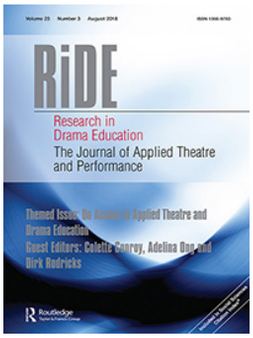

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance

ISSN: 1356-9783 (Print) 1470-112X (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/crde20

Enhancing relaxed performance: evaluating the Autism Arts Festival

Ben Fletcher-Watson & Shaun May

To cite this article: Ben Fletcher-Watson & Shaun May (2018) Enhancing relaxed performance: evaluating the Autism Arts Festival, Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance, 23:3, 406-420, DOI: 10.1080/13569783.2018.1468243

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2018.1468243

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

Published online: 07 May 2018.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 3027

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=crde20

RIDE: THE JOURNAL OF APPLIED THEATRE AND PERFORMANCE
2018, VOL. 23, NO. 3, 406–420
https://doi.org/10.1080/13569783.2018.1468243

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

OPEN ACCESS Check for updates

Enhancing relaxed performance: evaluating the Autism Arts Festival

Ben Fletcher-Watson [a,b] and Shaun May[a,b]

[a]Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, UK; [b]School of Arts, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

ABSTRACT

'Relaxed performances' allow theatre spectators to experience a non-judgmental environment, featuring adjustments to make them more accessible to a range of audiences. The Autism Arts Festival attempted to develop the idea of relaxed performances further to create an entirely autism-friendly festival in Canterbury. The organisers developed a suite of features to make the festival more accessible, and the suite as a whole was effective at increasing the accessibility of the festival. Moreover, discussions with performers indicate that the festival, as an 'autistic space', was conducive of both a sense of community solidarity and engagement with the politics of neurodiversity.

KEYWORDS

Autism; accessibility; neurodiversity; relaxed performance; autistic space

Easy to read abstract

This paper looks at relaxed performances, which are theatre performances where it is OK to talk or move around during the show. Relaxed performances are often enjoyed by people on the autistic spectrum. This is because the lights are less bright, the sound effects are quieter, there are more theatre staff to help, and you can read about the theatre and the show before you visit, so you feel more comfortable and relaxed.

This paper looks at the Autism Arts Festival, which was a two-day festival of theatre, films, comedy, and art where all the performances were relaxed. The people who ran the Festival wanted to make sure that people were comfortable before and during their visit – especially if they were autistic. To do this, they tried lots of new things, such as videos of the paths around the theatres, and free toys to fidget with. We found out that most people who visited the Festival thought it was friendly and welcoming. We also found that people used lots of different things to help them feel comfortable.

The people who made the shows told us that the Festival felt like an 'autistic space', which means a place where autistic people feel at home. They liked meeting other people on the autistic spectrum. They had interesting conversations about how autistic people and people who are not on the spectrum could work together and learn from each other.

CONTACT Shaun May S.R.May@kent.ac.uk

© 2018 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

Introduction

A relaxed theatre performance has been described as 'an environment where it is acceptable to move around, make noise, and behave in non-normative ways' (Lawrence and Birds of Paradise Theatre Company 2016, 29). Such environments make performances more accessible to people with autism,[1] learning disabilities, mental health conditions, neurological conditions, and chronic pain conditions (Lawrence and Birds of Paradise Theatre Company 2016) as well as very young children (Fletcher-Watson 2015). Typical accommodations include the reduced intensity of lighting and sound, provision of visual stories to familiarise spectators with the venue and production, and trained staff available to assist visitors. It is now possible to attend relaxed concerts, museums, art exhibitions, film screenings, and supermarkets.

Since the first such event in 2009, relaxed performances – sometimes known as sensory-friendly or autism-friendly performances in recognition of their emergence as a specifically autistic phenomenon – now occur at theatres around the world. The number of relaxed performances has risen sharply to more than 120 annually (Fletcher-Watson 2015).

The rapid expansion of relaxed performance in the UK, USA and increasingly across the world challenges clichéd assumptions about autistic people's 'special interests' tending to centre around transport, science, and technology. This is clearly false, as indicated by a 2012 study of autistic adults' interactions on Internet forums which found that they 'displayed interests in creative arts at levels comparable to individuals posting on [neurotypical] forums' (Jordan and Caldwell-Harris 2012, 398).[2] However, the fact that the authors report that this finding was 'contrary to [their] expectations' suggests that such assumptions persist even amongst scholars and practitioners working with people on the spectrum. The right to culture, enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities,[3] is eagerly seized by autistic spectators when accommodations are offered to make them accessible (Fletcher-Watson 2016).

Developing the Autism Arts Festival

The Autism Arts Festival (AAF), which took place at the University of Kent campus in Canterbury on Saturday 29 and Sunday 30 April 2017, was an attempt to develop the idea of a relaxed performance further to create an entire festival that was as autism-friendly as possible. Shaun May was primarily responsible for the project management of the festival, securing funding for the event from Arts Council England and was the main point of contact for artists and Front-of-House staff. Ben Fletcher-Watson led on design and implementation of the evaluation, formulating questionnaires, working with the Front-of-House team on gathering data and writing up audience feedback. May also worked with an advisory board of four autistic artists to ensure that the festival was an autistic-led event. We drew on examples of promising practice for relaxed performances (Fletcher-Watson 2015; Kempe 2015) and autistic-led conferences such as Autreat, a retreat/conference run by and for autistic people in the USA between 1996 and 2013, and Autscape, a similar event held annually in the UK since 2005. As will be addressed further in the next section, Autreat and Autscape are often described as 'autistic spaces'

by autistic self-advocates (Dekker 1999; Sinclair 2010), a term that's intended to contrast them with the dominant (neurotypical) social environment.

