” (Bartley). Even this choice is not fully A/B, as Bartley also says that in some instances performers may hand the phone to participants, presenting even fewer options (although it’s not clear if ringing phones are always choreographed to be answered eventually or the performers are free to make choices in the moment whether to answer). This is not to say that there is no agency offered to the “narrator-visitors” in *Sleep No More* – spectators do choose the tracks of the story that they follow and are allowed to choose their level of physical engagement with the set and, to some extent, the performers. I have attended *Sleep No More* multiple times as a narrator-visitor and had experiences of independent discovery which, in my estimation, allowed me to at least marginally direct how I engaged in the options available. But none of these choices completely change the trajectory of the overall experience—for example, all narrator-visitors are led to a banquet hall to view the same final scene at the climax regardless of the track they have followed so far. The number of choices offered to the participant is ultimately almost always somewhat limited, which has a profound impact on the amount of true agency which can be explored in the space.

²⁴ Bartley uses the term “narrator-visitor” for participants in *Sleep No More* reflect how participants chose their own track to follow the story, providing them the opportunity to understand a distinct version of the story depending on what action they follow.

This A or B choice is particularly profound when one considers the limitations placed on disabled people in society. The deinstitutionalization advocate Dale DiLeo has written on the issue of A or B choices in the types of services disabled people may receive, mimicking the language of these critiques about participatory options: “People with disabilities are referred to fixed choices of programs – they can go to agency A or B or have no options at all” (DiLeo, ch. 9). This mirroring of language (agency A or B for disability services, option A or B in performance) suggests that there be something more profound to the types of agency which are or are not made available to the young disabled who are attending sensory theatre productions. These limited options may also be celebrated by the people around this young person because a few options are an improvement over the total lack of options available in the era of institutionalization. That celebration may itself create an illusion of a greater horizon of participation within a services decision which is actually quite limited. As well, those options are shaped by what choices are presented to the young person. Much of the dynamics of caregiving shape a relationship between that young person and their caregivers where the information presented is likely already filtered down to options that the caregiver deems appropriate for the young person. This filtering down of agency comes into play in sensory theatre spaces as well as will be explored in the next chapter.

Does sensory theatre share this limitation of offering only A or B option? Certainly to some extent, when procedural authors designate a scripted moment of participation, there are only so many horizons of participation they may anticipate. But here we return to the unscripted, accidental invitations to participation which permeate the empathetic improvisational approach in sensory theatre. Audience members are genuinely offered a wider range of options - to refuse to engage in an episode, to experience the episode from a different part of the theatre, to leave

the space entirely, to take control of the episode - which presents many more than A or B options for participation. At the same time, sometimes this unlimited range of options can be challenging for performers because it can be hard to differentiate when an Empirical Participant's way of engaging is so far outside of the boundaries of the performance that they are no longer engaging in the performance at all. In one interesting interview exchange with a practitioner, Emily Bruner, we explored the limitations of empathetic improvisations' flexibility. In the context of comparing methods of different sensory theatre companies – in this case Bluelaces Theatre Company and Trusty Sidekick because Bruner works with both – Bruner contrasted the different methods for establishing boundaries for theatrical participation. Bruner found Bluelaces to be more “play-based” while Trusty was more “narrative-based”. Because of these differences, Bruner found that participants were more likely in a Bluelaces production to engage in participant-driven narrative experience:

There were several times where, in both Bluelaces and Trusty, but more so Bluelaces, that I would essentially be leading play activities in a corner with an audience member and never could get them back to the production, which was totally fine. And again, if that's what the audience member needs and wants we can make that happen. But I think boundaries are important in this type of work to encourage focus and to encourage...yeah, just staying, staying with the plot, staying with the story staying with the characters. (Bruner)

Noticing the somewhat contradictory thoughts that Bruner offered – both that this participant-driven narrative was “totally fine” but also that there should be boundaries to encourage engagement with the narrative set out by the procedural author – I asked Bruner to speak more about that tension. Because Bruner had initially used the word “fine” to describe those experiences, we grounded the conversation in that term.

It's fine in that I am so glad this audience member is having a good time at the theater. It's not "fine"—quote, quote—because...well, I guess it's fine no matter what. It— to me, the theater maker in me is like, 'It's not fine, because they're not experiencing the play and its narrative. And it's so separate than everybody else's experience.' If I'm in the corner, pretending to be Princess Elsa in *Frozen*, because that is the audience member's favorite character: that has nothing to do with the show that we're doing. Now, oftentimes, I would find myself pretending to be a Princess Elsa within the world of *SUDS* or in the world of *Up and Away*. But having a completely separate experience that has nothing to do with the show at large feels to me that my role in that moment is less of an actor and more of therapist? Question mark? The expectation shifts when the audience and the actor are completely taken out of the play. To me. (Bruner)

The live nature of the moment in which Bruner worked out her thoughts in real time provides a great amount of insight to the difficult tension between trying to design an experience which can be designated as "theatre" while also being radically accepting of the way a participant wants to engage. Bruner begins by centering having "a good time at the theater" as a primary aim of the exchange between performer and participant. Because of that grounding, she immediately re-thinks presenting anything to do with narrative engagement as outside the realm of "fine". She then re-frames her answer to be about her own perceptions as a theatre-maker rather than any objective definition of "fine". She expresses disappointment about moments when the participant pulls the story completely away from the established narrative, and recounts her efforts to marry the participant's narrative with the procedural author's narrative by becoming "Princess Elsa within the world of *SUDS* or in the world of *Up and Away*". She then uses this moment of being pulled out the narrative as one of a crisis of identity for the performer – if the performer is no

longer engaged with the procedural author's narrative, are they still an actor? In addition, this crisis of identity is presented as having a potential ethical implication because actors have not been trained to be "therapists" which Bruner questions they may become when drawn entirely into the narrative of the participant. However, she presents this very clearly as only a provisional thought, literally speaking the words "question mark" as she works through this idea. She then again caveats the end of her response by repeating "to me" which reifies that her assessment of the moment is subjective and based on her experience of what it means to take on the roles of a theater maker and actor.

While I asserted in the last chapter that engagement with a fictive narrative is not essential for engagement in sensory theatre, this anecdote again raises the question of what makes something "theatre" if the narrative or semiotic engagement is abandoned. A wholesale rejection of the procedural author's rules raises a question of whether what is being engaged with can be considered theatre at all, and therefore perhaps the number of choices available to participants must be limited so that the choices stay within the frame of "theatre". Essex raises this same notion in her conference presentation on sensory dance, in which she states that because of the de-privileging of narrative, performances can sometimes feel chaotic and that she continues to wonder about the balance between architect and clown: "What is the right balance between a satisfying narrative for observers and a gratifying experience for participants where they feel that their choices have impact?" (Essex, "Interactive"). This suggests that perhaps there is a limit to the number of choices that can be made available to participants for an event to remain "theatre" and therefore perhaps there is not a way for any event within the category of theatre to offer unlimited agency.

Sensory theatre artists use a multitude of strategies to engage Model and Empirical Spectators in their performances, creating potentials for co-authorship. The power differentials between procedural authors and participants make it impossible for this to be an entirely equal relationship, but these thoughtful avenues for participation do allow procedural authors and participants to reach a much more profound level of collaboration than in many other genres of participatory theatre. In addition, the empathetic improvisational approach within performance creates an experience which celebrates the agency of neurodivergent young people. This celebration of agency is particularly profound in the context of a society which does not often provide young disabled people with decision-making power. While this agency is celebrated and cultivated in these spaces, it does not mean the agency is without limits as the notion of “theatre” means consenting to play within the boundaries of a procedural author to some extent. In the next chapter, I will explore how limitations to agency present themselves from the side of spectator risk perception, and the steps that sensory theatre procedural authors take to assert their audience’s dignity through risk.

Chapter Four: Audience Participation and Risk in Sensory Theatre

The previous chapter explored ways procedural authors approach co-authorship through collaboration with their audience in development and performance. It outlined the way sensory theatre artists invite audience agency through their participatory methods. However, choices from the procedural author are not the only way participant agency can be limited. Participants may also limit their own agency due to their perception of risk. Therefore, to create an emancipatory experience procedural authors must also cast their attention toward transparency and comfort when communicating the risks of the space. The term “risk” immediately conjures the concept of physical harm, but Adam Alston points out that risk is a broader category that encompasses any type of uncertainty: “just about anything can be perceived as risky, provided that perception relates to an evaluation of future-oriented uncertainty” (Alston) There are two major categories of risk which may present themselves in performance: emotional and physical risks.

In a typical participatory theatre experience, emotional risk often takes the form of embarrassment. White devotes a significant amount of his text on the risks in participatory performance to this notion of embarrassment:

In everyday life the risk of embarrassment has a disciplinary effect on people. We are under injunctions to control ourselves, to present performances of ourselves that fit the personae we present to the world. So when participatory theatre invites performances from audience members, it presents special opportunities for embarrassment, for mis-performance and reputational damage, such that the maintenance of control and the assertion of agency that protects this decorum is important to the potential audience participant, especially at the moment of invitation. (White, *Participation* 73)

Indeed, a lot of scholarship about immersive-participatory theatre for adults focuses on how procedural authors work to break down social inhibitions in order to better immerse the audience in the experience. In Heddon et al's paper on spectatorship in One-to-One performance, they provide an example of co-author Rachel Zerihan choosing to eat multiple strawberries offered to her in a one-to-one performance, despite having a lifelong aversion to strawberries. The authors reflect that this was due to a desire to act as an "ideal audience-participant" because Zerihan "assumed her response to strawberries is too insignificant in terms of the hierarchies of experience that experiential performance proffers" (Heddon et al. 124). This returns to the notion that procedural authors are granted more power than participants, but in this instance the power comes from participant assumption rather than the structure of the space. Hedden et al. connect this to an observation from Helen Iball of the compulsion towards "giving good audience" where the participant feels compelled to "participate in [] normative assumptions" about what an ideal participant might do (Heddon et al. 124). This giving good audience could be framed as a pressure to act as Model Spectator rather than an Empirical one, to match what the participant anticipates that the procedural author anticipated about them. Instead of Zerihan actually becoming an "ideal audience-participant" she merely passed as one to the performer by appearing to enjoy (or at least not mind) eating the strawberry. This pressure comes from the intensity of the performer's gaze in one-to-one performance and the knowledge that the performer will be aware of the participant not engaging in the planned participation. Analysis on the impact of a gaze in performance will be analyzed in more depth in chapter five, but in this moment I am focused on the broader social pressures within performance and how they might be different when performing for a neurodivergent audience.

The participant self-censoring due to embarrassment seems unlikely in sensory theatre performances, where many Empirical Participants are likely to prioritize their sensory comfort over social embarrassment due to their neurodivergent perspective. Taking the Model Participant who I earlier put forward as a young person whose responses would be read as “disruptive” in a typical theatrical space, this participant is likely to be very open in expressing their sensory preferences although that expression may be difficult for others to interpret.

The much higher risk for a Model Participant is that of an unpleasant emotional or sensory experience. White’s analysis of emotional risks also includes “taking part in an activity that is not enjoyable, or which might even be distressing” (White, *Participation* 77). Most spectators have dealt with the experience of unwelcome sensory experiences throughout their lives, and therefore new sensory experiences are likely to be met with suspicion until the participant has enough information and trust for the experience to try the new sensation. Procedural authors manage the risk perception of participants by offering overt invitations to participation and gradually transitioning into new spaces and experiences.

However, this is not to say that the compulsion to ‘give good audience’ is absent from the sensory theatre experience. Caregivers are likely to worry that a participant is breaking the conventions of “theatre”. Particularly considering the social stigma around expressions of neurodivergence like stims, many caregivers likely come into the space with a heightened sense of protecting participants from judgement. Duret pointed to the impulse in parents to shield their children from the judgement they are likely to encounter when breaking social norms, “you've got these parents that want the best for their child but have to kind of shield them from the unforgiving world, but also support them” and how that impulse can act counter to the desired permissive space of sensory theatre (Duret). Bruner spoke to the way these heightened emotions

about judgement need to be managed in the initial space where performers encounter caregivers before a performance begins: “Everyone's figuring out, ‘Okay, what are the expectations? What is my role within this play? Do I need to be apologizing for the way that my child is behaving?’” Bruner says she would often pull family members aside to communicate, “this is okay, we literally built this show, so that your loved one can experience it in whichever way that you want” (Bruner). The use of “you” here is slightly ambiguous but in context I believe Bruner was assigning the agency of the experience to the loved one rather than (at least solely) to the caregiver.

Many practitioners have spoken to the potentials of the space to lessen this embarrassment through positive reactions to socially “disruptive” behavior. If the caregiver does not feel this social release—either because they are still learning the rules of the space or because they have resisted the cues the procedural authors have tried to provide—then their perception of embarrassment may ultimately shape the experience of the participant, acting as a sort of filter on the agency provided to the participant. I call this *caregiver-assumed risk perception* because the caregiver, relying on the social codes of their role outside of the theatrical space, assumes it is their responsibility to assess risk on behalf of the caree. Holden gave an example of this from *Red Kite, Blue Moon* (a particularly difficult production in terms of setting social expectations because, as one of the first shows in the US, the caregivers in the space would have no pre-existing model of sensory theatre):

The first day, a mother came in and was so nervous about her kid, that it really hindered his experience. She was...yeah, she was so nervous. I wrote in the first day that the kid was really excited to be there. And he was expressing himself. He's making verbal responses,

and the mother kept correcting him. And that really, I think, eventually upset him. And he wasn't able to experience, he wasn't able to really let himself live in that. (Holden)

In this instance, the emotional risk assessment of the caregiver appeared to completely counteract the participant's emotional risk assessment and shift that participant's affective experience.

Because of this caregiver filter on risk, much of the procedural author's attention when designing participatory invitations has to be split between the participant and the caregiver. They must both provide information to the participant to allow an informed decision about the sensory and emotional impact of participating in the experience, and enough information to the caregiver to assure them this participatory action will not violate the social expectations of the space. As White points out, the actual risks of the space are often less important than the perceived risks:

These actual risks may not, however, be as important to the procedures of audience participation as the perception of risk in the minds of the participants. If the initiation of participation is a rational response by the audience member to an invitation...then the choice depends on this potential participant's assessment of risk rather than on the risk itself. (White, *Participation* 77)

If the caregiver perceives risks, and chooses to direct the participants towards a conventionalized, passive response, then that risk perception has a much larger impact on the participant than is called for by the actual risk of breaking the social conventions of the space. Zdeblick provided the example of a performance with *Seesaw* in which a teacher's perceptions of the risk of permissive behavior were entirely different from the procedural authors', and the negative impacts of this misalignment:

I was in a performance where a teacher was not aware of the expectations for the students and kept pulling them away from stuff and telling them to sit down and accused us during

the show, verbally in front of her students, of creating bad patterns of behavior that would be impossible to break when they got back to school. And in the moment, I didn't know what to do, and nobody really knew what to do. And I think that's the kind of situation that you can't fix once it's already happened. The only way you can fix that is by communicating expectations really clearly beforehand. It's not to say that that's never gonna happen to us again. But if it happens again, we'll be able to point back and say, 'But you signed this, you read this piece of paper and said that you agreed to all of these things.' So that it's less like feeling blindsided. Because I have a feeling that if that particular educator had known what to expect, she would have either made the choice to not bring her students to the show, or hopefully made the choice to bring them to the show, and been a little more lenient with their behavior. Because from what I know, as a teacher and a student and from working with people with disabilities, her assumption wasn't true. We were setting expectations in our theater space that were different from the expectations at school. I do not believe that we establish bad patterns of behavior by letting students draw on things that were supposed to be drawn on. I just don't buy that. But I do see how it felt threatening to her in the moment. And how the idea that we were doing that was really scary. And she didn't know what else to do. (Zdeblick, Intv.)

In this instance, it was the caregiver's perceptions of the risk of the permissive behavior that shaped the experience, not the actual risks (or at least the actual risks as understood by Zdeblick and the other procedural authors). This points to the importance of managing the perception of those risks by the caregivers because that perception ultimately holds more power than the risk itself.

The most common tactic mentioned to address caregivers was through assuring parents directly that a behavior was “okay” if the performer observed the caregiver moving to shut down an expressive behavior. Some practitioners also mentioned speaking explicitly with caregivers ahead of time to set up the social expectations of the space (as with Bruner’s example of speaking to caregivers ahead of the performance or Zdeblick’s imagined contract). Leigh expressed interest in using a tactic she saw employed by Australian company Sensorium of providing written recommendations to the caregiver audience pre-show, but had not yet had the opportunity to test this tactic (Leigh, Intv.). Dixon spoke to how the space itself works to discourage a feeling of embarrassment because the richness of the immersive environment made it so clear that the space was an alternative social reality:

There was rarely a time when a parent would kind of get embarrassed for the behavior of their child....And because the world is not like...it's another world, people behave differently when you create the world. They just feel like it's not the same world and they don't behave in the same way they do. Something happens and comes over people and they are on their best behavior, most of the time. And so what might be going on in a theater—a typical theater—with a parent removing a child from the seat to go deal with them in the lobby, wasn't necessarily our experience in this magical world. Because it was like everyone was on stage. And there's something sacred and magical about it. (Dixon)

The use of “best behavior” is interesting here, although I wish to resist too careful parsing of language due to participants speaking extemporaneously. Thinking about the phrase abstractly, it could be used in the typical way “best behavior” is applied – directed toward a young person and meaning following the conventions of polite society and therefore not needing to be pulled from the space. But it can also be interpreted as directed toward the caregivers, that their “best

behavior” in the space includes not pulling their child from the space but instead allowing their child’s to openly express their reactions to the performance. This sparks an interesting question of what constitutes the “best” behavior for a sensory theatre experience.