As has been established within the literature on relaxed performances, providing autistic audiences with visual stories[4] and making adjustments to lighting and sound within the show often increase the accessibility of performances (Fletcher-Watson 2015). The adjustment of lighting is a key feature of both Autscape and Autreat, with the website for the former noting that '[g]ood natural lighting (so that fluorescents can be avoided) is an absolute requirement for Autscape venues' (Owren 2013, 54). Therefore, careful consideration was given to all venues used for the AAF, with fluorescent lights turned off where possible. Accommodations were also made for other sensory modalities. Regarding sound, electric hand-dryers in toilets were turned off and replaced with paper towels, and music in public spaces such as the campus shop was turned off. Moreover, all visitors were provided with disposable ear protectors in a free audience pack, and detailed information about the sounds in each performance was given in the programme and on the festival website.[5] Finally, an aspect of sensory sensitivity often overlooked at relaxed performances is smell, to which many people on the spectrum are hypersensitive (National Autistic Society 2017). At Autreat, scented products such as perfume and aftershave are explicitly prohibited, and whilst this is not something the AAF demanded of audience members, staff were asked to avoid such products during their induction.

Thomas Owren argues that 'extreme autistic variability presents challenges in accommodating sensory needs in autistic space [because] the kinds of sensory stimuli that are hurtful to some autistics may be necessary for others' (2013, 57). Given this, he notes, some of the adaptations at Autreat and Autscape are intended to facilitate self-regulation. The audience pack mentioned above was an attempt to achieve this at the AAF – alongside ear protectors and detailed information in the programme about sounds and potential triggers in shows, audiences were also provided with a free fidget toy (Figure 1).

Autistic self-advocates have reported that use of fidget toys, and 'stimming' more generally, has the effect of reducing anxiety. Moreover, for many people with autism, the experience of stimming can be immensely pleasurable, with Julia Bascom suggesting that 'these things autistic people are supposed to be ashamed of and stop doing? *They are how we communicate our joy*' (2011, n.p.; italics in original). Despite this, the stimming behaviours of autistic people have been stigmatised and interventions such as Applied Behaviour Analysis (ABA) aim to eradicate them. As a result, the act of stimming has been politicised – with the call for 'quiet hands' by advocates of ABA condemned by the autistic community and the opposite, 'loud hands', being a key term in autistic self-advocacy.[6]

A key aim of the festival was to create a space in which people felt they could stim – that this behaviour was not just 'tolerated' but allowed and even celebrated. In one of the productions at the festival, *The Misfit Analysis,* performer Cian Binchy openly revels in the joy of spinning a tin opener – an object that he often carries with him – and encourages the audiences to share in the sensation by providing windmills, tin openers, and other spinning tools. This sense that people could stim without judgement, both within performances and outside them, has an importance that cannot be overstated. Finally, to allow people to self-regulate their social interaction, they could visit three chill-out spaces, containing sensory toys, colouring books, comfortable seating, Lego and other things to employ when they wanted to 'decompress', either on their own or with others.

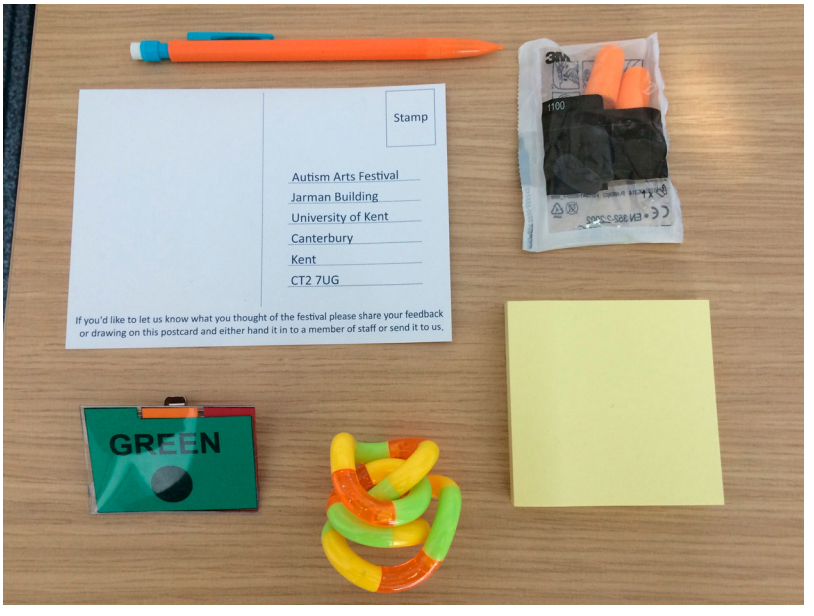

Figure 1. The contents of a free audience pack at the Autism Arts Festival, including coloured pencils, sticky notes, earplugs, a fidget toy, feedback cards, and interaction badges marked Green, Yellow, and Red (colour online only).

Access and autistic space

There is relatively little academic literature on Autreat and Autscape, with Owren's (2013) unpublished Masters thesis being the most detailed. A central research question this thesis addresses is 'What are the specific conditions that constitute Autreat and Autscape as autistic spaces, and how are these conditions created?' (2013, 10), and his answer is three-fold: first, the accommodation of sensory issues; second, the facilitation of autistic sociality; third, the protection of the boundaries of the space. By this, Owren means managing who is allowed within the space and on what terms. As he puts it, 'allowing too many people to enter who are not able or willing to abide by certain given rules and reproduce certain practices may make it impossible to uphold the conditions that make it an autistic space' (2013, 81). This seems equally true of relaxed performances – it is necessary for those attending, even if they are not themselves autistic, to respect the premise of the relaxed performance. For example, a small group of individuals staring at an audience member who is stimming or making noises would probably be sufficient to inhibit a truly inclusive environment from developing. It seems that most relaxed performances will achieve the first and third aspect to some extent, but we suspect the facilitation of autistic sociality may be a neglected area of practice.

Although 'autistic sociality' is sometimes presented as a contradictory (perhaps even oxymoronic) idea, it is in fact an 'observable and widespread phenomenon in everyday life' (Ochs and Solomon 2010, 69). To better facilitate an autistic style of sociality, the organisers of Autreat have developed a system of colour-coded interaction badges to clearly indicate the wearer's communication preferences:

> Showing a **green badge** means that the person is actively seeking communication; they have trouble initiating conversations, but want to be approached by people who are interested in talking. Showing a **yellow badge** means that the person only wants to talk to people they recognize, not by strangers or people they only know from the Internet … Showing a **red badge** means that the person probably does not want to talk to anyone, or only wants to talk to a few people. (ASAN 2014, emphasis in the original)

At the AAF, colour communication badges were included in the audience packs, allowing people to indicate their preferences to other audience members and staff. As Owren suggests,

> combined with the rule of not pressuring anyone to socialise and the knowledge that they are free to withdraw at any time, the badge system seems to make it easier for some to opt into activities and choose to interact. (2013, 75)

Moreover, many autistic people report feeling more comfortable at such events where the rules for social interaction are explicit, and where they can indicate their communication preferences openly, without worrying that they seem impolite. This facilitation of autistic sociality, evidence from Autreat and Autscape suggests, is fundamental to the development of autistic space. Within 'NT space', people with autism can feel that they must conform to neurotypical expectations; by contrast, 'autistic space' eschews 'the dominant construction of "normality"' (Bertilsdotter Rosquist, Brownlow, and O'Dell 2013, 370). 'NT space' is viewed as inaccessible and even hostile, while 'autistic space' is inclusive and welcoming:

> … the importance of such an autistic space is … in providing a space within which to develop autistic identities and advocacy narratives. The purpose is not to develop social skills for face-to-face (NT-dominated) environments, but to offer a challenge to the need to 'fit in' to the NT world. (Bertilsdotter Rosquist, Brownlow, and O'Dell 2013, 375)

As such, the ambition to create an arts festival that is, like Autreat and Autscape, an 'autistic space' has two important dimensions: first, the dimension of access – opening up the arts to people who might otherwise not be able to access them; second, the political dimension – challenging the grip that NT space has on the art world and its institutions, and creating a space with the potential for autistic identities and advocacy narratives to emerge.

The politics of autistic space

The potential for advocacy mentioned above was realised most concretely in the programming of the festival, which included work by autistic self-advocates such as Paul Wady, Annette Foster and Kate Fox. These artists, amongst others, shared work that directly address the politics of autism from a range of perspectives. After the festival, we conducted informal and unstructured interviews with these artists about their experiences.

Paul Wady discussed the festival directly in relation to Autscape, the first two of which he attended, and also used the term 'autistic space' to describe the AAF. He suggested that autistic spaces are valuable because 'you have your own kind to empathise with' and commented on the 'harmony between autistic people' at such events. For Wady, this sense of belonging is important because it is the basis from which a sense of community emerges, giving rise to the argument that, as he puts it, 'we are not a disease or disorder'. Wady is

not alone in such views; Jim Sinclair notes that 'some autistic people have written moving, dramatic accounts of immediately feeling "at home" amongst other autistics, having a sense of "belonging", and recognizing other autistics as "their own kind" of people' (2010, n.p.).

The concepts of autistic space and community solidarity were themes that Annette Foster discussed in relation to her première performance of *The Adventures of Super Aspie Grrl*:

> I've never been in an autistic space before, on this scale. I've always kinda been the one person, aware of my difference but unaware of how I was different, surrounded by neurotypical people most of my life … This is because I did not discover I was autistic until my diagnosis seven years ago at the age of 39. It has taken me years to come to terms with my autistic self and seek out the autistic community. As a late-diagnosed woman on the spectrum, I found it hard to identify at first with the stereotypes around autism, and ultimately, the autistic community. So I felt that the festival was extraordinary: to be part of an autistic space and have people there that understood and that I could talk to. It was great to share my new work in the festival because really, my piece is for the autistic community … I felt like the audience really wanted me to succeed, they believed in me from the beginning and even if little things went wrong, that didn't matter. At the end of my performance, I asked the audience to come on stage in solidarity for all the misdiagnosed autistic people out there and the whole audience came down, and I just thought that was absolutely amazing.