The caregiver filter on risk is also applied to the realm of physical risk. Physical risk to participants is often minimal in other participatory theatres, although in some cases (see description of *Rotating in a Room of Images* in chapter two (Alston, “Politics”)) participatory theatres play with perceptions of physical risk. In those instances, however, participants can generally trust that procedural authors have accurately anticipated their range of responses and put in place safeguards to minimize real physical risk. Considering the Model Participant for sensory theatre, the physical risk is higher because many participants will not share the same risk assessment as caregivers and procedural authors due to their age and cognitive status, and therefore caregivers feel less assurance that the procedural authors have accurately accounted for and minimized all physical risks. Therefore, the procedural author must consider both how to lower the potential physical risks in the space (such as with Duret’s earlier example of “autism-proof[ing]” the space) as a well as, again, signaling to the caregiver that the space is physically safe in order to create an environment with a low or nonexistent anxiety about the physical risks to participants. Physical risk is given a different weight in the space and as a result procedural authors will often not fully cede control over the physical risks of the space, instead asking for a partnership with caregivers to manage physical risk. In cases where caregivers are given explicit instruction about their responsibility in the space, usually the instructions to allow for a greater range of behaviors will include a caveat of caregivers intervening if behavior becomes unsafe (Sensorium Theatre, *Guidelines*).

In one interesting exchange with a practitioner related to physical risk, we discovered that we had both seen the same performance of the Oily Cart show *Light Show* at the Big Umbrella Festival, in which one participant chose to enter the backstage area during the performance (Mahoney, *Light Show Follow-Up*; Mahoney, Intv.). In this particular show, there were designated participant chairs with a companion stool located just behind the participant chair. One family arrived with two children and a parent, which meant that the young neurodivergent person took the participant chair and his sibling took the companion stool, leaving their father to sit in the observer section which was somewhat removed from the performance space. I was seated close to the father and observed that when the participant began to move from his chair, the father seemed tense and unsure whether he should intervene. Mahoney, on the other hand, was observing the performance as a staff member at the other end of the room. From her vantage point, which was both physically removed from the father and provided a clear view to the backstage area, she did not perceive any risks to the participant's behavior. As a result, we discovered we had read the stress levels of the performers in those moments entirely differently—Mahoney perceiving the performers as confident and prepared when the participant went backstage while I perceived them as unsure and anxious. Mahoney attributed this in part to her ability to literally see that the backstage area was safe because it only contained a props table:

I had a moment where I was like, 'What happens if the table falls over?' And then I looked at it, and I was like, 'It's plastic, nothing happens.' There are round edges. And I think that maybe was the moment where I was like, 'Oh, they've got this.' Maybe less from like an actor point of view and maybe more from a design point of view, I think, is maybe what I was tapping into there. That the space felt so safe. Like physically. That if that table had

fallen over, that it wasn't a big, heavy wooden props table. That it was this lightweight folding plastic table with rounded edges that wasn't really going to hurt anyone. (Mahoney, Intv.)

Mahoney here attributes her perception of the emotions of the actors to the physical safety of the space—she projected confidence onto the performers because she presumed they had the same knowledge that she had of the physical safety of the space. This suggests that communication of risk perception to caregivers directly shapes the emotional risk perception of the caregivers as well.

This moment had additional emotional layers that also impacted our disparate perceptions—Mahoney had previous experience working with this same family and had observed that this parent was generally permissive in performance events, while they were strangers to me. I was also seated near Francis Italiano, an artist with Sensorium Theatre, who leaned over to the father to tell him, “He’s having such a good time” in reference to the child moving around the space. After this comment, I observed the father physically relax. I interpreted Italiano’s comment as motivated by a desire to assure the father that the participant’s behavior was accepted in the space. Because of Italiano’s experience as a procedural author, I deferred to his expertise at reading caregiver emotions and his impulse to address the caregiver reified my interpretation that the father was feeling emotional distress. Because I saw this assurance coming from an observer rather than coming directly from the performers, I assessed the performers as not doing enough to communicate the physical and emotional risks of the moment to the caregiver. Mahoney, from her physical and emotional vantagepoint, assessed them as appropriately communicated. This moment presents an interesting example of the complex layers of emotional and physical risks that interplay in sensory theatre spaces, the

difficulty of fully communicating those risks to every layer of the audience, and how each spectator's understanding of those risks shapes their interpretation of the performance.

In both the cases of physical and emotional risk, procedural authors need to find ways to set the appropriate risk perceptions for the caregivers to bypass the caregiver filter and allow the participant risk perception to hold a greater amount of sway in the performance space. By prioritizing the risk assessment of the participant directly, procedural authors are asserting the participant's right to make risky decisions, a concept which has been explicitly tied to the dignity of people living under care.

Dignity of risk is a term first coined by disability advocate Robert Perske in the 1970s to assert that reasonable risk-taking is an essential component of human dignity (Perske, "Dignity"; Perske, "Meet"). Perske asserted that protection can be smothering when it is acted upon "exclusively":

For many who work with the [intellectually disabled], this term triggers such action words as 'protect,' 'comfort,' 'keep safe,' 'take care,' and 'watch.' Acting on these impulses, at the right time, can be benevolent, helpful, and developmental; but if they are acted upon too intensely, or if they are used exclusively without allowing for each [intellectually disabled] person's individuality and growth potential, the [disabled person] becomes overprotected and emotionally smothered. (Perske, "Dignity" 24)

The term has been taken up in multiple service fields which interact with safety, caregiving, and guardianship including education, nursing, law, and architecture (Bumble et al.; Lyons; G. Mitchell; Millar; Wolpert). These are fields which historically have not privileged dignity of risk, so while I know citing from them will bring skepticism from disability studies scholars, I look to

these fields specifically to find the most emancipatory ideas emerging to propose a more ethical version of caregiving.

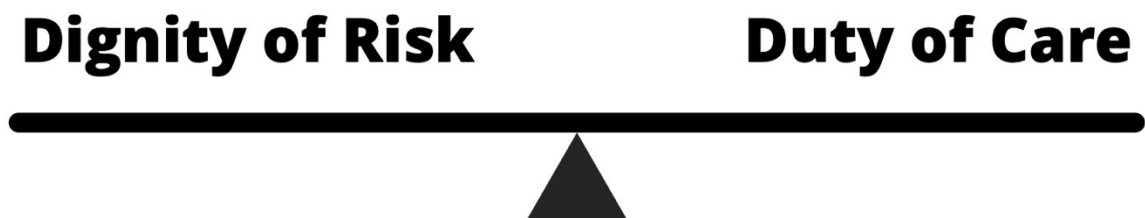


Figure 5. Diagram of dignity of risk balancing with duty of care

Dignity of risk is conceptualized as acting as a counterbalance to the duty of care (the caregiver’s obligation to protect their caree from unnecessary risks). Dignity of risk advocates put forward part of what makes the human experience dignified and worth living is the ability to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from failure. Self-advocate Patricia Deegan wrote about how, after being diagnosed as having schizophrenia, her assertions of independence were read as “uncooperative, noncompliant, and treatment resistant” and that she was denied the right to sometimes make stupid choices (Deegan 9). Writing about how the risks of an urban landscapes are under-considered for the general population and over-considered for disabled populations, Julian Wolpert re-purposes the term “cloak of competency” — used originally to describe people with intellectual disabilities who were able to pass as nondisabled — to point to the way nondisabled people are granted relative grace for failure: “Normal people have a cloak of competency to cover their inabilities and their failures to perform tasks which the experts have programmed for us as normal. We are not universally competent and do some things better than others and we fail frequently” (Wolpert 400). Because of the connection between risk and failure, the two are often combined into the longer phrase “the dignity of risk and the right to

failure”. Gail Mitchell, a nurse who works with older patients, highlights that worthwhile experiences are often the results of failure and risk: “I have been reminded that art, invention, freedom, friendship, love, triumph, and discovery are the fruits of failure and risk” (Mitchell 10).

Returning then to sensory theatre, if the procedural author is successful in bypassing the caregiver-assumed risk perception to allow the participant to take risks within the theatrical space, it has the potential to re-balance the relationship between dignity of risk and duty of care. By creating a space in which caregivers are able to lessen their grip on risk assessment, they are able to see the participants thrive in an environment which celebrates their agency, a rare event in many participants’ lives. Wood points out that in sensory theatre,

the audience determines outcome through exploration and decision making and the creation of meaning. This is of special significance for audiences with complex needs who usually have few choices in their daily lives which are usually very structured. (Wood, *Critical*)

Essex highlighted that in the 2012 Good Child Report children identified “being ‘trusted to make your own choices;’” as important to their happiness and uses this information as a reason to prioritize autonomy in sensory dance experiences, and Shaughnessy points to how the methods of the *Imagining Autism* project, “emphasiz[ed] autonomy and authorship, and a licence to play creatively (often overlooked post diagnosis).” (Essex, “Co-operative”; Shaughnessy, “Imagining Otherwise”). The connection between agency and play, and the way these opportunities for choice subvert socio-cultural expectations about neurodivergent young people’s capacity for choice is a clear principle of sensory theatre making.

There is some debate within the field of sensory theatre about how agency is framed for this audience. Goodwin presents a critique of agency on the grounds of the associations between agency, improvement, self-awareness, and language; and the way personhood has been denied to

those perceived as falling short of a Western ideal of self-determination. She advocates for instead moving toward a “relational and reciprocal understandings of capacity and agency” (Goodwin 58). Her critique of the association between agency and improvement sits within her larger argument against busy-ness in educational institutions and the potential of spaces in which audiences are allowed to simply be. However, I do not fully agree with Goodwin’s grounds for this reciprocal understanding of agency as I find some of her supporting evidence problematic on the grounds of centering neurotypical benefit. She quotes several authors who assert the personhood of significantly disabled people based on their impact on neurotypical people, such as “the power to move other people” and how “profoundly disabled people ‘offer the rest of us an opportunity to learn about our humanity’” (Goodwin 58). This framing of reciprocal agency could fall into inspiration porn narratives by only asserting dignity for disabled people on the grounds that they positively influence neurotypical people (Young). While I question some specifics of how one might construct this more reciprocal version of agency, I find Goodwin’s overall questioning of a Western obsession with agency only through independence significant. Any argument around agency alongside disability and youth necessitates the inclusion of caregiving dynamics and may require a reframing of what agency can encompass.

Participatory actions from young people within sensory theatre have the potential to become a “rehearsal of the revolution” as proposed by Boal. These moments create opportunities in which participants can exercise a greater level of agency and caregivers can release the anxiety of always maintaining their duty of care. Of course, Boal’s theories could still prove to be inaccurate at least for some spectators. Perhaps the experience of gaining agency temporarily could be considered unethical for introducing a person to a level of agency they will not be allowed in other parts of their lives. However, I am inclined both to believe that it is better to

have some experience of agency in one's life than to live without it, and to think that as long as artists are successful at marking off the space as explored in chapter two, then participants will not misinterpret the significance of the agency generated in the space. As well, there is significance to the celebration of the dignity of risk in a space which is public and holds cultural significance in that it exposes the possibilities of society as a whole releasing its grip on the duty of care toward disabled people. The act of seeing this dignity celebrated in this space can impact observers to create more spaces in the future in which this dignity can be asserted, therefore making the conditions of the space more quotidian moving forward.

I have outlined in this chapter the many ways I believe the specific structures and choices of sensory theatre create greater possibilities for agency. It is impossible to say without a study of Empirical Spectators which gathers data directly from caregivers and participants what impact these participatory choices have on the spectators, both within the theatre space and after leaving the performance. However, the responses in participant interviews do indicate that practitioners have observed the exercise of agency within performance. Holden described how the physical arrangement of *Red Kite*, *Blue Moon* placed some space between caregivers and participants which he found a useful gap to discourage interference:

It's nice for the parents to have some space and let their kids fly a little bit. If there's an impulse to just be like, 'Oh, don't do that. Oh, be quiet. Oh, don't move your arms like that.' Because it's such a habit. This may be the first time you've ever brought your kid to a theatrical setting where it's okay for them to be who they are. But that is not an easy thing to shut off. So if you give yourself four feet of space, by the time you're about to correct the kid, I'm there to be doing that and celebrating that. And the parents are like, 'Oh, this is

okay. Oh, okay.’ So I thought that was actually really good. And it gives the kids a little sense of independence. (Holden)

Duret also commented on moments when he has seen caregivers release their assumed risk perception and why that is so often difficult for parents to release:

There are a lot of moments, or there have been quite a few moments, where an adult or a parent will try to hold the child down. But once we step in and say, ‘Hey, it’s okay,’ that is relinquished. And it is a really lovely moment that gets to happen. There’s— and again, I think, going back to what Faith [Clarke] used to tell me about being a parent, you know, to be able to believe someone when they say I’ve got control of the situation. There’s hesitation of course, but there’s also this sigh of relief because you want that so badly that you almost trust anybody who’s willing to say it. You’re scared but you’re trusting. And again, it’s a 45-minute experience. So we’re not talking about it going on and on for days. So a lot of people are able to relinquish that kind of responsibility and that anxiety. Which is nice. I feel like we’ve been successful in that. (Duret)

Duret defines this release as success for the procedural authors but also acknowledges why that release may be difficult to accomplish. Zdeblick spoke to the way she has observed special educators, who are often excluded from field trips, realize during the course of the performance that they do not need to direct student behavior and how their observation of student choices may eventually impact classrooms:

They are told that these experiences are not designed for their class, and they have to be on high alert, on guard to like stop their students from destroying things, breaking the rules. And to watch that high shoulder anxiety like melt away. And watch those adults realize that no, this is actually a space where we’re imagining that the world is a place where we can all

exist together. We're just pretending that that's the reality and moving from that assumption. It's pretty cool to watch them see their students in a new way. And I think- and I mean, I've heard sort of anecdotally that it carries back into their practice in the classroom, that they get ideas from what we do in the space or how we are with one another that they reference or bring up again, or they discover from watching their students. That they really like music and that they can use music more in the classroom and maybe that'll be helpful. So it's those- those moments are important to me. They're not side effects that happen when we're engaging with the primary audience. They're part of the point. It's supposed to be an everyone experience. (Zdeblick, Intv.)

Zdeblick's knowledge of how the experience impacts caregivers after leaving the performance is based on the application of sensory episodes to curriculum rather than a shift in relationship. The observation that some caregivers bring sensory experiences out of the space (which was not the only mention of this phenomenon —Leigh also observed some parents used salad spinners to “dry clothes” with their children after seeing their children enjoy the same sensory episode in *SUDS*) indicates that there is reason to study whether the relational shifts in sensory theatre spaces can impact a relationship after the performance.

I have presented here my reasoning for both how sensory theatre creates an environment for young disabled people to practice agency and why this expression of agency is particularly important for this population. But it is important to acknowledge that some scholars have also questioned the validity of using the agency produced within performance as an appropriate metric to evaluate art. Many scholars have looked to metaphors about agency in democracy as a way to think about the types of agency generated in participatory performances. Boal's entire theory of Theatre of the Oppressed is built upon the notion that physical action in performance

will lead to political action. Participatory theatre scholars have compared restrictive performances which create the illusion of choice to political processes with the “illusion of public dialogue” (Freshwater, “You Say” 406) or the reduction to A and B choices to the distilling of the political process to an A or B candidate ballot (White, “Theatre” 26). As well, Heddon et al. point out that collaboration does not guarantee equity in the process of collaboration, and that power dynamics both outside the world of the theatre as well as the relative power of the procedural author over the participants restrict the concept of equality in partnership (Heddon et al. 130)—particularly important constraints to consider in a model of theatre in which most participants are young disabled people and most procedural authors are neurotypical adults.

There is also, however, a critique of the equation of participatory theatre with democracy. Performance art scholar Claire Bishop discusses the “Ladder of Participation” model from the field of architecture which presents eight rungs of ascending power for the citizens engaging with the architecture piece. Bishop says it is tempting to evaluate participatory art based on which rung of the ladder it climbs to but that this thinking is too simplistic when thinking about art:

The most challenging works of art do not follow this schema, because models of democracy in art do not have an intrinsic relationship to models of democracy in society....The relationship between artist/participant is a continual play of mutual tension, recognition and dependency...rather than a ladder of progressively more virtuous political forms. (Bishop 279)

Taking Bishop’s critique, I find it important to celebrate the agency sensory theatre celebrates without using it as the only metric for evaluating the form.

White points out that it's possible to create a performance which is very open to participation but lacks substance as well as a very restrictive participatory experience which is impactful and important:

The 'meaningfulness' - the amount of meaning of the performance itself is not necessarily dependent upon the freedom of the participant to create it: it is possible for a restrictive procedure to suggest and produce very important performances, and for a broad and open horizon to suggest and produce banal or superficial ones. (White, *Participation* 176)

White's point is an important reminder that it is too simplistic to say that performances are meaningful merely because they are participatory. I asserted in chapter two that the primary aim of sensory theatre is the production of a shared affective experience, and as such I believe that the agency practiced through participatory choices are secondary to the affective aims of sensory theatre. These experiences are ultimately aesthetic, not therapeutic or political. However, the consent for those affective experiences must be offered within the context of meaningful agency. As well, art can contain multiple significances and therefore I find it worthwhile to explore the potentials of a political reading of the participatory celebrations within sensory theatre.

By creating transparent processes which allow for accurate assessments of both the emotional and physical risks of a theatrical space, and which are accessible to both participants and caregivers, procedural authors create opportunities for risk-taking in sensory theatre spaces. When performers take time to relate to caregivers to communicate risk, rather than de-centering the experience of the participant, it allows caregivers to release their assumption of risk perception which creates conditions for participants to assess risk independently and explore a greater range of emotional and physical possibilities. This celebration of risk can be read as a political celebration of the dignity of risk for those under care, which affirms the dignity of

young disabled people visiting these spaces. In the next chapter, I will expand on considerations of the social rules within sensory theatre spaces by examining how the intra-audience viewing shapes that social reality.