This strong sense of community and solidarity was remarked on by a number of audience members and artists. Performance poet Kate Fox, in particular, described the strong influence that it had on her. Fox's performance at the AAF was, as she described it, part of a 'phased coming out', having previously only discussed her autism in 'closed, safe' shows for the National Autistic Society and similar organisations. The publicity material for her show did not disclose her identity (using the pseudonym Una Q Horn) and if she spoke about the gig, she would maintain an ambiguity about her diagnostic status:

> But when I got to the festival itself, particularly seeing Annette's show – which was such an important political call around the importance of autistic women having their voices heard … seeing something like that … made me think, "hang on, I have to stand up and be counted as well" … So because I felt comfortable and safe [within the festival environment], I was then able to be more receptive to this important message about voice, and representation, and visibility for autistic people and particularly autistic women. It just feels important to be more publicly part of that advocacy.

Fox discussed a few reasons for her anxiety about 'coming out' as autistic and her initial need for ambiguity, which included discomfort with how the label is currently defined with the medical model and, perhaps relatedly, concern about stigma within the cultural sector. The dynamics of disclosure are discussed by Davidson and Henderson who note that 'persistent stigmas related to autism mean that those who can "pass" tend to do so' (2010, 160). However, they go on to discuss the way that, in coming out as autistic, self-advocates are 'taking responsibility for the co-production of positive (political) space' (164). There is some evidence to suggest that the AAF created an autistic space conducive of both a feeling of community and a site for political engagement, and Wady was explicit in his view that for him this was the most important aspect of the festival. For future iterations of the festival, he suggested a social hub, in addition to the chill-out

spaces and open at all hours during the festival period, would increase the capacity of the festival to facilitate both the sense of community and space for political engagement.

In one of the first articulations of the idea of autistic space, Dekker (1999) draws an analogy between autistic people and Deaf people, specifically that they both have a 'communication style that differs from the norm' (5). However, whilst sign language is now recognised to be as rich and diverse as spoken language, autistic communication and sociality continues to be pathologised. Most institutions demand, whether tacitly or explicitly, a neurotypical communication style and this is a crucial disabling barrier for many people on the spectrum. Research on autistic spaces indicate that once this barrier is acknowledged, and there is more effort to facilitate autistic sociality, then the necessary groundwork is set for, as Dekker puts it, an 'emerging autistic culture'.

Audience experience

The innovations outlined above emerged from a desire to create a qualitative curatorial-feedback model of evaluation. This was intended to allow people on the spectrum to contribute towards the design of the audience experience, recognising the centrality of the autistic voice in discussions around access, and making participants into co-curators of their own visit. In recognition of the fact that many autistic people do not traditionally engage with live performance (hence the creation of the relaxed performance movement), we designed a three-part evaluation process, aiming to encourage participation from a constituency for whom conventional qualitative methods such as in-person interviews can in some cases be challenging.

Ethical considerations were paramount and the core principle of the evaluation design was to assume competence. This meant that all responses were viewed as equally important and valid, but also that diversity of capabilities required a wide range of data collection methods, rather than focusing on a lone method such as questionnaires to produce a unified dataset. The autistic voice cannot be encountered via a single medium and still maintain its diversity. For some participants, brief communication via digital devices or computers was preferable, while others relished the opportunity to take part in a detailed face-to-face interview.

Therefore, the process was designed in three stages:

(1) A mixed-methods qualitative data collection exercise designed to identify accommodations likely to improve the spectatorial experience. This centred around a short-form survey and a more detailed interview protocol that could be completed in person or by email. Participants were invited to select the method of data collection most appealing to them: an internet survey, lasting around 10 minutes; an email questionnaire, lasting perhaps 30 minutes; or an in-person interview, lasting around 45 minutes. As with the subsequent stages, participation was sought from a variety of stakeholders, including autistic people, parents of children with autism, personal assistants, and other neurotypical people, reflecting the diverse attendance the AAF was intended to encompass.
(2) Immediate responses to individual performances, including observation data from AAF ushers and staff, reflective writing by spectators who preferred to give written feedback (this was defined as broadly as possible, from smiley faces to detailed

written notes), short interviews and 'vox pops' for spectators who preferred to provide verbal responses, and a long-table discussion for artists, organisers and audiences. Respect for communication preferences was foregrounded, meaning that individuals' preferred methods of transmitting information were the central focus, rather than the level of detail or need for comparability.

(3) A final survey specifically for AAF attendees, inviting them to reflect on the accommodations provided, the programming, the accessibility of the site and the events, and their suggestions for improvement. The survey could be completed on paper or online, allowing participants who required longer processing time to provide feedback at a later date.

Participation levels were varied, to be expected given the inherently flexible structure of the study. Stage 1 produced 21 responses (survey = 16; email interview = 1; interviews = 4); Stage 2 produced 72 responses (observation data = 22; reflective writing = 33; interviews = 3; long-table = 14); Stage 3 produced 34 responses.

Findings

Stage 1 participants were first invited to reflect on various statements about their interaction with the arts. Whilst 66% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'the arts are central to my life', 69% also agreed or strongly agreed that 'there are not many opportunities for people with autism to go to the theatre'. Furthermore, 58% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that 'mainstream' arts are easily accessible to them, and 85% of people agreed or strongly agreed that 'changes should be made to shows to make them accessible to everyone'.

Although these statements are obviously not comparable to the views of the wider population, having been presented to a self-selecting cohort with an identified interest in culture, they do provide useful data on the opinions of contemporary autistic spectators. In particular, it is valuable to note that an overwhelming majority agreed that performances should be altered to encourage access. As one autistic adult interviewee noted, 'I am always very anxious going to the theatre, but I do love seeing live productions, but wish the theatre was more accessible, which would help with the anxiety and feeling scared'.