Chapter Five: Viewing Dynamics within Sensory Theatre Spaces

The nature of participatory-immersive art places the audience in a position to look at one another. Co-existence within a playing space suggests that everyone is within fair view to be watched. White highlights how for spectators engaged with the ludic elements of a participatory space, “there is a good chance that others will play alongside you, play with you, see you playing, watch how you play” (White, “Theatre” 22). Being watched has a profound impact on the spectators experience due to the social risk and subsequent inhibition that comes with awareness of being viewed. In parallel with this performance dynamic, being stared at is a common experience for those who are visibly disabled, which may be the case for Model Participants whose behavior is read as “disruptive” in many social spaces. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has gone as far as to say "the stare is the dominant mode of looking at disability in this culture" (Garland-Thomson, “Dares”, 31). Placing these two factors together, the format of sensory theatre calls upon artists to think critically about how intra-audience viewing is directed in their spaces. How artists manage these stares has a profound impact on the way disability is framed in sensory theatre, both for the starrer and the staree.

Garland-Thomson proposed that the term “staring” should be used in conversations about disability as an extension and modification of how the term “gaze” is used by feminist scholars – with “staring” making the subject of the stare into a medicalized object rather than a desired object: "Gazing says, 'You are mine.' Staring says, 'What is wrong with you?' Gazers become men by looking at women, and starers become doctors by visually probing people with disabilities" (Garland-Thomson, “Dares”, 32). However, she does not use the term in an inherently negative sense, despite the emotional reaction readers are likely to have to the word. She tells readers that her “anatomy” of types of staring “unsettles common understandings that

staring is rudeness, voyeurism, or surveillance or that starers are perpetrators and starees victims. Instead, this vivisection lays bare staring's generative potential" (Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 9). In this section I will use the term "stare" in a similarly flexible way to explore the generative potential of audiences looking at one another, and "staree", as Garland-Thomson does, to indicate the person or object being stared at.

Garland-Thomson lays out differing categories of stares to examine their generative potential. She proposes two major drivers of stares that inform the type of stare the starrer might engage in: a stimulus versus a goal. A stimulus-driven stare is driven by what is novel and is "promiscuous" because it is "always at risk of being seduced away by a fresher, newly stimulating sight". Goal-driven stares, in contrast, involve paying deliberate attention "controlled by our intentions and strategies" (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 20). How and whether a stimulus-driven stare shifts into a goal-driven stare determines the type of stare (blank, baroque, separated, engaged, or dominating). She begins her argument with this analysis of the stare within cognition of the starrer, but then shifts her focus to how starees "look back" (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 84). Through interviews with visibly disabled people and analysis of visual art about disability, Garland-Thomson is able to point to ways disabled people manage the staring encounter and therefore impact the starrer. Some examples of the looking back include re-framing the stare through an aesthetic encounter, introducing positive self-representation into the stare, and drawing the staree into an interpersonal encounter. All of these are used to introduce a reciprocity and empathy into the encounter: "If an arc of empathy is to leap across the breach opened up by staring, persistence and generosity must prevail on both sides. Starees must insist on recognition as fellow humans by wielding an array of interpersonal techniques that the commonly embodied need not acquire" (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 94). This acquiring of

interpersonal techniques is a particularly fraught notion when working with youth audiences, as young spectators have likely not yet had the requisite life experience to build up this toolbox. Therefore, sensory theatre provides an opportunity to model the shaping of this stare encounter through aesthetic decisions.

In her article “The Politics of Staring”, Garland-Thomson uses photography to analyze the framing of the stare encounter. Photography is a useful medium for thinking through the ways that artists can direct a stare because photography is primarily the art of the photographer shaping the way the viewer takes in the photograph’s subject. Using photographic examples of disabled bodies, Garland-Thomson identifies four visual rhetorics:

- Wonderous - eliciting amazement and admiration. Garland-Thomson presents this as the oldest mode of viewing disability but traces its continuation to this day. This way of viewing can be connected to a moral model of disability, because it harkens to a view of disability which gives the disabled person superpowers (such as clairvoyance) or acts as a marker of good/evil. It can also be connected to inspiration porn as it contains the archetype of the “supercrip” “who amazes and inspires the viewer by performing feats that the nondisabled viewer cannot imagine doing”, a construction which then interacts with sentimental rhetoric (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 61; Young)
- Sentimental - eliciting pity and inspiration. A sentimental lens “produces the sympathetic victim or helpless sufferer needing protection or succor and invoking pity, inspiration, and frequent contributions.” Garland-Thomson traces this rhetoric to the Victorian era but points to its contemporary employment in fundraising efforts like telethons. Sentimental rhetoric is often tied into cure narratives by soliciting donations for the purpose of fixing a disability. This cure narrative was perhaps worst employed in connection with autism in

the 2009 “I Am Autism” commercial from Autism Speaks which frames autism as a pernicious villain which will steal children and end marriages (Wallis; ASAN; *I Am Autism*).

- Exotic - sensational, erotic, or entertaining. This rhetoric is “characterized by curiosity or uninvolved objectification”. Garland-Thomson traces this framing to nineteenth-century “freak photography” and points to its contemporary uses in the fashion world. The exotic offers a differing commercial aim from the sentimental “by upsetting the earnest, asexual, vulnerable, courageous image of disability that charity rhetoric has so firmly implanted” but also maintains a fascination with difference and novelty (Garland-Thomson, “Politics” 66).
- Realistic - establishing a relationship of contiguity between the starrer and staree by “regularizing the disabled figure in order to avoid differentiation and arouse identification, often normalizing and sometimes minimizing the visual mark of disability” (Garland-Thomson, “Politics” 69). Garland-Thomson traces the emergence of this rhetoric to the disability rights movement, whose gains allowed disability to be “tucked with various degrees of conspicuousness into the fabric of common visual culture” (Garland-Thomson, “Politics” 72).

In addition to Garland-Thomson’s proposal of these four modes, musicologist Joseph Straus has also suggested a fifth framing,

- Eugenic – eliciting “fear, horror, revulsion, and disgust to an object that seems bestial and thus subhuman” (Straus 12). Straus connects the eugenic model to the moralism of the sentimental model but with a negative valence of sin and evil, as well as a connection to

the medical model of euthanasia and its “impulse toward segregation, institutionalization, and elimination” (12).

These frames are easier to analyze within the medium of photography because the artist has been ceded ultimate control over the way the disabled body is viewed in their art piece, and the art object is static, allowing a somewhat uniform experience of viewing through the direction of the photographer’s lens. Garland-Thomson points out that “portraits pull the staree out of a live encounter in order to deliberately state a staree’s self-presentation. Face-to-face staring encounters, in contrast, are living communications filled with complex and dynamic interrelations” (Garland-Thomson, *Staring* 86). How then, can these same frames for a disabled body be considered within the fleeting and multiplied experience of a live audience consuming theatre?

In Garland-Thomson’s work on disabled performance artists she proposes these artists subvert the “stealth” element of staring encounters through the decision to place themselves onstage: “such performances are forums for profoundly liberating assertions and representations of the self in which the artist controls the terms of the encounter” (Garland-Thomson, “Dares”, 33). Through the claiming of the stare, the artists are able to claim elements of personhood often denied to disabled people, like “empowerment, agency, and sexuality” (35) and challenge medicalized discourses (38). These artist are able to “control[] the terms of the encounter” because they are the staree onstage, shaping the entire performance text that frames the body onstage. That same control is not afforded to the disabled people in a sensory theatre space, because the disabled young people come in as audience members rather than the primary procedural authors. As covered in chapter two, there has been a level of collaborative co-authorship leading up to that moment. But they still enter the space with the status of “spectator”

and as a result, cede management of the stare to the procedural author. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the procedural author to consider the framing decisions of their art: the design of the audience space/“house”, how the audience is introduced to the performance frame, the manner of bringing them into the performance space, how performers interact with the audience, etc. not just in terms of how these choices establish the frame of “theatre” for the participant but also how it establishes the framework for spectators to view one another.

For procedural authors tasked with stare management, there are multiple pre-existing scripts of how staring is and has been directed toward young disabled people that need to be considered to determine which narratives should be enforced and which should be subverted. On top of the visual rhetorics that Garland-Thomson and Straus presented there are additional dynamics present due to the youth of the participants. Returning to the concepts of caregiving and risk, staring has historically been directed toward maintaining safety for young disabled people by keeping them under constant surveillance. Perske’s work on the dignity of risk in architecture implores readers to think about what is said to someone with an intellectual disability through the spaces designed for them, and that instead of saying “we will protect and comfort you- and watch you like a hawk!”, spaces should be designed to include a certain amount of risk in order to maintain a right to dignity (Perske, “Dignity” 27). Dale Dileo, in his critique of institutions, provides examples of window blinds and bathrooms stalls to show how dignity of privacy has been denied to those requiring care:

When I looked at the window, I thought something just wasn’t quite right. Then it dawned on me – the blinds were on the outside of the window, in the hallway! This is classic institutional thinking. The purpose of the blinds was not for the boys’ privacy, but for the staff’s convenience to look in at them. The bathroom had the same approach. The toilets

were lined up against one wall, but they were not enclosed in individual stalls. The idea of personal privacy just didn't enter into the architectural planning. When I asked why, the answer I got was always the same: it was for the residents' own safety. Some were self-injurious; they would hurt themselves and had to be monitored. It seemed to me then, and still does now, that one could pay attention to people without making their every private action open to public scrutiny. (DiLeo, chap.1)

This suggests that dignity of risk is intertwined with the dignity of privacy and presents a challenge for the way immersive theatre places audiences on display. While in the last chapter I proposed the importance of transparency about the lack of physical risks in the space, it is important that transparency is applied to the space itself rather than intense watching of the participant themselves. Spectators could view their fellow audience members in a way which reifies the connection between exposure, safety, and caregiving or in a way which challenges those notions.

In considering these multiple narratives of disability and staring, and the multiple places a starrer's gaze can land within immersive performance, it is necessary to pare down the number of avenues being considered in this chapter or else the analysis becomes untenable. For example, performers and audience can watch one another's reactions in an infinitely recurring loop. But performers, unlike spectators, have the benefit of an entire rehearsal process to shape their way of framing the disabled people they encounter in these spaces, and an in-depth analysis of a rehearsal process from this perspective would be an interesting but separate study. In this section I am interested in how practitioners seek to direct the intra-audience staring within the relatively little time available within the confines of a performance event.

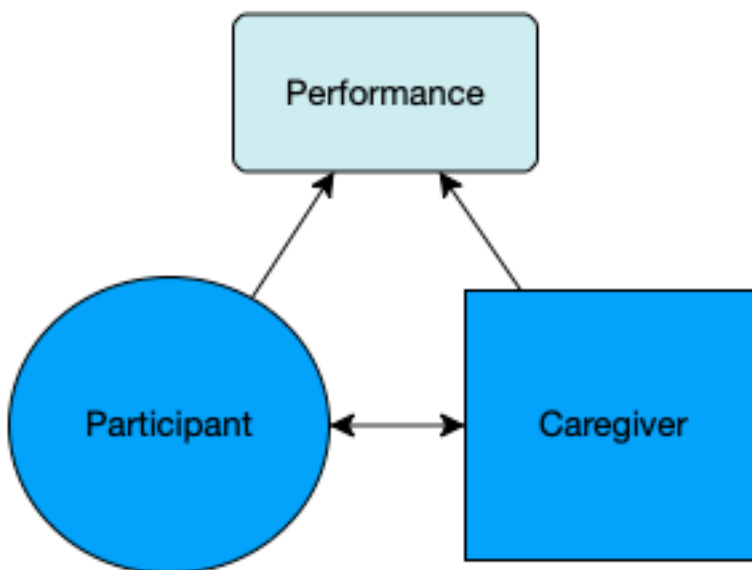


Figure 6. Diagram of the viewing relationship between participant, caregiver, and performance text

I begin with the viewing relationship between the participant and caregiver, as this relationship holds central importance in the performance and, as established in the last chapter, has a great deal of significance when it comes to the emotional risks within the performance space. In thinking about how spectators will inevitably be on display when the physical boundaries between a performance and house space are blurry, one can also consider how *who* is looking at the participant will have a greater degree of influence on their behavior than just *whether* they are being looked at. In a 1981 article, Frank Coppieters analyzed audience reaction to a production (*The People Show*) in which the designation between performer and audience space was unclear. In particular, Coppieter's found that spectators who attended one performance which happened in the daytime, resulting in equal illumination of the full space, created a far greater awareness from the spectators about how their gaze was directed during the performance. In addition to feeling the scrutiny of being seen as performers, they also "checked their reactions against fellow members of the audience and 'opinion leaders' play a special part in this"

(Coppieters 42). To indicate what is meant by an “opinion leader”, Coppieters gives an example of a participant spending a significant amount of time watching a theatre professor and Coppieters himself (Coppieters 42). However, the quote from the participant is brief and Coppieters offers little analysis of this concept of an opinion leader. Perhaps the participant’s gaze was drawn to these two people designated in some way as experts in the space. This could drive a curiosity about the reactions of experts or an anxiety to be viewed by the opinion leaders as having the correct reaction. The participant also offers it may have been “because of your intended analysis” in reference to watching Coppieters, and so perhaps the participant was curious about the eventual results of Coppieters analysis or feeling particularly under scrutiny by Coppieters as someone taking on the role of researcher.

I find this concept of “opinion leader” an interesting one to apply to the dynamic between a participant and caregiver within a sensory theatre space. To what extent might a participant’s experience of sensory theatre be shaped by their assessment of the caregiver’s experience with the cultural event of theatre? As I posited earlier, for some participants who are largely resistant to social expectations, this may be a relatively unimportant part of their experience, but for others the reactions of their caregivers may have a large impact on both their emotional risk perception but also their assessment of the performance as an art piece. In Brigg’s dissertation, which included data collection on the engagement of participants viewing *The White Peacock*, she notes the need to warn the caregivers collecting data to “be aware of their power to trigger emotion in their students if they found themselves particularly moved” (Brigg, *Theatre* 206). This indicates how the affective response of caregivers acts to shape the response of the participant. As explored in chapter four, the caregiver’s assessment of emotional risk will impact both the permissiveness of the space as well as the participant’s ability to open themselves to the

emotional experience, as caregiver anxiety will influence their caree's anxiety level as well.

Because affect is to intrinsically tied to the aesthetic experience of sensory theatre, this affective impact gives the caregiver a significant power over the participant's aesthetic reception of the piece, making them an opinion leader.

Reversing the direction of this exchange, how might the caregivers in the space see the participants as the opinion leaders? For adults attending "Theatre for Young Audiences" performances, the labeling of the show as "for" young audiences raises the question of whether the adult should engage with the performance text directly or primarily understand the performance through the reactions of the intended audience. Marco De Marinis, an audience reception but not TYA scholar, puts forward that "children's theatre" is an example of a "closed performance" because there is a defined type of spectator which is required for a "correct" reception of the text. In the case of closed performance, "the performance only 'comes off' to the extent that the real audience corresponds to the anticipated one, thus reacting to the performance in the desired way" and things will turn out "differently" if the intended and real audience (model and empirical spectators) do not match, including if an adult attends a children's performance (De Marinis, "Dramaturgy of the Spectator" 103). What De Marinis means exactly by "comes off" is not clear, but his analysis raises the question of how a performance could ever appropriately "come off" considering that social conventions would never allow for a performance for young people to be done without adult caregivers in the audience space—social conventions of caregiving do not allow caregivers to drop a child off for a performance and trust the child will be fine until it is time to pick them up. This tension is why, when seeking to define the Model Spectator I asked practitioners who within the space they considered their "audience" and is likely why I received mixed answers. There are layers to the roles that the audience holds

in the space. Performers may consider these layers to be more or less a part of their audience, and may consider them to a greater or lesser extent in development, but their experience will be one facet of the reception of the performance.

How do adults come to understand the way that children are receiving the performance? Short of audience reception studies, which rarely occur and are not often taken into account by artists (Klein, "Perspectives"), adults primarily understand children's reception of the performance through watching their reactions. Watching a child's reaction will provide limited but some understanding of reception. Matthew Reason uses photography from Lisa Barnard of children watching a TYA performance to analyze the inscrutability of the cognitive processing of children based on watching their expressions:

The expressions are not blank, but there is a closed quality to the children's faces, which are bathed in a glow that in its effect is not unlike that of the mesmerising television screen.

The stillness in the faces, the distant raptness of the expressions and the almost glazed quality of the eyes may lead us to believe that the audience's experience of theatre is largely passive. However, while the transfixed eye might suggest passivity, it might alternatively be taken as a supreme level of engagement. Children are frequently described as the most honest of audiences. If a production is poor or uninteresting they will fidget and shuffle, talk and look away. If, on the other hand, a production is gripping they can be still and transfixed - more so even than adults. And the transfixed audience is one that may be passive externally (publicly) but internally (privately) is very active - at work in interpreting, engaging, analysing and constructing what is going on in front of them.

(Reason 169)

Reason here presents a version of Rancière’s “emancipated spectator” argument, that the cognitive engagement is happening primarily privately, and that the audience’s engagement cannot be measured by their outward participation.