Stage 1 participants were then invited to select their favoured options from a list of accommodations drawn from recent relaxed performances in the UK and USA. Figure 2 outlines the relative popularity of various accommodations.

Interestingly, the lower-ranked accommodations such as touch tours (23%), 'meet your seat' (31%), and keeping the overhead lights on (31%) are among the most common in the UK and USA at relaxed performances, while plot summaries (92%), lists of sensory triggers (85%), and video trailers (82%) are provided less frequently. Quiet areas (92%) and screens outside (80%) have become standard at larger theatres, but for cost reasons, remain rare at fringe venues. As such, it seems that the priorities of autistic theatregoers are not yet being fully recognised by the industry.

The most popular accommodation, plot summaries available in advance (92%), benefits theatregoers for whom familiarity rather than surprise is key to enjoyment. In the words of one parent of an autistic child:

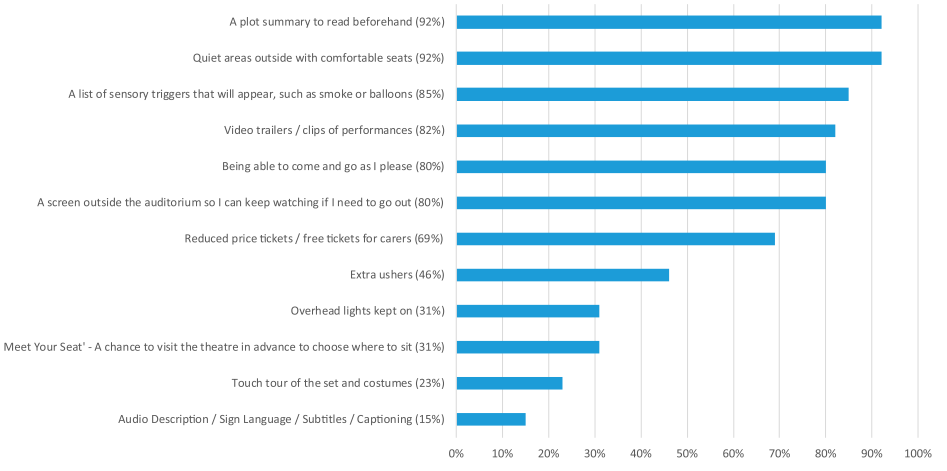

Figure 2. Proposed accommodations, ranked from least popular to most popular.

> many people like going to the cinema or theatre or panto, and they don't mind surprises, whereas for her, she would actually far rather if you told her the entire plot before she got to the theatre … it's not spoiling surprises, it's just building on the imagination she already has of that piece … . It's that comfort through repetition and comfort through knowledge of what's going to happen.

For a population for whom repetition is an important self-soothing activity, the option to read and re-read a synopsis is strongly recommended.

Finally, Stage 1 participants were encouraged to consider the alterations they would prefer to see in performance, as opposed to alterations to the venue and Front-of-House experience (Figure 3).

Reflecting the diversity within the autistic community, there is no clear preference for altered performances, in contrast with the finding above that 85% agreed that changes should be made to the theatre experience to make it accessible. As a relative of an autistic adult noted in a Stage 1 interview, 'That is the other big real annoying thing about relaxed performances: while they try to be super-accessible, you can't please everybody. You'll find some who say, "It wasn't loud enough" or "It was too loud".' On this point, it is worth recalling that the solution to this heterogeneity within autistic-led events like Autreat is to facilitate self-regulation. AAF provided audiences with detailed information about all performances, so that those who wished to avoid loud noises or triggers like drums or balloons could do so, but there would still be events that they could enjoy. Others, conversely, could attend events aware of the elements that might be challenging and prepare themselves accordingly – for example, using ear protectors for loud sounds or using their colour

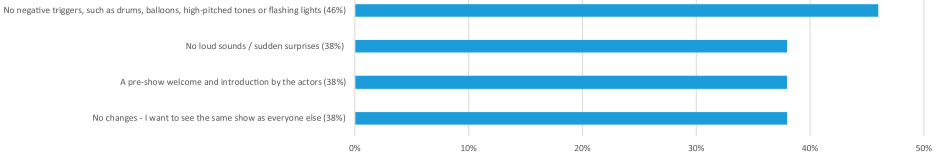

Figure 3. Proposed alterations to performance.

communication badge to indicate that they did not want to engage in audience participation.

The AAF team also created videos showing routes around the city and campus, in response to statements such as the adult with autism who said,

> Theatres are big buildings, and I don't like not knowing where I'm going. Everything hits you – it's nerve-wracking and anxious … It's about familiarity: because I don't go very often, it can be like getting to know a theatre new each time.

Lastly, the description of one interviewee's personal 'fidget pack' informed the creation of the AAF audience packs: '[I] get a bag of stuff together that can help me through (this includes fiddle and chewy toys, pollution mask designed for cyclists, Stickman Communication cards, my Squease, noise cancelling headphones and ear plugs, etc.)'.

Data from Stage 2 mainly centred around critiques of specific performances and other data relating to the management of the AAF,[7] and so are beyond the scope of this paper. However, one key point of constructive criticism was that the requirement for artists to provide visual stories and detailed show information was challenging for some artists on the spectrum. As Annette Foster put it, 'I felt I was too autistic and dyslexic to write the social story'. Similarly, Kate Fox observed that because of such requirements, there was more paperwork for her performance and workshop than at any other festival she could recall. Although such requirements are valuable for audience members, future iterations of the AAF must ensure that this extra work is not simply transferred to artists, and that more support is provided to artists for this. More generally, both Foster and Fox suggested that an artist pack – similar to, but distinct from, the audience pack – would have been beneficial.