Affective engagement may be easier to account for through simply viewing a young person. Beth Juncker’s essay on “meaning” in TYA provides a useful example of a child’s affective response shaping her adult interpretation. She begins the description of the performance, done by a Danish company in Shanghai, by saying the performer entered the space, “speaking Danish to the Chinese, nonsense to the Danes”, indicating that language was de-emphasized in this performance, giving it a common characteristic with sensory theatre. Juncker’s reception of the performance seems to have been almost entirely shaped by the responses of a child seated near her rather than her understanding of the performance text:

This particular evening I was seated next to a small Chinese boy. Between 8 and 9 years old I suppose. I had noticed him, nodded and smiled, of course, but beyond that he did not occupy my mind. **I do have a natural disrespect for grown-ups wasting their time during performances observing children!...** Approximately five minutes after the performance had started the Chinese boy leaned against me, seized my sleeve, and laughed. Two minutes later he got on his feet crying from laughter. After another five minutes I found him rolling on the ground between my feet howling with laughter. It was a bit **difficult not to pay attention and to join his expressive joy.** For him, the performance became a force, an energy, which seized him and now shaped his body. He tried again and again to sit down and held his sides in vain. He participated 150%. An unforgettable evening! Ladies and gentlemen - **this is the meaning!** When this happens, theatre is worthwhile! (Juncker 14, emphasis mine)

Juncker's journey in this story is from disrespect for the concept of an adult primarily spending their time watching children while in a performance to such engagement with the reactions of the child that she uses his affective response as the answer to the question of what makes theatre for young audiences meaningful and worthwhile, rather than relying on her own interpretation of or affective response to the performance text. This is particularly of interest in sensory theatre where, I have asserted before, the affective impact on the audience is the primary aim of the performance. She credits the boy's affective response for expanding so far past his body that it shaped her own affective response, indicating a profound impact of an intra-audience viewing experience. It is important to note however that it is the level of exuberance from this spectator that shapes Juncker's experience, and a spectator with equal emotional feeling who expressed their enthusiasm more privately might not have impacted Juncker's response in the same way. Looking at examples of caregivers experiencing the performance primarily through the affective response of their caree, Bruner discussed how she observed parents react to their children relaxing during the Cloud Canyon segment of *Up and Away*: "watching parents watch that moment was always just like [exaggerated sigh]. You could feel their relief and their happiness and their appreciation for just this experience catering and being made for them" (Bruner). Bruner credits the parent's affective response (relief, happiness, appreciation) to the parent's observation that their child was relaxed and engaged in the performance.

Clearly, by influencing one another's affective responses, caregivers and participants shape one another's experiences in sensory theatre, sharing the roles of opinion leaders. On the whole, artists already spend a significant amount of time considering this relationship by building the performances with intentional consideration of this relationship and considering the way emotional and physical risks are communicated to the pair. However, it may be useful for artists

to consider in designing participatory invitations not just how risks are communicated but also how the manner of invitation communicates their framework of disability, to align the audience reception with the artist's political and social intentions related to disability.

While much of the way artists talk about their development of sensory theatre performances centers this caregiver-participant duo, in most cases these performances are not viewed in just these pairs. What are the additional layers of the audience in sensory theatre spaces and how do they impact the viewing dynamics? In previous work (Mattaini) I proposed a visual of concentric circles for understanding the layers of audience experience which exist in sensory theatre performances, with the most intimate layer being between the participant and performer, and then a secondary layer for companions (including caregivers as well as others with pre-existing relationships to participants like neurotypical siblings), and finally an outside layer of observers – those in the space without a pre-existing relationship to participants:

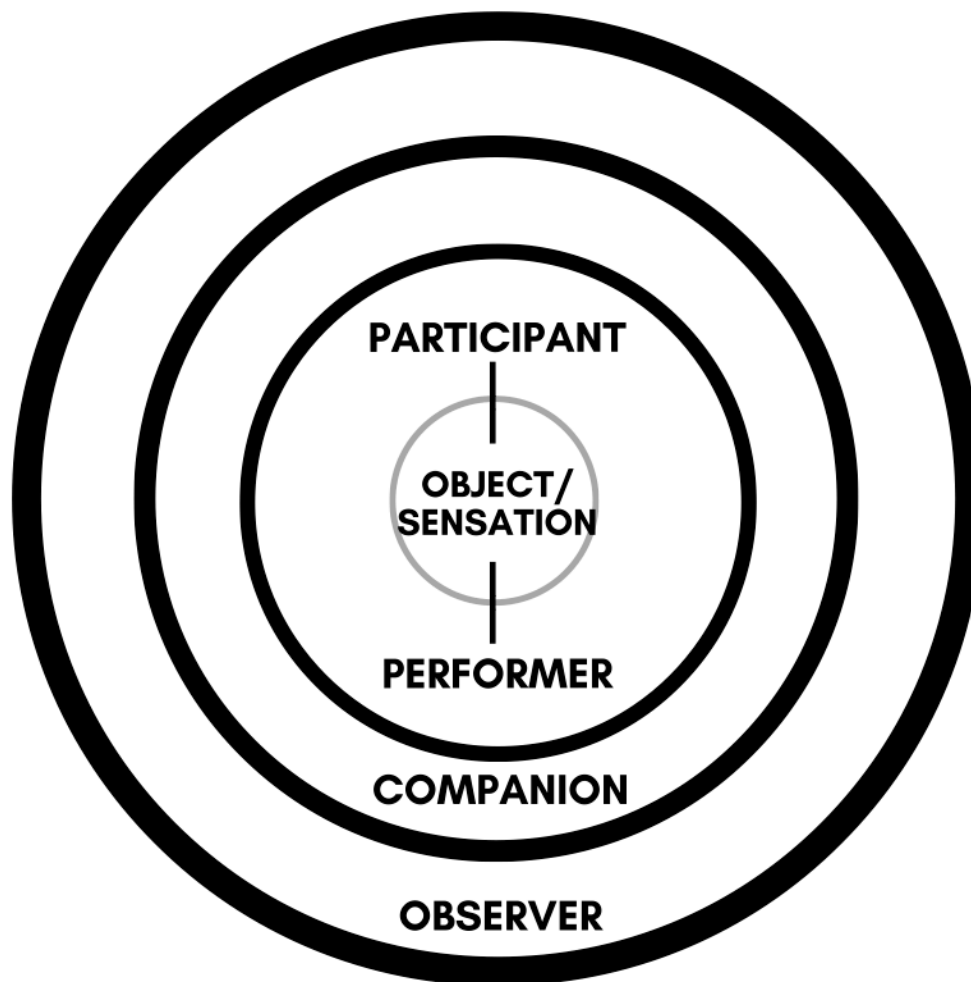


Figure 7. Diagram of audience layers from a 2019 publication (Mattaini 50)

While this basic construct still holds true, after interviewing practitioners about interactions they have observed between the various layers of audience, I have also found that the lines between these different roles can sometimes be porous. For example, a neurotypical sibling attending a performance may choose to situate themselves fully as a participant or fully as a companion or move between these two roles (depending on both their own positioning choices and on the availability of performers to interact exclusively with a sibling). As well, a caregiver may choose to separate themselves more fully from the performance and act more like an observer than an engaged part of a companion audience.

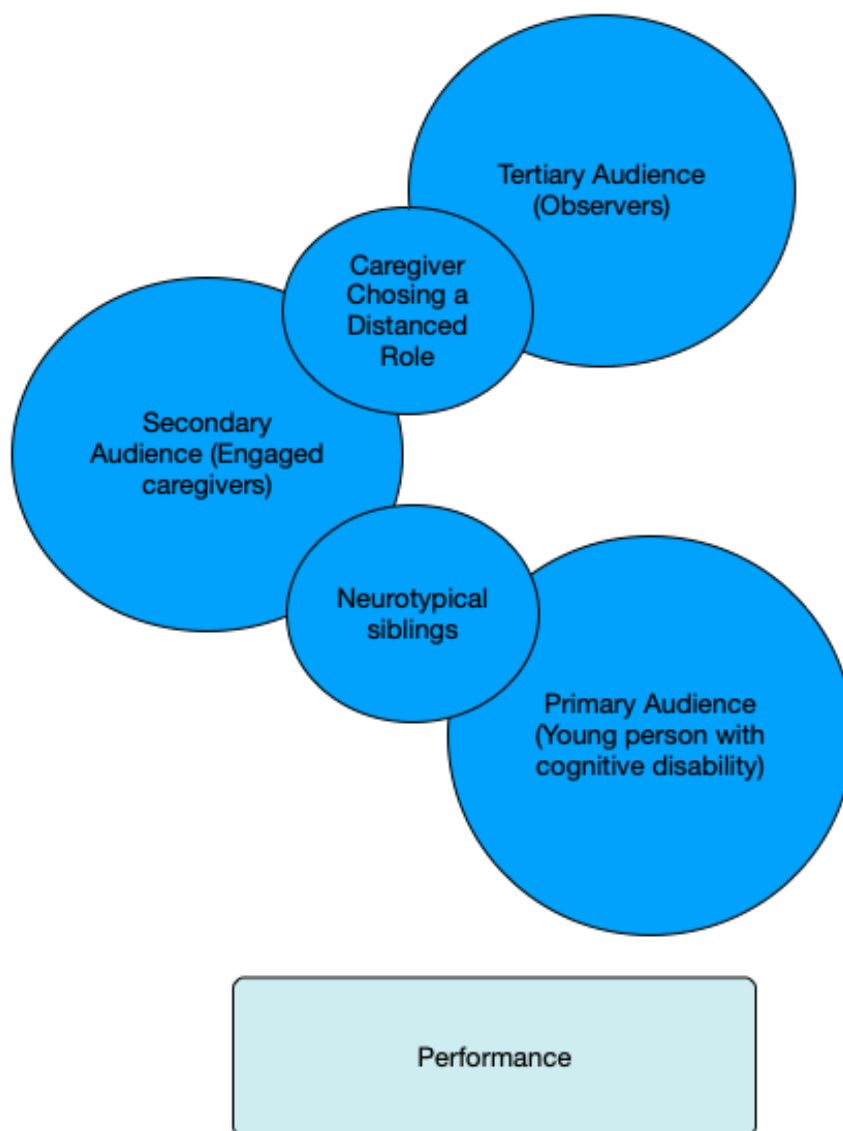


Figure 8. Updated diagram of audience layers, which indicates how spectators may move between layers of the audience.

Instead of defining audience based solely on their relationship to the people in the space before the show begins, it is more accurate to place that relationship in conversation with choices made in the space about how these spectators relate to the action of the show.

While these categories are porous, there are some limits to the movement between them. Even the most disengaged caregiver is not becoming entirely an observer (assuming they are primarily watching their own child) because the dynamic of watching a child you know

intimately having an experience is inherently different from watching a child you just met. Perhaps, as well, an observer with a more intimate relationship to disability or youth could move further toward a secondary layer of audience because of their existing frameworks of disability and youth as they enter the space, but it would be impossible for them to move fully into that role because of the limitations of the time within which to establish a sense of intimacy with the participants.

Stepping back then from the layer of how participants and caregivers view one another in performance, one can consider the broader “companion” layer of the experience. For example, how do caregivers view one another?

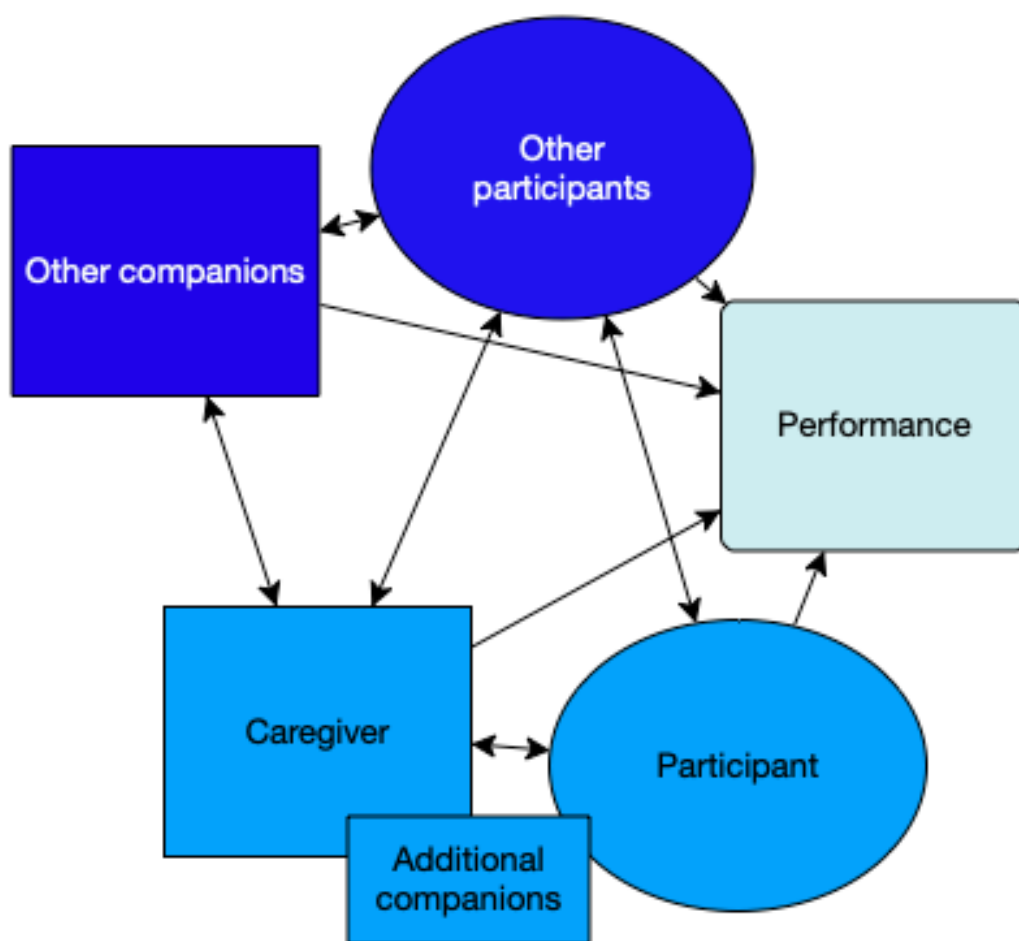


Figure 9. Diagram of the viewing dynamics among the caregiver and participant layers of the audience

An idea raised in multiple participant interviews, either explicitly or implicitly, was the impact on caregivers of being in a space where their caree was not judged for their manner of expression. This comes both from the reaction of the performers but also from being in a space of primarily people who share an experience of being a caregiver to a child whose behavior is read as disruptive in other spaces. As quoted in chapter two, Russell spoke about a caregiver who did not “even go to Dunkin Donuts, because people just won't stop staring at us” (Russell). In that instance, a stare acts as social inhibitor, diagnosing the caree as disruptive. In contrast, many participants reported parents feeling that the social space created in sensory theatre resisted the type of judgement and fear triggered by staring in other spaces. Dixon expressed the importance of sensory theatre because, " this audience [] doesn't have a lot of outlets for expression, for freedom, and even just for simply entering the door without fear that you'll be looked at or judged or shamed or anything" (Dixon). Dixon connects participant's opportunities for self-expression and freedom to their ability to avoid judgement, speaking implicitly to the caregiver-assumed risk filter but also potentially to the direct impact on participants of social inhibitions through staring. Musante also suggested that the connections formed between caregivers in sensory theatre spaces countered the isolation that many neurodiverse families feel:

I think there's something really wonderful that happens when families who are there see other families and relate. I think one of the most beautiful parts of *Up and Away* was that in each balloon basket were two groups. And with the young person engaging the most with the work but then behind them in the basket, along with them, were their families. And they would be sitting next to each other. And so there are beautiful moments of passing objects; this kind of community ownership of the task at hand and support for your neighbor, which

I think is maybe less present sometimes in families of kids with autism, or it might be very isolating. (Musante)

In Musante's example of community ownership, the exchange happens primarily between caregivers who are able to see themselves not only reflected in the other people in the room but also engage in a communal act of caregiving which counters feelings of isolation.

I put forward that a large factor in caregivers releasing their assumption of emotional risk perception comes from the knowledge that most of the other adults in the space, those who hold power over how the caregiver and their caree are viewed, are also caregivers. It is this knowledge, paired perhaps with the way those caregivers interact with one another nonverbally that counter-act the impact of being viewed by other members of the audience. However, since this project focused on practitioners rather than caregivers, this is mostly speculation based on practitioner observation of the impact on caregivers. A reception study would be called for here to ask caregivers directly about how they perceived the other caregivers in the space.

In considering inter-caregiver viewing, as well, it is important to consider the potential drawbacks of limiting spaces to assure caregivers of a common experience. Sensory theatre spaces risk becoming segregated spaces for participants for the sake of lowering the emotional risk for the caregiver. Considering the long history of segregation of disabled people, operating a space which is separated out from other cultural experiences has the potential of reifying the idea that disabled people cannot or should not be part of other shared social experiences. A full examination of this question is outside the scope of this particular project, but it is one that practitioners share an awareness of and one which the field will likely be grappling with in years to come. In analyzing how the stares of the space impact the experience for audience members, I raise the question of whether this shared understanding that caregivers have about how they want

their caree to be viewed in sensory theatre spaces can be accomplished through other means to allow this experience to become mainstreamed?

This secondary layer of audience viewing also raises the question of the impact on participants of seeing other participants respond to the performance. One would certainly hope that experience is emancipatory, as they are seeing other young people celebrated for their affective responses. How other participants are treated by performers may also impact a participant's understanding of the social permissions of the space. However, just as with inter-caregiver viewing, this would require reception studies focused on this particular question to fully explore.

Moving to the outermost layer of the audience experience, one encounters the complex dynamics of the observer's viewing experience. Observers are any members of the audience who came into the space without a pre-existing relationship with any of the young people participating. I will spend a particular amount of time considering these observers both because this is the only role I have ever been able to take in these spaces, as a neurotypical adult without any enduring connections to a neurodivergent young person, and because how these observers view the young people in these spaces is the most ethically fraught. Unlike companions who have a history with a young person to shape their reception of that young person's reactions to the performance, observer's framing of the participants happens entirely within the theatrical space. An observer brings in a social history of their relationship with disability but not a

personal history of the participants, meaning sensory theatre experiences are an opportunity for their social expectations around youth and disability to be either reified or subverted²⁵.

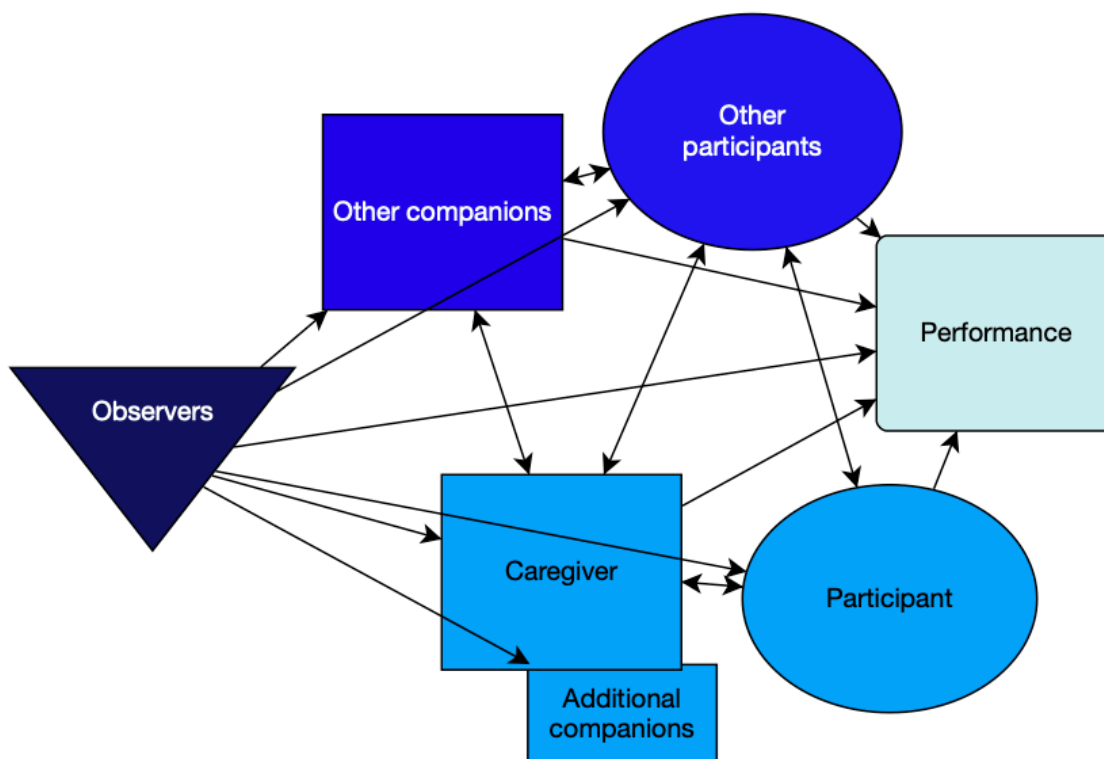


Figure 10. Diagram of the viewing dynamics between all layers of the audience, including observers

Not all practitioners interviewed for this project had included observers in their performances. For example, Stephen Santa could not think of an instance when *Jumping Jack* included observers, which may be in part because their theatre has worked most frequently within a school context, where all of the adults in the space would have some relationship with the students/participants (Santa). Those who have included observers manage their admittance through controlling ticket distribution (Zdeblick, Intv.), capping the total number of observers

²⁵ It is possible that in some cases, an observer may have a close relationship with a neurodiverse person who is not in the audience with them while observing (for example, perhaps they have an autistic sibling but are also an artist who is attending the performance primarily to inform their own practice). In that instance, the observer would have a similar role within the space but their observations in the space may end up impacting that close relationship in addition to their social expectations around youth and disability.

(Leigh, Intv.; Duret), or by inviting observers only to “beta” performances (Dixon). These control measures indicate the discomfort with the dynamic that exists when bringing observers into sensory theatre spaces.

Many participants expressed a discomfort about, but also need for, observer presence.

Brewster McGinley summed this up well:

We are very sensitive to the fishbowl mentality. Parents and families of kids with cognitive disabilities or diagnoses of any disability are constantly watched, are constantly observed. And so we wanted to deescalate that as much as possible, while also understanding that the magic of the piece was in the witnessing of it, and that we wanted to, we needed to create space for that to be able to happen. (Brewster McGinley)

Brewster McGinley expresses how having observers opens up the space to a “fishbowl mentality” in which the core layers of the audience are placed on display like fish in a fishbowl—able to be observed and examined from every angle and separated by a barrier from the observer. His acknowledgement that neurodiverse families are “constantly watched” echoes comments about both the social inhibition of being stared at in public spaces for being disruptive as well as the institutional mentality which equates safety with exposure. But he also presents the counterpoint of the “magic” of the piece coming from witnessing. This is something I have heard from many sensory theatre artists, that because this work is so far afield of typical conceptions of theatre and because the meaning of the performance comes from the affective response of the audience, without an example of seeing the performance with its intended audience, it can be difficult for the uninitiated to understand what sensory theatre is.

There are a number of potential observers who sensory theatre artists might want to impact: people who work in fields which intersect with autism like teachers or therapists, and other

artists who they want to inspire to take on this work. Trusty Sidekick was in a particularly high-pressure circumstance around bringing in observers as a company showcased by Lincoln Center—which holds great cultural power and an ability to influence artistic practice within the US—and hosts of the Big Umbrella Festival, which placed sensory theatre on display for an international group of artists and arts administrators. In addition to these observers, there is also the reality of funding which drives a need to allow funders to observe the impact of their donations. Leigh acknowledged that the work is “driven by donations” and Zdeblick stated, “I can say, ‘Actors, let's not have your family come,’ but I can't say to this person who gave us several thousand dollars to make the show happen, ‘You can't see it in action’” (Zdeblick, Intv.). The capitalist constraints of performing the work in a context without robust arts funding necessitates the inclusion of observers who have financially supported the performances.

To some extent the reason for the observer's presence makes a difference to the viewing dynamic. It may shift their sense of ownership over the performance if the observer has contributed to it financially. But in speaking with practitioners, it seemed that much of the discomfort came from the mere presence of the observer's stare rather than the reason the observer was in the space. Performers were the most likely to voice this discomfort, as people who had direct experience working in a space with observers present. In analyzing observer impact, Duret said, “the more eyes that are on you, the less authentic things become” and Bruner said,

[It] makes me feel slightly, I don't want to say icky, but like....I don't know, it feels like we're putting our audiences on display a little bit. And that feels a little icky to me. Now, I know they're there to learn our methods and see what we're doing. But it also has a slightly voyeuristic quality. (Bruner)

Neither of these quotes suggests discomfort about the observer's reason for being there, but rather a baseline discomfort with how that observation shifts the space regardless of the intentions of the observer.

To the extent that staring happens within the cognitive processing of the starrer, it is impossible to entirely direct this internal processing: whether the observers take in the performance from a sentimental, wonderous, eugenic, etc. perspective is not under the direct control of the procedural author. However, I put forward that procedural authors should consider both what lenses they have observed being evoked in their spaces already, and what lens they *wish* to evoke in their performances. In describing the engagement of observers, some participants described events which, in my analysis, fall within the wonderous frame:

They [observers] were fascinated by the world and filled with wonder and just sat and loved to just to be in the atmosphere and looking at the children having fun and...I mean, it's weird to say it was such a magical world, no one misbehaved, really. (Dixon)

Dixon here presents the atmosphere, the “magical world”, as the primary means of shaping the lens that the neurotypical adults used to view the space. She describes the observer experience as being literally shaped by “wonder”, but it is unclear to what extent this wonder was applied to the general space versus the disabled bodies in the space. It raises the question of how that wonder may be directed and whether artists need to consider what boundaries can be drawn around eliciting wonder to direct that experience to the performance text rather than the participants. Russell provided a similar analysis of the lens which neurotypical adults used in the performance:

Honestly, so many people just sit there and they...just start weeping...they get so moved emotionally. Because it's beautiful. So they're usually just in a place of just awe, and

appreciation, and love for the children, so much love for the children. They just can't get over how awesome the kids are. (Russell)

The act of crying in response to awe about the young people in the space could fall somewhere between a wonderous and sentimental view, raises the question of where that type of rhetoric is appropriate when considering a theatrical experience from a holistic perspective versus when it is being applied to the participants. What are the drawbacks and benefits of observers having a sentimental lens on the participants? Should artists redirect this stare (to the extent they can), or is there an ethical employment of the sentimental lens due to the affective aims of the performance? Or the necessities of funding the work?

On the point of funding, Holden offered this pushback to the concept of allowing observers into a sensory theatre space at all:

Otherwise, you're watching people watch a show. And that's a really emotional experience to see this thing. But I don't think that's the intention. I don't think you're making a show for other people to come in and be affected by it to then go out and take the streets and raise money for autism. I just don't— that's not what it is. It should be a special thing for kids and their families. (Holden)

Holden here connects the idea of watching another person's experience of watching theatre to a motivation to rally the observers to raise money for autism. I suspect he makes this connection because, without a fundraising or rallying intention, one is left with a question of why and how the artists are seeking to impact the observers. There may certainly be answers to that question beyond fundraising, but Holden's pushback on observer presence suggests that the field has not yet fully answered the question of the intended impact on observers and in what circumstances the compromises of an observed experience are worth the drawbacks.

Often, concerns about the observer's stare came from the notion that this stare would impact the experience of the more intimate layers of the audience. One risk of including observers is how it impacts the caregiver-assumed emotional risk perception. Caregiver's awareness of others watching them and their caree is likely to impede their ability to release that assumption of risk. In Holden's pushback on the concept of observers, he laid out the drawbacks of observers as inhibiting both the caregiver's ability to allow their caree to express themselves along with inhibiting the caregiver's ability to express their own emotion:

It's a really, really vulnerable and sensitive environment. And I think these parents who are bringing their kids to an experience where their kids are going to be most authentically themselves, I think is going to be stressful enough. But to feel like there's some people watching you and your kids, I think could be stressful. And also, it's really emotional for the parents. And I think, me feeling like if I was a parent, being able to just express myself and not have somebody watching me watch my kid watch a show. (Holden)

Russell also expressed a concern that the feeling of being watched would impact participants directly, "those kids are just so sensitive to other activity and people and it's distracting", which motivates her desire to limit the participant's feeling of being observed (Russell).

A seemingly obvious solution to this concern about awareness of being watched is to manage the visibility of observers. Several practitioners mentioned designing sections of the performance space for observers that were "unobtrusive" (Leigh, Intv.), "not so visible" (Russell), "separate", "behind a scrim" (Brewster McGinley) or where one could "sneak in the in the very back" (Holden). This lessens the chance of the more central layers of the audience becoming aware that they are being observed, but runs the risk of reifying the "stealth" way of staring at disability as laid out by Garland-Thomson: "Because staring at disability is illicit

looking, the disabled body is at once the to-be-looked-at and not-to-be-looked-at, further dramatizing the staring encounter by tending to make viewers stealthy and the viewed defensive" (Garland-Thomson, "Dares", 31). An obscured observer leaves the staree unaware that they are under a stare but does little to shape the starrer's experience. In fact, it could harken to clinical settings which have medicalized disability, placing the starrer at a clinical distance from the staree. Rather than changing the dynamic between the two, it merely creates the illusion of having shifted that dynamic.

An alternative way to manage awareness of observers is through justifying their presence in the world of the play. An interesting example of this was the observer balloon in *Up and Away*. This show is a useful case study because multiple practitioners interviewed either worked on or attended the performance, and because the design of the house, in which audience members viewed the performance from distinct hot air balloon baskets, offers an unusually bounded experience of audience design in comparison to some other sensory immersive performances where audience areas are more fluid. It also, as discussed above, had the most demands for observers of any sensory theatre performance in the US.

The performance included 5 balloons with two families per balloon. However, the fifth balloon was located behind the musicians, who were often busy playing their instruments and therefore unable to deliver the same sensory episodes to those spectators. It is also next to the visual schedule of the performance, a spot that was revisited frequently. Trusty Sidekick employs a "Zoom In/Zoom Out Structure" which includes both very intimate moments between participants and performers but also "moments of audience as a community watching the full ensemble perform" much in the way they might in a typical performance, and these full ensemble moments tended to happen either just in front of or to the side of the observer balloon

(Trusty, *Ingredients*; Trusty, *Up and Away*). This meant that the observers in this balloon had a justified reason for being in the space—they were on a balloon ride along with everyone else—but were also having a more separated experience from the sensory episodes than other audience members. Their position in the space, located near what might be considered the primary playing space, both encouraged them to look out over the rest of the audience but also placed them on display.

This in-between status of the spectators in the observer balloon is a useful visual metaphor of the tension I have noticed between the tactics of distance and engagement. Many practitioners, in trying to articulate how observers exist in their spaces, seemed to oscillate between wanting the observers to have distance from the performance and for them to be engaged in the action of the performance. Some practitioners expressed a desire to perform in spaces that allowed for more space between participants and observers (Leigh, Intv.; Russell). That desire for distance seems driven by a need to de-center the neurotypical observer in the space:

It was about being transparent that this isn't actually for you or about you. [laughter] That you're about to go in and observe something that was made for kids and families that you're getting a chance to participate in and see. And we welcome that but please remember that it's for them first. And if you have an opportunity to step up or step back, you should probably step back. (Brewster McGinley)

This “step[ping] back” is a complex request, as it can both decenter the neurotypical experience but simultaneously encourage the fishbowl mentality, because the observer is placed at a distance which discourages their direct engagement with a performance text that is quite grounded in direct sensory experiences. Without the sensory experiences, observers are left to cede their understanding of the performance to the opinion leaders of the space—the young neurodiverse

participants. That ceding of understanding could be viewed positively, as this is a cultural space in which the observer's cultural vocabulary loses power in favor of the affective responses of the participants. This presents young disabled people as figures of cultural expertise. But it could also encourage a wonderous or sentimental lens on the experience of the participants. It may also encourage a mentality of separateness from disability, reifying the notion that segregated spaces provide the best care for disabled people, which is already a default assumption for many in the US.

In one moment when discussing the potential voyeurism of the spectators in the observer balloon, Musante provided the example of an episode in which the audience would “fish” for objects under a cloud tarp: “One of the balloons didn't have audience members. And so we didn't fish. They didn't fish. They just watched people fish” (Musante). Here, Musante—likely unconsciously—labels the observers as not audience members, despite being in the physical space of the audience. He goes on to say how he would try to offer commentary about the fishing to those observers so that “they were on the trip with us” but an experience in which observers are not a part of the audience despite being on the trip suggests a sense of “specialness” for the experience of the participants which might be counter-productive to a goal of framing the observers and participants as equals who should operate in the same social spaces. This is made even more complex when considering *Up and Away* had an additional observer space hidden behind a scrim which obscured surplus observers who wanted to watch all or a part of the show, creating a condition where the procedural authors were simultaneously managing very different observer experiences.

In discussing the engagement with observers, many performers reported engaging observers in sensory episodes when a more limited audience size allowed for extra time to

provide sensory experiences to them. For example, Samantha Leigh commented, “It's pretty fun when the sizing of the audience allows like, ‘Okay, this group is going to play too’” (Leigh, Intv.). Based on the fact that performers were most likely to express their discomfort about how observers shifted the energy of the space and their impulses to include observers in sensory episodes when resources allowed for it, I would propose that companies could do more work to intentionally include observers in the sensory episodes of all performances to create a sense of equal membership in the audience which discourages primarily observing the experience through the participants, because it is difficult for the company to control the lens through which observers view those participants.

There are some steps that companies can take to direct the observer lens beyond the physical distance from performance. Providing explicit social instruction to observers of not just what they are expected to do in the room but also the aims of the production and even specifically how to watch the participants may shape their lens to some extent. As well, how they are brought into the space (in instances when the observer space is visible) helps to communicate to both the participants and the observers what their relationship should be to one another. Zdeblick recounted three methods of seating observers that Parachute Players has employed, all of which she evaluated as not working. The first was seating observers alongside the participants, but this led to questions about who these adults are and kids asking those adults “where's your kid?”. The second was observers pre-seating, “pretending to be part of the tech crew”, which failed because “it just feels weird to walk into a space where people are already set up to watch you”. The third method was using a camera to capture the performance for archival purposes but drew participants to pay attention to the camera “because cameras are so cool. And even if you see a camera hidden between a curtain, you're going to go over to it and touch it. And we set up

the rules of the space where you can go over to things and touch things." (Zdeblick, Intv.). Some practitioners evaluated their experiences with observers as working overall, but others had clear discomfort about the tactics up until this point to include observers. I put forward that the discomfort about their presence, frustrations with ways of bringing them into the space, and the tensions between engagement and distance indicate that the field has still not yet found a satisfactory way to deal with the realities of observers in these spaces. I posit that this is in part because practitioners have not yet settled on a clear answer as to what lens they want these observers to have when they enter the space. More specificity around how both the participants and the performance text is framed for the observers may provide clarity on the logistics of their inclusion in the space.

The intimacy that immersive productions allow for neurodivergent audiences has obvious benefits, but it also introduces a complicated dynamic of intra-audience viewing. Adults in these spaces, curious about how the performance is impacting participants, are drawn to watching their experiences. Considering the complex social histories of disability and the way that staring shapes the way starers understand disabled bodies, procedural authors must consider how they direct the stares of the adults in these spaces. There is no one clear tactic which emerged as the superior way to include observers in the space, as all tactics explored had clear drawbacks. However, clarity about the intended frame around disability in these spaces may allow artists the opportunity to make more informed decisions about how intra-audience viewing is managed to ensure that the performance is received by all layers of the audience in a way which asserts the dignity of the participating audience members.