The Stage 3 survey then captured data on usage of the various accommodations identified in Stage 1 (Figure 4).

The mixed nature of Stage 3 respondents, including people with autism, parents, and personal assistants with and without autism, and neurotypical spectators, mean that these data are not directly comparable with the rankings from Stage 1, but the discrepancies between them are nevertheless worth discussing. For example, 55% of Stage 3

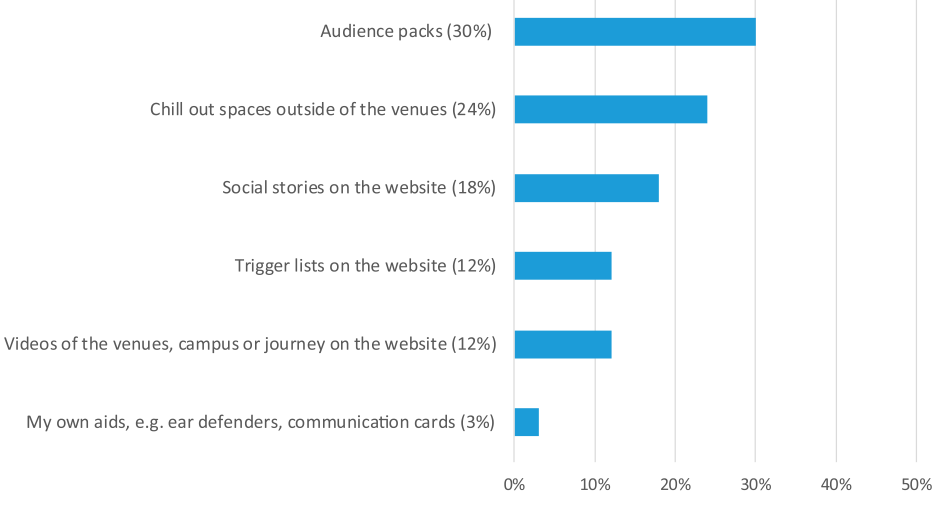

Figure 4. Accommodations used at the Festival, from least used to most used.

respondents reported that they used no access aids before or during the Festival. It is striking that 92% of respondents in Stage 1 responded favourably to chill-out spaces in a relaxed performance but only 24% of respondents in Stage 3 reported using the ones at the festival. Although it is important not to over-generalise from individual reports, in his interview Paul Wady discussed the reason he tended not to use the chill-out space next to the auditorium but rather to go outside, preferring instead to find a quiet space on the leafy University of Kent campus:

> There was lots of space between the events, so autistic people could walk out of the building and be outside and decompress and be on their own before going on to another event. It wasn't one intense almighty building which was too much to handle.

Jim Sinclair observes that access to outdoor spaces was an important component of Autreat events, where the initial organisers emphasised 'the importance of having not just a building, but also outdoor spaces where people could move around' (Sinclair 2012b, 59). Whilst, of course, it would be difficult for many venues to provide outdoor spaces (particularly those within densely populated cities), an area ripe for further exploration is precisely what makes for a good chill-out space. It might be the case that, reflecting the heterogeneity of autism, there is no one-size fits all answer to the question, but future iterations of the festival will explore a range of options, including outdoor spaces and small one-person tents that could be implemented in venues with limited foyer space. One limitation of the present study is that we did not record when or how people used the chill-out spaces. We made this decision for two reasons: First, we thought that observation might affect behaviour. Second, we were concerned that if someone was in the chill-out space because they were feeling anxious then having a researcher observing or recording them might exacerbate this anxiety. As such, we used show entrances and exits as an imperfect proxy for chill-out space usage – we measured when people stepped out of the show but did not track where they went to after leaving the auditorium.

A similar discrepancy between stated preference and observed behaviour can be found regarding audiences being able to come and go as they pleased. Although 80% of respondents in Stage 1 reported that this would make performances more accessible to autistic audiences, and this is already standard practice in relaxed performances, at the AAF remarkably few people did so. Across the performances where we managed to reliably measure this (total attendance of 286), five people stepped out of a show and three returned (see Table 1).

Table 1. Table of attendance, exits, and re-entrances for 11 performances.

Performance	Attendance	Left	Returned
Adventures of Super Aspie Grrl	30	0	–
Beyond the Flash	31	0	–
Guerrilla Aspies	24	0	–
My Son's Not Rainman	23	0	–
The Misfit Analysis	36	0	–
Una Q Horn	20	0	–
AAF Comedy Night	41	1	1
The Emperor's New Clothes	34	2	2
A Heart at Sea	20	2	0
Catch the Baby	13	0	–
Imagining Autism	14	0	–
	286	5	3

There are a few possible explanations for this discrepancy. First, given that the audiences were provided with detailed information about performances beforehand, including potential triggers, those audiences who would find a certain aspect challenging might have refrained from attending, or they might have been more prepared for the elements they found challenging. Second, and in a similar vein, the fact that audiences were provided with fidget toys and ear protectors might have enabled them to self-regulate sufficiently to avoid the need to step out. Third, it might be the case that simply knowing that it is acceptable for you to step out, if needed, has the effect of reducing anxiety and therefore the need to do so. (By contrast, feeling anxious enough that you might need to step out whilst also thinking it is unacceptable to do so might create a feedback loop which amplifies the anxiety.) Fourth, it is possible that despite being told that it is acceptable to step out, audiences might still refrain from leaving due to nervousness – particularly around being the first to do so. Finally, given that four out of the five people stepping out did so in a show primarily targeted towards an audience of children and families, it might simply be the case that this is an aspect of relaxed performances that are utilised more by children than adults.