Conclusion

This project began with the question of how the temporary aesthetic space created in ability-inclusive sensory theatre performances reinforce and/or subvert socio-cultural expectations around disability. Ultimately there are many elements of sensory theatre which subvert the notion that theatre experience for young people with disabilities must be educational or therapeutic, as well as the risk aversion of many caregiving spaces. But there are also some practices in the field which reify expectations that young disabled people require artistic guidance and frame their experiences under a sentimental lens.

I began the research with a documentation of how the genre of sensory theatre has developed within the United States, and what influences lead to the distinctions of sensory theatre practices in the US. The autism + model which is prevalent in the US is likely due to a combination of the genre's origins with autism-specific educational environments and the general level of awareness of the term "autism" for funders. Due to the lack of state sponsorship for arts in the US, projects are funded largely through organizational grants and private donation, driving the artists to use language with broad cultural awareness. The genre's emergence in the US from autism-specific classrooms and collaborations with service providers influenced aesthetic elements such as the use of visual schedules within sets. In countries where students are more likely to be educated in schools which serve a broad range of disabilities in a specialized setting, artists are able to build their art around settings rather than around labels. The US's focus on mainstreaming and specificity in educational labels has made the tactic of partnering with schools less popular in the US. This has created a landscape in which the question of labeling the audience has become particularly difficult, because many audiences are encountering the theatre experience directly through marketing materials.

The complexities of the social landscape around autism (the neurodiversity movement, cure narratives, vaccine skepticism, debate over therapies like ABA, etc.) place artists in a difficult position when choosing consultants and funders to partner with. I assert that companies should do more to take explicit stances related to their alignment with the neurodiversity movement, so the agency practiced by young people within performance spaces is present at all levels of the production process. Creating policies about expert and funding partnerships (including what constitutes ethical partnership with those whose philosophy does not align with the company's stance) as well as transparency with audiences about those policies would allow the political aims of the field to come into clearer focus.

Moving to the aesthetic aims of sensory theatre, chapter two asks how meaning is generated in sensory theatre performances. I assert that meaning is generated within sensory theatre primarily through affect. The affective goals of sensory theatre affirm an aesthetic centrality which subverts the expectation that all art practices related to youth must be educational and add art practices related to disability must be therapeutic. The aesthetic goals of sensory theatre assert the value of the creative, emotional, playful capacities of young disabled people.

I find that the primarily affective experience is equally valid to theatrical experiences that center cognitive understanding of a fictional narrative. Artists create affective impact through sensory episodes which influence the emotional state of the audience. Semiotic signifiers are present but engagement with a semiotic lens is optional, opening the experience to broad range of cognitive states of being. This affective impact extends beyond the neurodivergent participants to include caregivers and performers, shaping a shared affective experience. There is debate in the sensory theatre field about whether cognitive understanding should be entirely de-privileged or if some engagement with a fictive narrative is essential to the experience of

“theatre”. While I present a case for a purely affective engagement, it is ultimately the realm of artists to decide to what extent a cognitive understanding is essential to the intention of each particular show. Semiotic and affective engagement are a matter for experimentation, but there is consensus that marking off the theatrical space as distinct from the quotidian is important to the creation of a “theatre” experience. Both artists and scholars must have a clear understanding of whether an art piece has a semiotic aim to determine methods of assessing the audience experience. If a performance has purely affective aims, evaluating its semiotic success would be unfair to the artist and frustrating to the scholar. The difficulties of assessing a primarily affective piece of theatre will be explored in the future research section.

Chapter three examines how artists work “with” their intended audiences for these productions and to what extent this collaboration process amounts to co-authorship. I. While the hierarchies of “artist” and “audience” make it difficult to fully reach co-authorship, the multi-faceted ways artists collaborate with their audience affirms the agency and artistic practices of neurodivergent young people. This subverts socio-cultural expectations that neurotypical people are inherently better qualified to author theatrical work, but because of the paucity of neurodiverse people in leadership roles, may also at times reinforce the notion that neurodivergent people are not capable of artistic leadership.

Sensory theatre practitioners use multiple methods to collaborate with Model Spectators, directly and indirectly, while developing their performances and provide opportunities for profound participation during the performance itself. This development work shapes the horizon of participation that will be offered to Empirical Spectators in performance. To shape the participatory experience, procedural authors offer overt invitations to participate and empathetic responses to their audience which allows for meaningful consent within participatory episodes.

Practitioners also expand the horizon of participation by offering multiple choices—beyond A or B constrictions—which allows for a greater level of agency. The number of choices offered can be troubled by a need to place some limitations on audience engagement in order to keep the experience within the boundaries of “theatre”, but artists continue to flirt with this line to approach the edge of participatory possibility. While this may not amount to fully equal co-authorship of the performance, it does present opportunities for participants to practice meaningful agency.

Chapter four adds complexity to the notion of agency through participation by examining the ways participant perception of risk limits their practice of agency in performance. Below is a diagram which places the two chapters together to detail the myriad ways audience participation can be limited in performance.

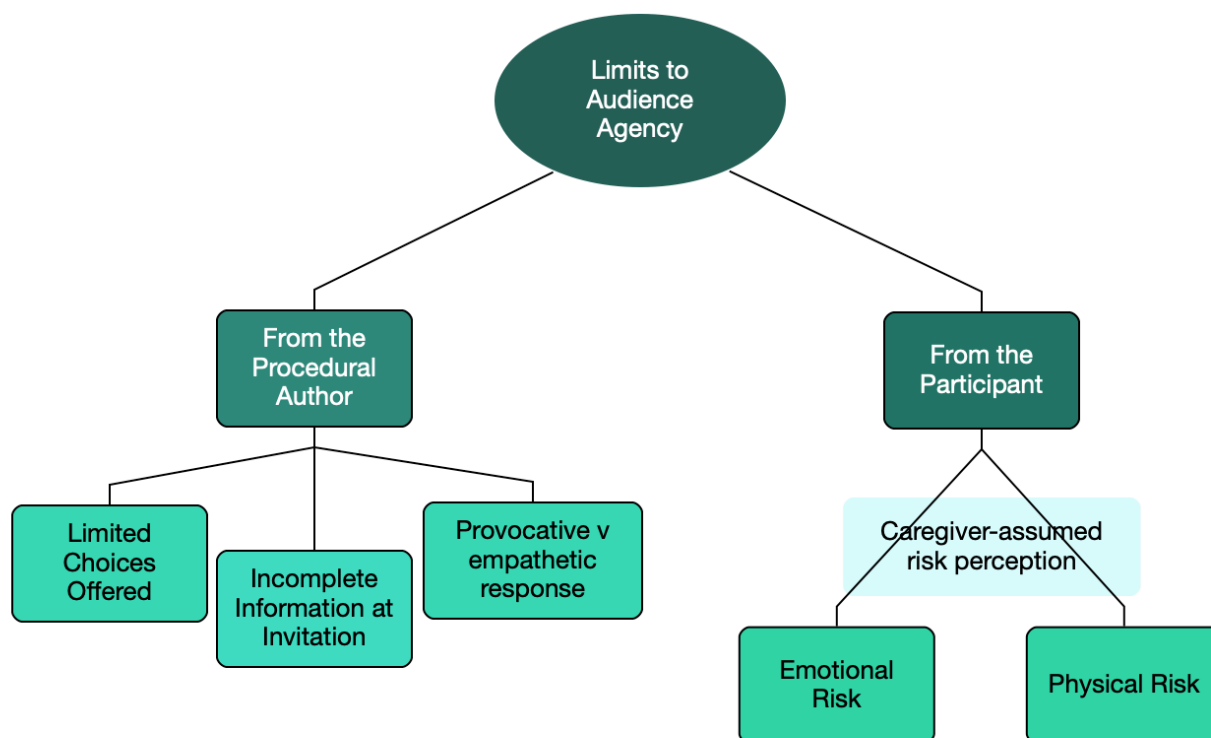


Figure 11. Diagram of limits to audience agency

Participants limit their own agency within participatory experiences based on their perception of risk. For young and disabled participants, this risk assessment is often assumed by their caregivers. The tactics of sensory theatre which allow for transparency about the risks of the space—which are minimal when it comes to emotional risk and generally well managed when it comes to physical risk—create conditions where this caregiver-assumed risk can be released, allowing the participant an opportunity to assert their own decision-making about risky behavior. This assertion that participants manage their own risks connects to the concept of dignity of risk, which holds that many of the worthwhile pursuits of humanity are inherently tied to the opportunity to take risks and potentially fail.

The caregiving dynamic of the space reifies the notion that young disabled people require care but acts to re-balance the duty of care with the dignity of risk. This allows for a political perspective to emerge, one which subverts socio-cultural expectations that youth and disability must be inherently connected with paternalism. The political alignment with the dignity of risk holds importance in sensory theatre spaces, but I posit these political aims are secondary to the affective aims, as sensory theatre is an aesthetic experience above all else.

Chapter five examines the tensions created by an immersive theatre design with multiple layers of audience, and the impacts of placing young disabled people in a position to be viewed. The nature of living with a visible disability, which certain neurodivergences fall within due to behavior “disruptions” in social spaces, means frequent encounters with stares. The nature of immersive theatre design is a lack of delineation between audience and performance space, placing the audience within the viewing space. These two dynamics in combination create a challenge for artists to manage the way that staring happens within their performance space.

There are many potential visual rhetorics of disability a starrer might employ to frame disability (wonderous, sentimental, exotic, realistic, eugenic) and social narratives which equate care with a lack of privacy. Artists must find ways to resist the visual rhetorics which they find problematic in their spaces through directing the audience gaze through design and interaction with performers.

The audience dynamics within sensory theatre are particularly complex because of the various layers of audience experience (participant, companion, observer) and how some audience members move between these layers. Within the most intimate layer of participants and caregivers, spectators in both roles hold a level of cultural capital which means the reaction of the other will hold significant weight, shaping one another's experience in a reciprocal way. This caregiver-participant duo has the most impact on one another, but their experience is also shaped by their interactions with other caregivers and participants. As well, in some performances, artists allow observers into the space who often watch the experiences of the more intimate layers of the audience. These observers have the most troubled relationship to the space, creating the greatest opportunity for the performance to slip into pure voyeurism. As a result, artists must take the greatest care with managing the stare of the observer, framing the performance for the observer rather than allowing the observer to choose their own frame without guidance.

Understanding the impact of audience members on one another's experiences with certainty would necessitate an empirical study. However, even without this data artists can use the work of Garland-Thomson about how disabled people have worked to manage stare encounters, both in public life and in aesthetic practices, to develop strategies that shape the framework their audience places upon disability in these spaces.

Future Research

Throughout this dissertation, I have pointed to a fundamental flaw of working without the voices of the neurodivergent young people who act as the core audience for this genre. Most research on sensory theatre relies either primarily on caregiver reporting (Giserman-Kiss et al.; Creech, *Tube*; Creech, *Bounce*; Varvarigou, *Mirror*; Varvarigou, *Light*; Varvarigou, *Uncancellable*), reflection from practitioners (Zdeblick; Mahoney, “Space”; Wood; Mahoney, *Sensory*), or combination of the two (Brigg, *Theatre*; Goodwin). This is not for lack of interest in the participating spectators, but rather because of a lack of communication options and the barriers of additional research protocols when studying vulnerable populations. It is incumbent upon the entire field, including my own work, to find ways to directly study the affective impact of sensory theatre on neurodivergent young people.

For insight on studying reception in a direct way, the field can look to TYA scholars who have conducted qualitative studies of young audiences. Matthew Reason, Jeanne Klein, and Shifra Schonmann have all conducted qualitative research on audience reception with young audiences. While these studies offer useful starting points, their methods cannot be simply wholesale applied to sensory theatre, both because of the greater communication barriers for this audience and because their studies focus on cognitive understanding.

While affect is not absent in their analysis, it takes a secondary role to semiotics. All three share a curiosity about what children understand in performance, and more specifically, how they form the distinction between understanding the fictional reality of a performance, the “evoked experience”, and the “material reality” of what is presented onstage (Reason 60). Schonmann, as covered in chapter two, is particularly concerned with children developing the skills to differentiate these two in order to form a proper “aesthetic distance”. An ideal aesthetic distance allows the child to remain invested in the performance but also maintain awareness of

the fictionality of the onstage events, so as to not “lose” themselves in the fiction, which Schonmann fears may make the emotional experience too intense (Schonmann 65). Schonmann focuses an entire chapter on catharsis (which she expands beyond the purgation of pity and fear), defining it as “the emotional energy that can be channeled to reveal to the child things that he needs to know... a process in which the child is open to learning through an artistic experience” (84). This definition frames catharsis as utilitarian, deriving value from its ability to teach. Her examples in the chapter make clear that the primary way the audience would experience this catharsis is through empathy with the characters onstage, suggesting there needs to be a level of cognitive understanding for affect/catharsis to be triggered. Klein is similarly interested in how children separate the real and fictive worlds: “Yet how and (i.e., at what age and under what conditions) do young spectators *simultaneously* feel and abstract imagistic forms and their conceptual, metaphorical content *beyond* discursive means?” and puts forward a concept of “imaginative ‘aesthetic experience’” which she defines as “internal cognitive-affective process of intra- and interpersonal meaning making” (Klein, *Perspectives* 42). While she includes the affective process, her primary interest in affect is how it contributes to meaning-making through cognitive analysis.

The challenge of applying a primarily semiotic lens to a primarily affective piece of art become clear in one example from Reason. In *The Young Audience*, Reason includes analysis of the audience reception of *Psst!*, a show from Europe which was programmed for a Scottish audience by Tony Reekie for the Imagine Festival. Reason recounts how the children attending this performance drew the puppet characters in largely abstracted spaces, which was unusual in comparison to other productions which had also used puppets. He puts forward that this is evidence that the production was “not working for them” (93). He then quotes Reekie discussing

his awareness that the show was “risk” for a Scottish audience because “it was about the mood as much as anything else” (93). Both Reason and Reekie seem confident that the children watching the production were thrown off due to cultural differences and a lack of tools to process this different approach to theatre. However, later on Reason also remarks,

In terms of its reception during the several performances I watched, *Psst!* did not fail its Scottish audience in that it was not enjoyed, nor did the audience fail the production in refusing to engage and work with it. But it is fair to say that the young audience did not have all the tools or experience to deal with the stark difference in its theatrical tone and abstract, elusive nature. (93)

While not having the full context of Reason’s evidence from the performance, it seems possible that if the children did “enjoy” and “engage” with this “abstract” production while it happened, perhaps the disconnect was not between the children and the performance but rather between the children and the tools being used to measure their reception. Reason’s research is heavily grounded in capturing a cognitive understanding of the performance, so that when faced with a show which may have had primarily affective aims (its “mood”), perhaps his tools of measurement were not able to capture what was successful about the show. This suggests that while there has been significant, creative scholarly work in the TYA field towards capturing audience reception, there may be yet more challenge ahead in order to assess the impact of a primarily affective theatre piece. How would one design a study to capture the affective impact of a performance on an audience who cannot adeptly describe their affective experience? The scholarship which does exist on affect relies heavily on the author recounting their own affective experience of watching a performance (Machon “(Syn)aesthetics”; Alston “Politics”). What happens when a scholar tries to capture that same information from someone who not only is not

already a scholar of affect but may not even speak? Unfortunately, I am not able to provide answers to these questions, but I am hopeful that further experimentation both within the field of sensory theatre scholarship as well as participatory and immersive theatre scholarship will reveal new methodologies for assessing sensory theatre.

Studying the impact of the staring encounter for observers and caregivers may prove simpler, as a study could be designed which directly asks neurotypical adults to describe their experience, including how they read the social cues about their role in the space and what they observed about participants. A comparison study could even be designed which compared adult responses after different performances that utilized differing tactics for managing intra-audience viewing. However, studying the impact of a staring encounter on participants would again be difficult due to communication barriers. To develop a meaningful audience reception study for sensory theatre, scholars will need to pull from research outside the realm of theatre which uses creative approaches to communication with people with intellectual and cognitive disabilities to include this population both as research subjects and as co-researchers. Just as with calls to the artistic field to include neurodivergent people in artistic leadership positions, likewise the scholarly field must include neurodivergent people in academic leadership.

Final Thoughts

As of the time of writing, the US was still struggling to recover from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic (and may still have future waves of the virus to contend with), leaving us in a state of uncertainty about the future of the sensory theatre field. However, based on the interviews I conducted with practitioners, it is clear that the passion in the field for serving this audience is unlikely to dissipate any time soon. My final question in all interviews was where participants saw the field in ten years. Themes which emerged includes the use of multiple

platforms and technologies, more artists with disabilities in leadership roles, more funding, acknowledgement of the field as legitimate aesthetic work, experimentation with narrative, expansion of the age expectations around sensory theatre (creating for a primary audience of neurodivergent adults, or having neurodivergent children as the artistic leaders with adults as their audience) and applying the ethos of sensory theatre to more generalized theatre experiences which rely less on specific labels. The theme which emerged most frequently was simply more sensory practice, done by a greater number of companies in a greater number of locations and with a diverse approach to the genre so that all audience members who had been previously marginalized from theatrical experience would be radically included.