While these explanations seem a little speculative, this reflects the fact that research on relaxed performances is still in its infancy. As far as we know, there are no other studies that have recorded the frequency with which autistic audiences have stepped out of other relaxed performances, so there is no way of knowing whether the numbers above are lower than usual. Similarly, because there are no previous studies measuring differences between autistic children and adults in relaxed performances using this method, there's no way of knowing whether this difference is surprising.

However, what we feel we can confidently conclude from the data gathered is that there is no single 'one-size fits all' solution to making theatre accessible to autistic audiences – unsurprising given the heterogeneity of the spectrum. Nevertheless, it does suggest that we successfully implemented a suite of measures that increased the accessibility of the festival for people with autism. Whilst different people used these to differing extents, 100% of respondents agreed that the festival was either 'accessible' or 'very accessible'. As the parents of one autistic child put it, the festival staff 'just understood the needs of everybody who was going to it. There was no pressure on anybody who was there … what I really liked was the attitude of "that's OK"'. Mirroring the performers' reflections in the previous section on the value of feeling part of the autistic community, the parents went on to describe their daughter's experience of being amongst other autistic children as 'freeing'. Finally, they conclude, 'we're not trying to change our children to fit in society, we're trying to make society more inclusive of our children', a sentiment that we hope resonated throughout the festival as a whole.

Conclusion

Relaxed performance is a new phenomenon, beginning in 2009, and while practice continues to develop (Andrews and Begley 2014; Kempe 2014), methods for evaluation, feedback, and criticism are currently in their infancy. The AAF aimed to develop the idea of a relaxed performance further, creating an entire festival of arts by and for people on the autistic spectrum, and this paper is an initial evaluation which we hope will feed into the development of future events.

Audience response to the festival suggests that it was broadly successful in its core aim of making an event that was accessible to audiences across the autistic spectrum, with 100% of respondents saying it was either 'accessible' or 'very accessible'. To achieve this, we implemented a range of measures including detailed show information with potential triggers, social stories, colour communication badges, chill-out spaces and an audience pack that included a fidget toy and ear protectors. While not all audience members used all of these, this is unsurprising given the heterogeneity of the autistic spectrum, and following the practice of autistic-led events such as Autreat, the emphasis of this suite has been to facilitate self-regulation. For people who are comfortable regulating their social interaction, communication badges might be unnecessary, and those who are not sensitive to noise might not require ear protectors, but implementing them across the festival seems nevertheless to be the most efficient accessibility strategy at present. That being said we should be clear that, despite our emphasis on self-regulation, accessibility remains a structural and systemic choice – there are a number of things that institutions can and should do to make the arts more accessible.

There are limitations to this study which should be addressed in future work. In particular, more detailed analysis of which accessibility features were used by whom would allow for a more focussed accessibility strategy in future events. Future work should also interrogate how these features could be implemented in other festivals, and evaluate how effective they are in such contexts. Stage 3 survey respondents were also asked about other access features they would like to see in future iterations of the festival, and two popular options were an online community to discuss arts events (62%) and live-streamed events so they can watch from home (48%). This suggests that a bespoke online platform for the festival might be beneficial for future years, and open up a whole new audience of autistic people for whom attending in person – with all of the stress that travelling involves – remains the largest barrier to access. Finally, future research would benefit substantially from more qualitative evidence regarding audience experience and the idea of autistic space.

Brooks (2017) recently expressed the concern that relaxed performances might have the negative effect of 'segregating' audiences, and insofar as this is true for individual performances, it might be especially the case for the AAF. However, we would challenge this line of argument on two grounds. Firstly, as this paper indicates, there is substantial evidence to support the claim that many autistic people do appreciate adjustments being made to performances. Whilst we think an ultimate goal of making all performances accessible to all audience members is one worth aspiring to, until that happens (assuming it ever does), events such as the AAF seem necessary. Secondly, a key strand of performer feedback centred on the idea that the AAF was an autistic space, in the same mode as Autreat and Autscape, and thus performing there was an affirmative and political experience. This indicates that, even if the festival became unnecessary on grounds of accessibility, the political dimension relating to the autistic community coming together in solidarity and celebration might nevertheless be of great value. Although the focus of this article has been on accessibility, in keeping with the theme of this issue of *RiDE*, we hope that the article nevertheless demonstrates this political aspect is ripe for further investigation.

Notes

1. There is an ongoing discussion within the autistic community about whether 'person-first' (i.e. person with autism) or 'identity first' language (i.e. autistic person) is preferable, with both criticised by some parties (e.g. Sinclair 2012a). Following Loftis (2015), we use the two terms interchangeably throughout this article to remain neutral on this particular debate.
2. In this study, creative arts were defined as '[m]ovies, television shows, artwork, painting, playing an instrument, music, writing and reading fiction, creating media (e.g. online films), performing arts, knitting, sewing, carpentry, etc.' (Jordan and Caldwell-Harris 2012, 395).
3. Given that some autistic people seek to challenge the idea that autism is a disability, it is worth clarifying that this paper follows the social model of disability. In the social model, autistic people are not necessarily 'disabled' by their autism *per se* but rather by social and attitudinal barriers, and the core aim of the Autism Arts Festival (AAF) is to remove some of these barriers to increase the accessibility of the arts.
4. For an example of a visual story, also known as a social story, visit https://autismartsfestival.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/a-heart-at-sea_s-visual-story-guide.pdf.
5. The template for this detailed information was adapted from a model kindly provided by the Awesome Arts Festival in Australia: http://www.awesomearts.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ASD-Guide-2016.pdf
6. The first book by the Autistic Self Advocacy Network is titled *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking,* and several articles contained within use this phrase to criticise 'normalisation'.
7. For example, some signage was not weather-resistant. Although this feedback is useful for future iterations of the festival, it is not the focus here. Similarly, knowing which events people enjoyed and which they did not is valuable for programming future events (e.g. probably fewer films and more poetry) but this is not the focus of this paper.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for support from the Institute of Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh and the School of Arts at the University of Kent. They particularly wish to thank the members of the autism community who reviewed drafts of this paper before publication.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Funding

The Autism Arts Festival was funded by Arts Council England, with additional support from the Public Engagement Fund, the Centre for Cognition and Kinaesthetics and the Centre for Popular and Comic Performance at the University of Kent.

Notes on contributors

Ben Fletcher-Watson manages the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at the University of Edinburgh. His research examines accessible performance for a variety of audiences. He is also an ASSITEJ Next Generation Artist.

Shaun May is a Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent and the author of two books, *A Philosophy of Comedy on Stage and Screen* and *Rethinking Practice as Research and the Cognitive Turn*. For more information about his work visit www.shaunmay.co.uk.

ORCID

Ben Fletcher-Watson http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8789-9228

References

Andrews, Lucy, and Julia Begley. 2014. *Show Time: A Guide to Creating Amazing Relaxed Performances for People with Autism*. Birmingham: Autism West Midlands.

ASAN. 2014. "Color Communication Badges." Accessed July 17, 2017. http://autisticadvocacy.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/ColorCommunicationBadges.pdf.

Bascom, Julia. 2011. "The Obsessive Joy of Autism." Accessed July 17, 2017. https://juststimming.wordpress.com/2011/04/05/the-obsessive-joy-of-autism/.

Bertilsdotter Rosquist, Hanna, Charlotte Brownlow, and Lindsay O'Dell. 2013. "Mapping the Social Geographies of Autism – Online and Off-line Narratives of Neuro-shared and Separate Spaces." *Disability & Society* 28 (3): 367–379.

Brooks, Vanessa. 2017. "Separate Doors 2 Report." Accessed January 6, 2018. https://vanessabrooks2020.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/separate-doors-2-report-vanessa-brooks.pdf.

Davidson, Joyce, and Victoria L. Henderson. 2010. "'Coming Out' on the Spectrum: Autism, Identity and Disclosure." *Social & Cultural Geography* 11 (2): 155–170.

Dekker, Martjin. 1999. "On Our Own Terms: Emerging Autistic Culture." Accessed July 17, 2017. http://www.autscape.org/2015/programme/handouts/Autistic-Culture-07-Oct-1999.pdf.

Fletcher-Watson, Ben. 2015. "Relaxed Performance: Audiences with Autism in Mainstream Theatre." *The Scottish Journal of Performance* 2 (2): 61–89.

Fletcher-Watson, Ben. 2016. "Live-streaming to Your Living Room: Towards a New Model of Social Inclusion and Relaxed Performance." *Coup de Théâtre* 30 (1): 127–140.

Jordan, Chloe J., and Catherine L Caldwell-Harris. 2012. "Understanding Differences in Neurotypical and Autism Spectrum Special Interests Through Internet Forums." *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities* 50 (5): 391–402.

Kempe, Andy. 2014. "Developing Social Skills in Autistic Children through 'Relaxed Performances'." *Support for Learning* 29 (3): 261–274.

Kempe, Andy. 2015. "Widening Participation in Theatre Through 'Relaxed Performances'." *New Theatre Quarterly* 31 (1): 59–69.

Lawrence, Matson, and Birds of Paradise Theatre Company. 2016. *Barriers to Access: Report on the Barriers Faced by Young Disabled and D/deaf People in Accessing Youth Arts Provision in Scotland*. Accessed June 22, 2017. http://www.boptheatre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/BOP-BTA-22-FEB.pdf.

Loftis, Sonya Freeman. 2015. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*. Bloomington: University of Indiana Press.

National Autistic Society. 2017. "Sensory Differences." Accessed August 3, 2017. http://www.autism.org.uk/sensory.

Ochs, Elinor, and Olga Solomon. 2010. "Autistic Sociality." *Ethos* 38 (1): 69–92.

Owren, Thomas. 2013. "Autreat and Autscape: Informing and Challenging the Neurotypical will and Ability to Include." Masters diss., University of Bergen, Norway.

Sinclair, Jim. 2010. "Being Autistic Together." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 30 (1): 1–31.

Sinclair, Jim. 2012a. "Why I Dislike 'Person First' Language." In *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking*, edited by Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 223–224. Washington, DC: The Autistic Press/The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network.

Sinclair, Jim. 2012b. "Autism Network International: The Development of a Community and its Culture." In *Loud Hands: Autistic People, Speaking*, edited by Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 22–70. Washington, DC: The Autistic Press/The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network.