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Appendix – Historical Timelines

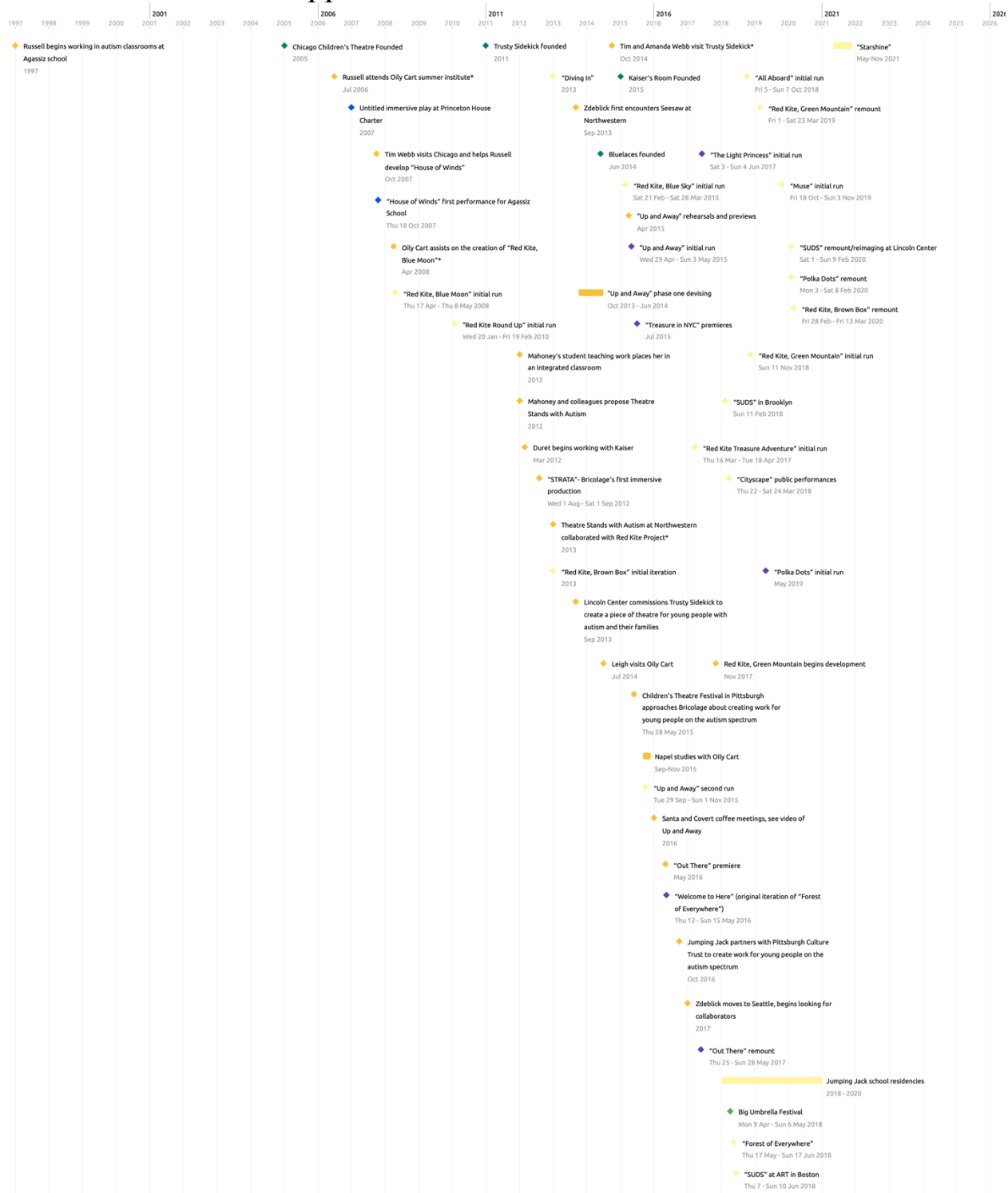


Figure 12. Full timeline of AIST events in the US (excluding Russell working with Agazzi in 1997 for space/legibility)

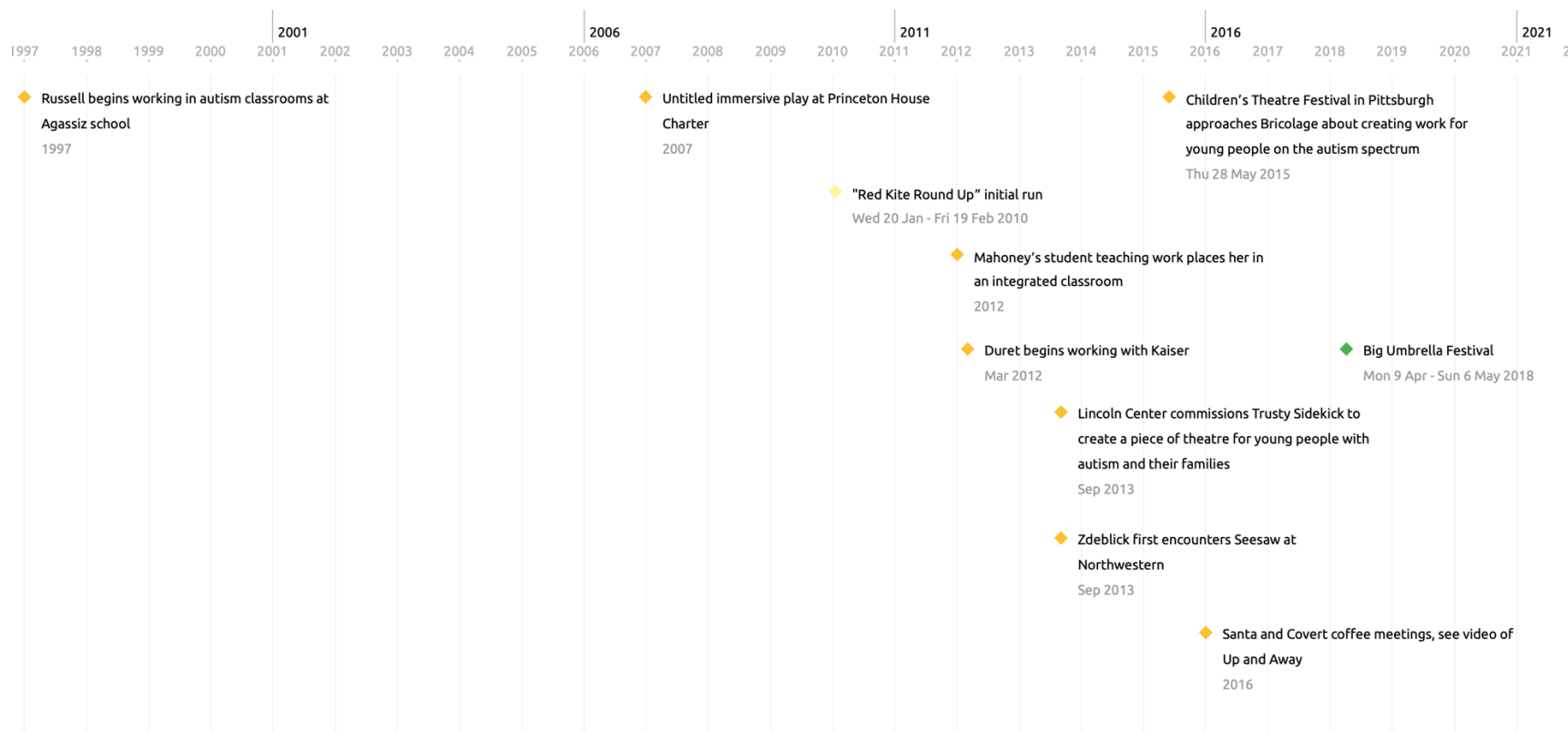


Figure 13. Timeline specifically of events which sparked the formation of new companies or first time productions

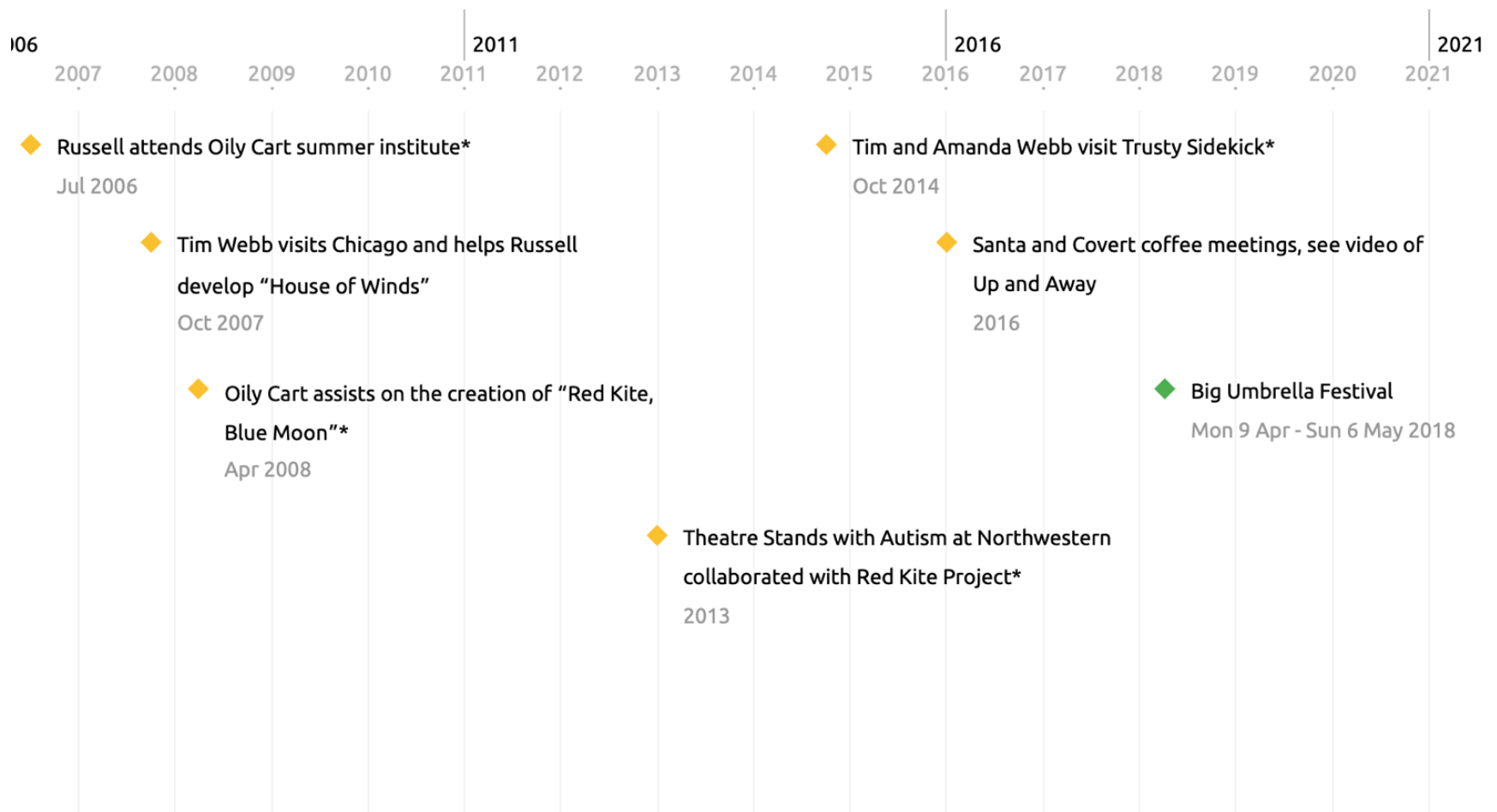


Figure 14. Timeline of company collaborations

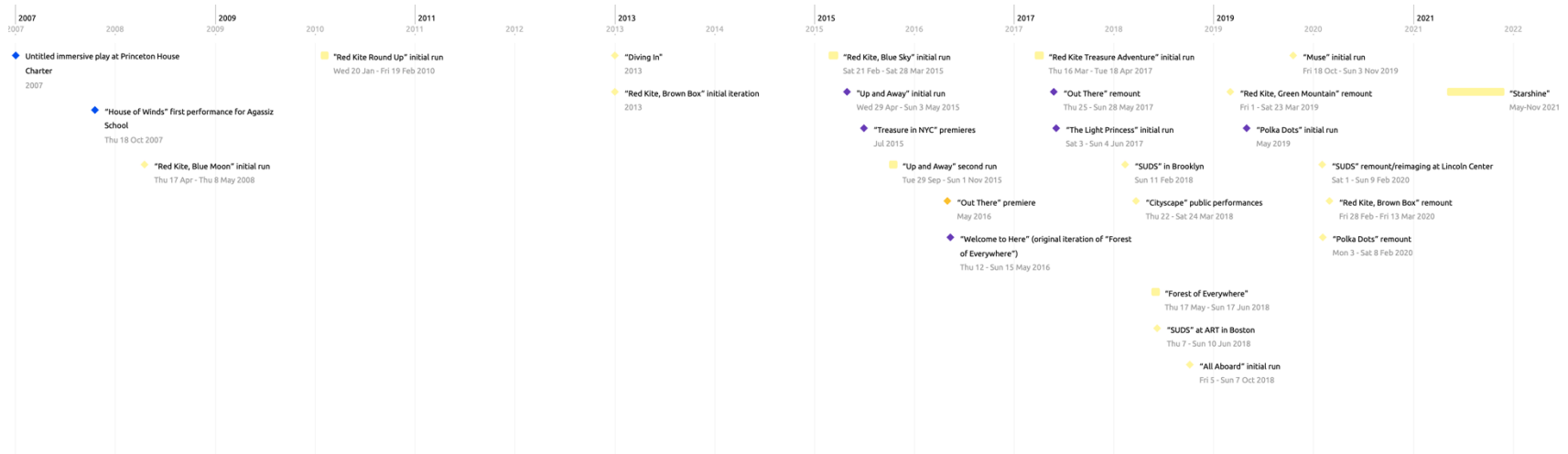


Figure 15. Full timeline of sensory theatre performances in the US

Label	#	Movement	Start Date	Source	Participant	Location	End Date	Category
Russell begins working in autism classrooms at Agassiz school	1	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	1997	Kenaz-Mara Blog	JR	Chicago	1997	Spark
Chicago Children's Theatre Founded	2	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	2005	CCT Website	JR	Chicago	2005	Company Founding
Russell attends Oily Cart summer institute*	3	Oily Cart Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Jul 2006	Russell Interview Gardner Article (2016)	JR TW OSA MR	London	Jul 2006	Collaboration
Untitled immersive play at Princeton House Charter	4		2007	Musante Interview Musante CV	PM	Orlando	2007	Show Premiere Performance Spark
Tim Webb visits Chicago and helps Russell develop "House of Winds"	5	Oily Cart Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Oct 2007	Russell Interview Red Kite Documentary	JR JR TW	Chicago	Oct 2007	Collaboration
"House of Winds" first performance for Agassiz School	6	Oily Cart Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Thu 18 Oct 2007	Jones Newspaper Articles Red Kite Documentary	JR JR TW	Chicago	Thu 18 Oct 2007	Show Premiere Performance
Oily Cart assists on the creation of "Red Kite, Blue Moon"*	7	Oily Cart Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Apr 2008	Holden Interview	JR JR TW OSA MR	Chicago	Apr 2008	Collaboration
"Red Kite, Blue Moon" initial run	8	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Thu 17 Apr 2008	Russell Interview Red Kite, Blue Moon Social Sta	JR JR TW	Chicago	Thu 8 May 2008	Show Premiere Performance
"Red Kite Round Up" initial run	9	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red Kaiser's Room	Wed 20 Jan 2010	Kenaz-Mara Blog	SD JR	Chicago	Fri 19 Feb 2010	Show Premiere Performance Spark
Trusty Sidekick Founded	10	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan	2011	Trusty Sidekick Website			2011	Company Founding
Mahoney's student teaching work places her in an integrated classroom	11		2012	Mahoney Interview	AM	Chicago	2012	Spark
Mahoney and colleagues propose Theatre Stands with Autism	12	Seesaw	2012	Mahoney Interview	AM	Chicago	2012	
Duret begins working with Kaiser	13	Kaiser's Room	Mar 2012	Duret Interview Broadway World, "The Cell" Confirmation Email	SD	New York City	Mar 2012	Spark
"STRATA"- Bricolage's first immersive production	14	Bricolage Production Company	Wed 1 Aug 2012	Dixon Interview Bricolage Website	TD	Pittsburgh	Sat 1 Sep 2012	
Theatre Stands with Autism at Northwestern collaborated with Red Kite Project*	15	BlueLaces Theatre Company Seesaw Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	2013	Mahoney Interview	AM JR	Chicago	2013	Collaboration
"Diving In"	16	Seesaw	2013	Mahoney Interview	AM	Chicago	2013	Show Premiere Performance
"Red Kite, Brown Box" initial iteration	17	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	2013	Chicago Parent Blog Post	JR	Chicago	2013	Show Premiere Performance
Lincoln Center commissions Trusty Sidekick to create a piece of theatre for young people with autism and their families	18	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan	Sep 2013	Brewster McGinley Interview Trusty Sidekick Phase 1 Report	BM	New York City	Sep 2013	Spark
Zdeblick first encounters Seesaw at Northwestern	19	Parachute Players Seesaw	Sep 2013	Napel Interview Confirmation Email	AM MC	Chicago	Sep 2013	Spark
"Up and Away" phase one devising	20	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan	Oct 2013	Musante Interview Bluner Interview Trusty Sidekick Phase 1 Report	BM EB AM	New York City	Jun 2014	
BlueLaces Founded	21	BlueLaces Theatre Company Seesaw	Jun 2014	BlueLaces Website	AM	New York City	Jun 2014	Company Founding
Leigh visits Oily Cart	22	Oily Cart	Jul 2014	Leigh Interview Leigh Email	SL TW OSA MR	London	Jul 2014	
Tim and Amanda Webb visit Trusty Sidekick*	23	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan Oily Cart	Oct 2014	Brewster McGinley Interview	BM EB AM PM TW OSA	New York City	Oct 2014	Collaboration
Kaiser's Room Founded	24	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red Kaiser's Room	2015	Guidestar Records	SD	New York City	2015	Company Founding
"Red Kite, Blue Sky" initial run	25	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Sat 21 Feb 2015	Worgan Blog Post	JR	Chicago	Sat 28 Mar 2015	Show Premiere Performance
"Up and Away" rehearsals and previews	26	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan	Apr 2015	Brewster McGinley Interview	BM EB SL AM PM	New York City	Apr 2015	
"Up and Away" initial run	27	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan	Wed 29 Apr 2015	Brewster McGinley Interview Trusty Sidekick Website	BM EB SL AM PM	New York City	Sun 3 May 2015	Show Premiere Performance
Children's Theatre Festival in Pittsburgh approaches Bricolage about creating work for young people on the autism spectrum	28	Bricolage Production Company	Thu 28 May 2015	Dixon Interview Eberson Newspaper Article (20	TD	Pittsburgh	Thu 28 May 2015	Spark

"Treasure in NYC" premieres	29	Kaiser's Room	Jul 2015	Duret Interview	SD	New York City	Jul 2015	Show Premiere Performance
Napel studies with Oily Cart	30	Seesaw Oily Cart	Sep 2015	Napel Interview Popely Newspaper Article	MZ TW THO BR	London	Nov 2015	
"Up and Away" second run	31	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan	Tue 29 Sep 2015	Trusty Sidekick Website	RBW EB PA	New York City	Sun 1 Nov 2015	Performance
Santa and Covert coffee meetings, see video of Up and Away	32	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan Jumping Jack Theater	2016	Santa Interview	SS	Pittsburgh	2016	Collaboration Spark
"Out There" premiere	33	Blueclaces Theatre Company	May 2016	Leigh Email	SL AM	New York City	May 2016	Show Premiere Performance
"Welcome to Here" (original iteration of "Forest of Everywhere")	34	Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan Oily Cart Bricolage Production Company	Thu 12 May 2016	Dixon Interview Ebersen Newspaper Article (20)	TD	Pittsburgh	Sun 15 May 2016	Show Premiere Performance
Jumping Jack partners with Pittsburgh Culture Trust to create work for young people on the autism spectrum	35	Jumping Jack Theater	Oct 2016	Santa Interview Confirmation Email	SS	Pittsburgh	Oct 2016	
Zdebick moves to Seattle, begins looking for collaborators	36	Parachute Players Seesaw	2017	Napel Interview	MZ	Seattle	2017	
"Red Kite Treasure Adventure" initial run	37	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Thu 16 Mar 2017	ITA Blog	JR	Chicago	Tue 18 Apr 2017	Show Premiere Performance
"Out There" remount	38	Blueclaces Theatre Company	Thu 25 May 2017	Leigh Interview Blueclaces Website	SL AM	New York City	Sun 28 May 2017	Performance
"The Light Princess" initial run	39	Jumping Jack Theater	Sat 3 Jun 2017	Santa Interview Broadway World	SS	Pittsburgh	Sun 4 Jun 2017	Show Premiere Performance
Red Kite, Green Mountain begins development	40	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Nov 2017	Bishop Blog	JR	Burlington,	Nov 2017	
Jumping Jack school residencies	41	Jumping Jack Theater	2018	Santa Interview	SS	Pittsburgh	2020	
"SUDS" in Brooklyn	42	Blueclaces Theatre Company	Sun 11 Feb 2018	MAC Calendar	EB AM	New York City	Sun 11 Feb 2018	Show Premiere Performance
"Cityscape" public performances	43	Jumping Jack Theater	Thu 22 Mar 2018	Broadway World	SS	Pittsburgh	Sat 24 Mar 2018	Show Premiere Performance
Big Umbrella Festival	44	Blueclaces Theatre Company Trusty Sidekick Theater Compan Oily Cart Bricolage Production Company Jumping Jack Theater	Mon 9 Apr 2018	Brewster McGinley Interview ASSITEJ Blog	RBW EB TD BR SL AM RM TW THO	New York City	Sun 6 May 2018	Collaboration Spark
"Forest of Everywhere"	45	Bricolage Production Company	Thu 17 May 2018	Ebersen Newspaper Article (20) Bricolage Website	TD	Pittsburgh	Sun 17 Jun 2018	Performance
"SUDS" at ART in Boston	46	Blueclaces Theatre Company	Thu 7 Jun 2018	Blueclaces Testimonial Video 20 ART Website Actor's Fund Calendar Leigh Email	EB SL AM	Boston	Sun 10 Jun 2018	Performance
"All Aboard" initial run	47	Blueclaces Theatre Company	Fri 5 Oct 2018	Stinson Portfolio Blueclaces Website All Aboard Social Story Leigh Email	EB SL AM		Sun 7 Oct 2018	Performance
"Red Kite, Green Mountain" initial run	48	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Sun 11 Nov 2018	Flynn Facebook Event	JR	Burlington,	Sun 11 Nov 2018	Show Premiere
"Red Kite, Green Mountain" remount	49	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Fri 1 Mar 2019	Chicago Parent Calendar	JR	Chicago	Sat 23 Mar 2019	Performance
"Polka Dots" initial run	50	Parachute Players	May 2019	Parachute Players Website	MZ	Seattle	May 2019	Show Premiere Performance
"Muse" initial run	51	Blueclaces Theatre Company	Fri 18 Oct 2019	Leigh Interview Blueclaces Website MAC Calendar Leigh Email	SL	New York City	Sun 3 Nov 2019	Show Premiere Performance
"SUDS" remount/reimagining at Lincoln Center	52	Blueclaces Theatre Company	Sat 1 Feb 2020	Leigh Interview Blueclaces Website	SL	New York City	Sun 9 Feb 2020	Performance
"Polka Dots" remount	53	Parachute Players	Mon 3 Feb 2020	Parachute Players Website	MZ	Seattle	Sat 8 Feb 2020	Performance
"Red Kite, Brown Box" remount	54	Chicago Children's Theatre/Red	Fri 28 Feb 2020	Chicago Parent Blog Post	JR	Chicago	Fri 13 Mar 2020	Performance
"Starshine"	55	Jumping Jack Theater	May 2021	Santa Interview Funk Article	SS	Pittsburgh	Nov 2021	Show Premiere Performance

Figure 16. All events logged to construct timeline

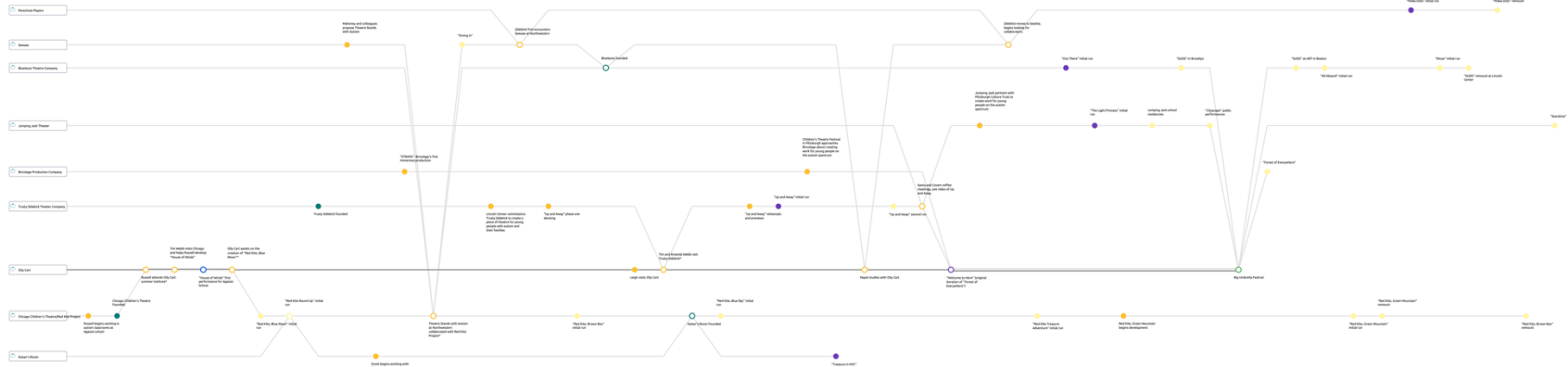


Figure 17. Subway view of companies collaborating

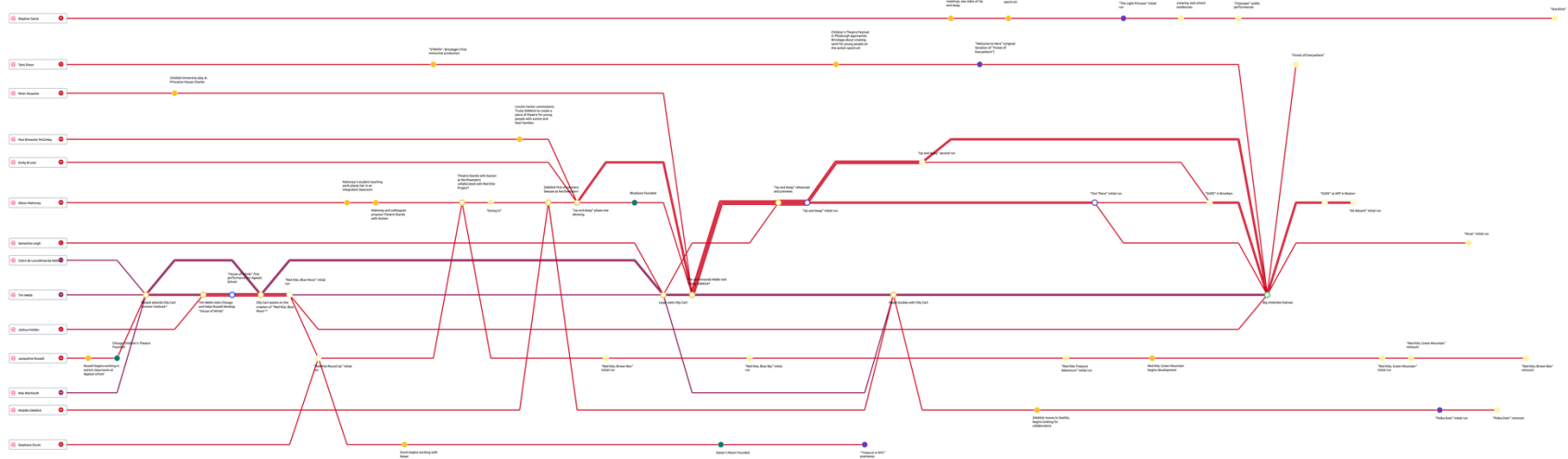


Figure 18. Subway view of individuals collaborating

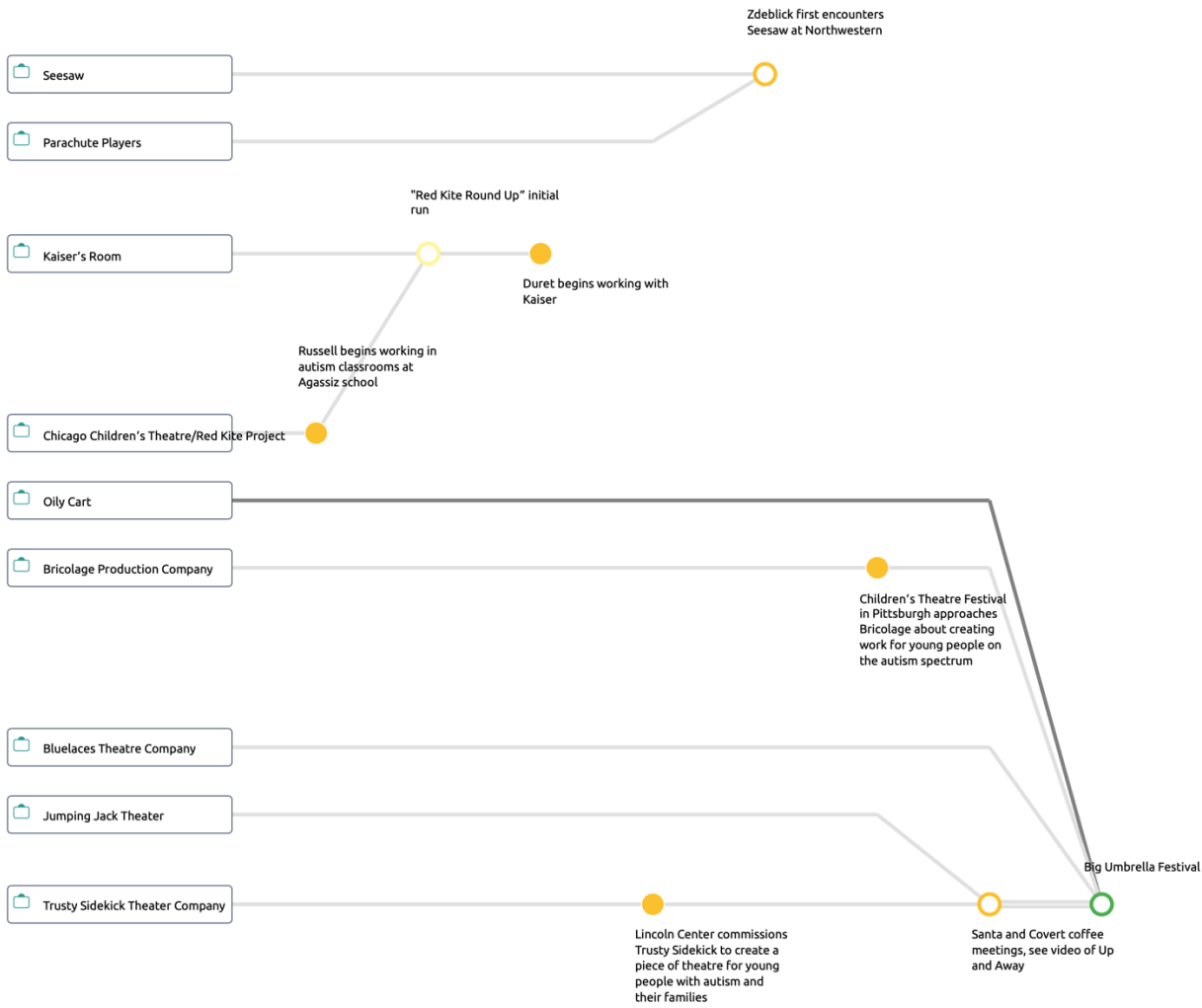


Figure 19. Subway view of companies collaborating – events which sparked new companies or first time productions

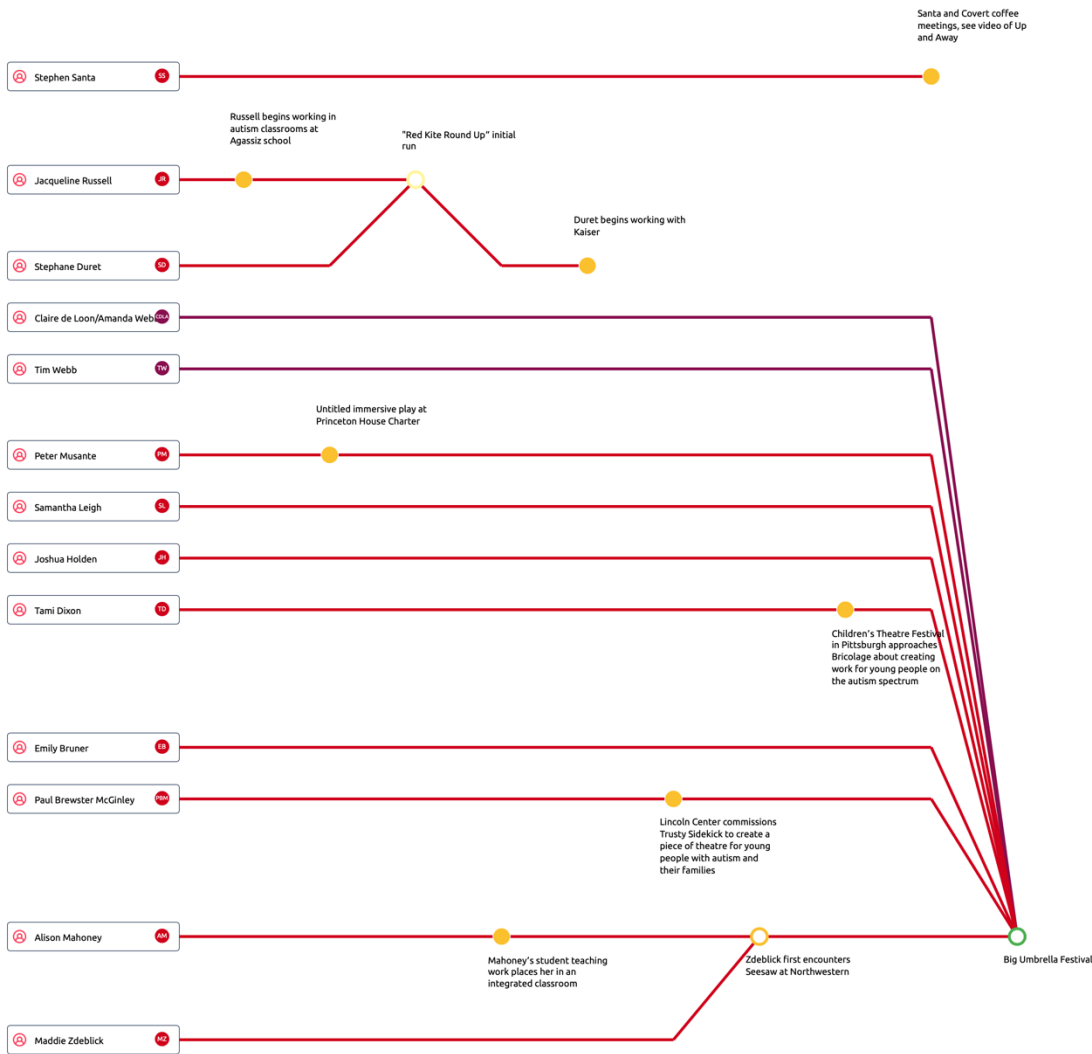


Figure 20. Subway view of individuals collaborating – events which sparked new companies or first time productions

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